

The Flaws of Contemporary Philosophy

Introduction

Contemporary academic philosophy stands accused of having lost its way. Once envisioned as the “love of wisdom,” the discipline today is charged with devolving into institutionalized *rumination* – an insular enterprise more concerned with self-referential puzzles and verbose rationalizations than with illumination or practical relevance. This polemical report examines these charges in detail, drawing on recent critiques that portray philosophy as a pathological “attractor basin” for clever but untethered minds. The analysis is confrontational by design: it diagnoses what has gone wrong – from perverse incentives that reward obscurity, to the co-opting of basic cognitive functions under grandiose guises – and illustrates the issues with a case study of Jordan Peterson’s pseudo-philosophical trauma projections. Finally, it considers a proposed remedy (a reorientation around multi-level coherence) and asks whether reform is plausible or the discipline is structurally doomed to remain “cleverness without orientation.” The goal is not to offer a gentle defense of philosophy, but to candidly lay bare its **flaws** – and the stark choices ahead if those flaws are to be repaired.

Philosophy as Codified Rumination

One foundational critique is that much of what passes for philosophy is little more than **codified rumination** – endless thinking aloud that generates no actionable insight. From a clinical perspective, this looks like “verbose procrastination—an ornate superstructure that keeps the mind busy while the body remains in the same feedback loop of distress” ¹. In other words, philosophy often functions as *institutionalized overthinking*. Rather than addressing real problems or changing how one lives, it spins ever more elaborate verbal webs. Indeed, many people (especially outside the academic priesthood) suspect that “extracting meaning” via philosophical discourse is just *rumination, procrastination, and avoidance* dressed up in pretentious language ². This aligns with the concept of “**spiritual bypassing**,” where an individual uses intellectual or spiritual talk to avoid facing unresolved emotional issues. Philosophy, in this view, becomes a high-minded excuse to stay stuck.

Modern psychology has a name for this pattern: **intellectualization**. When under threat or stress, one easy escape is to flee into abstract thinking. “*Grand narratives, metaphysical taxonomies, and second-order commentary flood the working memory; somatic cues fade...; and the organism can preserve a fragile homeostasis while never altering the external conditions that triggered the distress in the first place.*” ³ In plainer terms, a person can avoid dealing with pain or fear by obsessively philosophizing about it. The *content* might reference Spinoza or Nagarjuna, giving a *gloss of sophistication*, but the *function* is identical to any other avoidance strategy ³. The result is that philosophy often amounts to “**mind in exile**” – a mental escape hatch that relieves discomfort without resolving it.

Such rumination masquerading as profundity is not harmless. It *feels* productive (even lofty), but yields no change in one’s actual life or conditions. A person may discourse on “the nature of suffering” for hours yet remain paralyzed in the face of a real problem. As one analysis put it, “*Propositional insight, no matter how subtle, does not automatically re-pattern subcortical circuitry. To assume otherwise is a category error.*” ⁴

Understanding an idea intellectually is not the same as transforming oneself – a fact that perpetual philosophers often ignore. In this sense, philosophy can become a form of “**performative distraction**”: talking **about** meaning replaces the harder work of **making** meaning through action or change.

A clear warning sign is when philosophical discourse produces no **testable outcomes** or behavioral commitments. Healthy thinking should bridge theory and practice, but “*pathological philosophising resembles endless peer-review with no laboratory*” ⁵. By contrast, “*healthy philosophising resembles engineering: hypothesis, prototype, stress-test, iterate.*” ⁵ The contrast is stark: one is all talk, the other ties ideas to experiments and feedback. If a philosophical claim can’t be tied to some conceivable test or lived experience, it risks becoming what one critic called an “uncashed cheque” ⁶ – a promise of insight that, when brought to the bank of reality, returns zero value. For example, a theory of *impermanence* that does nothing to actually help someone cope with loss is empty ⁶. A grand treatise on *autonomy* that never translates into changed behavior is purely decorative ⁶. In short, unless philosophy’s speculations connect back to observable consequences or improvements in understanding, they collapse into the very rumination and avoidance that its detractors decry. Philosophy becomes *thinking for the sake of thinking*, an exercise in staying busy upstairs while accomplishing nothing downstairs.

Recursive Obscurity and Academic Insularity

Beyond individual habits of rumination, **the discipline of philosophy itself incentivizes a style of discourse that is recursive, obscure, and largely disconnected from real-world relevance**. In the modern academy, original insights that could guide action or clarify life have become rare, while complex *second-order discourse* proliferates. Within many philosophy departments, intellectual virtues seem perversely inverted: falsifiability is treated as a “*quaint... relic*,” clarity is scorned as naive, and practical utility is dismissed as *vulgar* ⁷. The predictable result is **scholasticism without impact**. As the broader humanities suffer a crisis of relevance, philosophy’s response has been to double down on insularity – retreating into a closed conversation rather than reaching out. Observers liken it to “*a lighthouse whose beam no longer touches the sea.*” ⁸ The light (of reason) is still spinning, but it illuminates nothing beyond the tower of academia itself.

Philosophy’s **incentive structures** exacerbate this problem. Careers are built not by solving problems or shedding light, but by producing endless commentary and clever reinterpretations. There is a premium on being difficult. Journals and tenure committees currently “*reward novelty and difficulty*” over accessibility ⁹. The safest way to get published is to pick some minute corner of an already esoteric debate, then push one step further into abstraction. The field thus fragments into hyper-specialized sub-discourses, each unintelligible to anyone outside its narrow niche. As one commentator notes, analytic philosophy often “*pursues ever finer technical coherence*” in subfields cut off from any larger vision, while continental philosophy embraces “*ironic play*” and endless critique that acknowledge no stable truth at all ¹⁰ ¹¹. The two tendencies converge in leaving **no shared center of gravity** – just “micro-puzzles” on one side and radical relativism on the other ¹². In both cases, the enterprise produces “*cleverness without orientation.*” ¹²

In plainer terms, contemporary philosophy often rewards **form over substance**. Rhetorical virtuosity and abstruse argumentation become ends in themselves. The **performative** aspect – the ability to dazzle or confound an audience – supersedes the **illuminative** aspect of actually clarifying an issue. As a result, “*the persuasive surface becomes the whole content*” in some quarters ¹³. Audiences (typically, other philosophers) applaud an argument not because it solves a problem, but because it performs intellectual difficulty well.

Outsiders, meanwhile, are left scratching their heads – or simply left out entirely. In such a regime, “*the field rewards virtuoso performers of puzzlement rather than solvers*”¹³. A premium is placed on generating paradoxes, dense jargon, and byzantine interpretations (the “stylistic pirouettes” of theory¹³). Solving those paradoxes or communicating clearly to non-specialists brings far less prestige. The natural consequences of this **academic one-upmanship** are the very pathologies surveyed above: endless rumination (with each “reply to a reply” adding another layer of verbal complexity), incestuous status games within cliques, and a kind of **intellectual inbreeding** that resists fresh air. Philosophy’s discourse becomes a hall of mirrors – recursive, self-referential, and increasingly **incoherent to all but its own initiates**.

Crucially, this is not just an unfortunate byproduct; it is built into how the discipline currently operates. When clarity is deemed naive and relevance vulgar, who *but* the most obtuse and obtuse-proud will thrive? There is a sense in which philosophy’s **decadent style** is self-perpetuating. Papers beget papers in an infinite regress of commentary, and the **real world quietly exits the conversation**. This insularity has led some to conclude that professional philosophy has abandoned any genuine epistemic or ethical mission. Instead, it sustains itself *performatively*, by continuously justifying its own existence through more talk. As we will see, this dynamic also selects for a certain personality type – and it isn’t the well-adjusted pragmatist. It is the *high-verbal, hyper-analytical, and often psychologically troubled* individual who finds in philosophy the perfect stage for endless (and endlessly rewarded) mental gymnastics.

Pathological Recursion: Philosophy’s Attractor Basin

Perhaps the most damning critique is that academic philosophy has become an **attractor basin for pathology** – a magnet for brilliant but disordered minds that find refuge in recursive intellectual games. Far from being an incidental issue, this may be a structural fate of the discipline as currently constituted. The argument goes like this: Because philosophy values abstract cleverness over empirical accountability, it naturally **selects for individuals who excel at abstract, unconstrained thinking** – even if (or especially if) they lack the grounding that reality usually provides. The field “*doesn’t accidentally reward incoherence, but is intrinsically biased toward it—because its affordances select for minds that are brilliant but epistemically untethered.*”¹⁴ In plainer terms, an emotionally unstable or reality-averse person who happens to have a high verbal IQ can thrive in philosophy more easily than in disciplines anchored to empirical feedback. The structures of philosophy, as an institution, provide cover and positive reinforcement for certain **psychological defense mechanisms**. Such a person can construct elaborate conceptual systems “not to explore reality, but to avoid it”¹⁵ – and be praised for their ingenuity. The very **recursion** that is supposed to be a tool for clarification becomes, in these cases, a tool of self-deception and avoidance. And the community often validates it: as the critique tartly observes, “*recursion isn’t just tolerated; it becomes currency*”¹⁶. Careers are literally made by adding footnotes to footnotes, interpretations of interpretations, each layer one step further removed from the ground. The more baroque and self-referential one’s edifice, the more it counts as “original scholarship.” Thus the pathological recursion feeds on itself.

This “philosophy as refuge for pathology” thesis might sound hyperbolic, but it resonates with many insider observations. It is no secret that philosophy has more than its share of *eccentrics* and *savant-like obsessives*, some teetering on the edge of mental health norms. A cynical (but not wholly unfair) way to put it is that philosophy departments often serve as **asylums for the brilliant broken**. The process is self-reinforcing: once a critical mass of such personalities accumulates, they set the tone for what is considered rigorous or impressive. New entrants either conform to the pathological style or remain marginal. Over time a whole academic subculture can normalize what is essentially a collection of *idiosyncratic coping mechanisms* elevated to theory. Little wonder, then, that from the outside much of philosophy appears not just abstruse

but *demented*: arguments that go in circles, definitions that devour themselves, elaborate rationalizations that never touch ground. Insiders reward each other for these virtuosic feats of irrelevance.

Importantly, critics are not merely name-calling here; they identify a **structural weakness** in philosophy that allows this to happen. Unlike the sciences, philosophy has no laboratory, no **reality principle** that enforces a sanity check. A chemist with delusional ideas will quickly fail in the lab; a philosopher with delusional ideas might become a celebrated theorist. *“There is no reality that slaps a bad metaphysician across the face like it does a bad engineer,”* as one observer drily notes ¹⁷. With no external corrective, *“the golem builds itself”* ¹⁸ – referring to a kind of self-constructed monster of thought, growing unchecked. The **affinity for the unreal** becomes a feature, not a bug. The discipline *“often lacks the antibodies to detect”* when intelligence has turned against itself ¹⁹. Indeed, those very “infections” – convoluted theories that serve as defense mechanisms – may be celebrated as profundities. The pathology, *“real”* and consumptive, *“turns intelligence against itself”*, and academic philosophy as an institution has proven largely impotent to **cure or even diagnose** it ¹⁹. Instead, it frequently confuses the symptoms for genius.

All of this paints a picture of a **self-perpetuating dysfunction**. Philosophy’s openness and abstract freedom, which in principle are its strengths, have become a kind of black hole. It pulls in talented minds and then traps them in a closed loop where even *brilliant thinking* ends up serving *dysfunctional ends*. As one summary concludes, *“what once was a tool of clarification becomes a defense mechanism. That recursion isn’t just tolerated; it becomes currency... Careers are made not on insight, but on footnotes to footnotes.”* ¹⁵ In this attractor basin, being *interesting* beats being *right*, and complexity supersedes progress. The tragedy is that many of these thinkers *could* have been solvers or innovators in other fields – but in philosophy, their worst tendencies are indulged and amplified. The very context that should challenge them to greater coherence instead enables their most elaborate **self-deceptions**. It is a harsh diagnosis: philosophy, the supposed engine of reason, becomes a sanctuary for *brilliant madness*. Intelligence gets devoured by its own tail, and the discipline celebrates the spectacle.

Co-opting Cognition: Philosophy’s Imperial Overreach

Another flaw critics highlight is philosophy’s tendency to **inflate its domain** by annexing virtually any form of cognition or inquiry under its banner. There is a sense that philosophy as an institution has no clear boundaries – whenever a new intellectual domain emerges (be it natural science, logic, psychology, linguistics), philosophy quickly claims it as “really” part of philosophy after all, or at least as fair game for philosophical reflection. This leads to what one analysis calls a kind of **“foundational incoherence”** in the very definition of philosophy: *“that philosophy, by its very nature, allows itself to mutate endlessly, absorb whatever it wants (wisdom, logic, metacognition, even ethics), and then claim retrospective dominion over it all.”* ²⁰ In plainer terms, philosophy habitually **co-opts** universal human cognitive activities – reasoning, questioning, meaning-making – and then congratulates itself for “owning” those activities. This *imperial impulse* has two pernicious effects: (1) it renders philosophy effectively unfalsifiable and unbounded (if philosophy is defined so broadly, it can *never* be declared irrelevant – it will simply move the goalposts and say “we encompass that too”), and (2) it breeds a kind of **decadent self-justification**. By casting such a wide net, philosophy can always inflate its importance (“everything is philosophy!”) even as its tangible contributions dwindle. The critique notes that in doing this, philosophy becomes *“unfalsifiable, unbounded, and epistemically decadent.”* ²¹ It can never fail on its own terms because it perpetually redraws those terms to include whatever success is happening elsewhere.

Consider the case of **logic**. Historically, logic was nurtured within philosophy, but as formal logic developed, it found homes in mathematics and computer science. Some contemporary skeptics argue that logic no longer “*operates within the domain of philosophy*” at all – that logic predates and transcends philosophy, being a basic feature of cognition or nature ²². They accuse philosophers of trying to “*claim it owns everything*,” from logic to scientific method, as if nothing can exist without a philosophical patron ²³. On the other side, defenders respond that *any* reflective examination of reasoning or inference is essentially philosophical in nature – “*the moment you pose those meta-questions you have stepped into philosophy*” ²⁴. By this account, philosophy isn’t stealing logic; it’s simply the name for our capacity to scrutinize **the rules and norms of thought**. Who is right? In a sense, both viewpoints underscore the same issue: philosophy’s definition is so broad that it *overlaps with virtually all rational inquiry*. That is precisely the source of confusion – and the opportunity for overreach. Philosophy can always insist, *heads I win, tails I also win*: if something yields knowledge, philosophers claim it was philosophical; if something fails, they say it wasn’t “true” philosophy.

This lack of a clear domain means philosophy often engages in **category creep**. It freely takes concepts from other domains (like scientific findings, or everyday wisdom) and weaves them into its own narratives, sometimes without adding anything except jargon. The discipline’s proponents might argue this is *synthesis* or *reflection*, but skeptics see it as appropriation with a dose of obscurantism. The phrase “*epistemically decadent*” ²⁵ captures the sense that philosophy luxuriates in its own expansive claims rather than exercising intellectual discipline. Without a firm core, philosophy can become *anything and nothing*, expanding to the point of emptiness. Internally, even philosophers bemoan that their field “*has no core discipline in the sense physics or engineering does. Its fluidity allows it to mutate, and yes, that attracts parasites*.” ¹⁷. The very openness that allows genuine interdisciplinary insight also opens the floodgates to **charlatanism and confusion**. With no hard constraints, “*it is always vulnerable to incoherence, because it lacks the constraints other disciplines enjoy*.” ¹⁷ A physicist can’t just redefine “force” arbitrarily, but a philosopher can – and often will, to suit a theory. When consequences are purely intellectual, not physical, almost *any* move can be made to seem valid if argued cleverly. Over time this leads to a proliferation of self-contained “theories of everything” with no way to choose among them. The environment rewards the **brass of assertion** more than the **humility of hypothesis testing**.

The upshot is a kind of **intellectual hubris** that further disconnects philosophy from reality. Philosophers sometimes speak as if they are the ultimate arbiters of *all* other fields – the ones who set the terms for science, logic, ethics, art, etc. This hubris is not lost on outside observers. It reinforces the perception that philosophy is a “**self-referential circle jerk**,” to quote a frustrated critic’s blunt phrase ²⁶. When the discipline claims everything interesting as its own, it risks taking credit for others’ achievements while disowning its own failures. It also invites backlash: other disciplines simply ignore philosophy, moving on with their empirical or practical work without the philosopher’s blessing. In recent decades, many scientists and even some cognitive psychologists have explicitly stated they have “no need of philosophy.” While that stance has its own pitfalls, it’s understandable given philosophy’s tendency to declare itself the referee of all knowledge while seemingly contributing little. If philosophy *truly* engages *everywhere*, it also becomes accountable *nowhere*. This *escape from accountability* is perhaps the gravest flaw of all: without firm criteria for success or failure, the field can indulge endless speculation and yet *never* be proven wrong – at most, fashions change. This is why one critic laments that “*falsifiability is treated as a quaint relic*” in philosophy ⁷. A discipline that cannot be falsified is perilously close to a religion or a game, rather than a truth-seeking enterprise.

Case Study: Jordan Peterson's Mythic Trauma

To illustrate many of the above issues in concrete form, one can examine the quasi-philosophical phenomenon of **Jordan B. Peterson**. Peterson, a clinical psychologist by training and now a famous public intellectual, is not a professional philosopher. Yet his discourse on meaning, myth, and morality has often been received as a kind of philosophy in the public square. What his example reveals is how easily *deep-seeming philosophy* can in fact be the **exoskeleton of personal trauma**. In Peterson's case, the grandiose Jungian and biblical narratives he promotes may be less a product of detached reasoning and more a projection of his *unresolved psychological pain* onto the world. As one analysis incisively put it, "*Pain, not metaphysics, is the engine*" of Peterson's philosophizing ²⁷. His much-discussed "maps of meaning" might just as well be maps of his own torment, externalized and mythologized.

The biographical context is key. In 2019–2020, Peterson endured a life-threatening dependency and withdrawal from benzodiazepines (an anti-anxiety medication), which led to severe neurological agony, a medically induced coma, and a long recovery. This harrowing episode – essentially a protracted trauma – seems to have "*burst into view*" a long-buried well of suffering ²⁷. Upon re-emerging, Peterson's rhetoric took on an intensified religious-apocalyptic tone. He began insisting that modern people "need a story strong enough to face unbearable pain" and that "*the Bible is the West's operating system*," as if only a return to myth could save us ²⁸. In hindsight, this was the voice of a man who had nearly been destroyed by pain and found pure rationality inadequate as a lifeline. He *desperately* cast about for something – *anything* – to make sense of suffering on that scale. The result was what one commentator called "*a trauma narrative in philosophical drag*" ²⁹. All the Jungian archetypes, the Christian symbolism, the cosmic battle between order and chaos – it's Peterson's personal agony writ large. He failed to master his pain through reason, so he sought to *embed the pain in myth*, to give it meaning by framing it as a universal human story.

The telltale signs of **unresolved trauma** pervade Peterson's intellectual style. "*Clinical markers of unresolved trauma—hyper-vigilance, catastrophic forecasting, a compulsive need to explain the suffering—still saturate his speech.*" ²⁹ His voice often trembles with urgency; every problem becomes an existential crisis, every disagreement a civilizational showdown. His famous exhortations about bearing suffering ("Pick up your damn suffering and bear it") actually trace back to autobiographical moments – lectures where he described his own depressive episodes and how he forced himself to carry on ³⁰. In short, he is *preaching to himself*. The world is invited to listen, but the core dialogue is Peterson versus Peterson's demons. When he rails that society has lost its myth and is sliding into "hell," he is *externalising* an inner nightmare ³¹. Researchers of trauma note that survivors often "upscale their private horror into grand explanatory frames as a way of regulating it" ³¹. That is Peterson in a nutshell: he took the hellscape of benzo withdrawal – replete with "*intense derealisation, intrusive death imagery, autonomic chaos*" ³¹ – and mapped it onto the entire world, with "Luciferian elites" and mass despair to battle. It's an extreme form of *meaning-making under duress*: if my pain is to be endurable, it must be because I am **fighting a great dragon** (not just battling my own nervous system).

The result is a kind of **mythic philosophy** fueled by very personal pain. To a follower, Peterson sounds profound – he speaks of the crisis of meaning, the need for stories, the archetypal truths of religion. But the diagnostic lens reveals a more poignant truth: "*The wound is still talking, and the philosophy is still its exoskeleton.*" ³² Peterson's intellectual edifice is effectively a coping mechanism made public. His unresolved trauma *wears the mask* of philosophical profundity. Notably, this leads to **internal contradictions** in his stance – one moment he's a scientific skeptic, the next a quasi-religious prophet – which reflect the push-pull of his own psyche (reason interrogating, limbic system screaming) ³². What

appears as a perplexingly half-agnostic, half-evangelical philosophy is, in fact, the unstable amalgam of an intellectual mind trying to rationalize the raw screams of a wounded emotional core ³² .

Why highlight Peterson in a critique of contemporary philosophy? Because he exemplifies how easily *personal pathology* can become celebrated “philosophy” when left unchecked. Peterson operates outside academia, yet his popularity and influence show the **cultural vacuum** left by academic philosophy’s retreat. In that vacuum, a man essentially working through his trauma via mythology can become a global guru. This reflects on the academy’s failings: had philosophy been offering compelling, coherent guidance on meaning and suffering, perhaps society would be less hungry for Peterson’s mythic melodrama. Instead, we have a situation where a figure like Peterson fills the void – and his success simultaneously **validates the critique** that much philosophy is just disguised psychology. Peterson’s case also underscores the earlier point about intellectualization as avoidance: rather than confronting his pain in purely therapeutic terms, he projected it into the realm of idea-battles and cultural criticism. It’s the spiritual bypass writ large. To be clear, Peterson’s insights are not entirely without merit; even a trauma-driven philosophy can hit on real issues (e.g. nihilism in modernity). But the **distorting lens of unresolved trauma** means his framework is fundamentally skewed. As one observer noted, Peterson’s worldview is a “trauma narrative” dressed up as philosophy ²⁹ – compelling to some, but ultimately constrained by the very wound it seeks to transcend. In sum, the Peterson example is a cautionary tale: it shows how, absent rigorous self-scrutiny and grounding, philosophy can devolve into **personal mythology**. And it raises an uncomfortable question: How many celebrated philosophical works are, at bottom, elaborate exoskeletons around individual or collective wounds?

The Vanishing Epistemic Niche: Logic, Normativity, and Relevance

A broader debate underlying all these critiques is whether **philosophy serves any unique epistemic purpose anymore**. In a world where science, mathematics, and specialized fields handle truth-seeking, and where public discourse and social sciences handle normative questions, what is left for philosophy to do? Some argue: *very little*. They claim that philosophy’s legitimate questions have been spun off to other disciplines, leaving behind a residue of meta-discussions and historical commentary. This sentiment was bluntly expressed by one skeptic who said, “*Culture, science, and other disciplines serve that purpose better... I’m not seeing any utility to philosophy, or any epistemic niches that it can occupy.*” ³³ The idea here is that whatever valid function philosophy once had is now accomplished through other means: scientific method for discovering facts, political processes (or even social media debates) for negotiating values, and so on. From this vantage, academic philosophy is like an appendix – a vestigial organ of inquiry that no longer plays a critical role in the knowledge ecosystem.

Defenders of philosophy contest this, but even their defenses sometimes highlight how precarious the discipline’s niche is. A frequent counter-argument is that **normative and conceptual questions** cannot be resolved by empirical science alone, and whenever those arise, we are forced back into philosophical territory. For instance, “*When a discipline confronts normative uncertainty, it imports philosophers rather than journalists or influencers,*” one commentator notes ³⁴ . Indeed, fields like bioethics, AI ethics, and legal theory do rely on philosophical expertise – often under titles like “ethicist” or “theorist.” And it’s true that modern science had to be built on certain philosophical foundations (logic, inferential statistics, etc.), which remain subject to scrutiny. In this view, philosophy’s niche is as a “**quality-control loop**” for human thought ³⁵ . It’s the only field explicitly tasked with asking “Are our reasoning methods valid?” or “What do we mean by this concept?” or “What should we value in this situation?” When done properly, philosophy *articulates premises, tests for consistency, and traces out implications* ³⁵ – tasks that are indispensable for clarity in any

complex debate. Without someone performing that role, we risk “*persuasive stories, comforting myths, and testable explanations all masquerade as equivalent*” ³⁶ ³⁷ . In other words, without the philosophical audit, society’s discourse could collapse into a stew of unchecked assumptions and muddled thinking (some would argue it already has).

However, the **flaw** is that contemporary philosophy often fails to effectively occupy this niche, even if it in principle *could*. The noble job of being the “norms answerable to contradiction” police ³⁸ ³⁷ is undermined when philosophers are busy with their own hermetic concerns. As a result, others step in: public intellectuals (like Peterson), social activists, scientists dabbling in philosophy, or even algorithms (in the form of mass opinion dynamics on social media). The vacuum left by philosophy’s retreat is being filled, but not necessarily by better alternatives. A telling comparison was made: “*Hell, social media beefs do more to debate the cultural norms and point out contradictions*” than academic philosophy does today ³³ . That barb might exaggerate, but it underscores how irrelevant academic philosophical debates often seem to everyday norm conflicts. People hashing out moral disputes on Twitter or in op-eds likely aren’t reading Kant or Rawls – and if they cite philosophy at all, it’s cherry-picked or superficial. Meanwhile, philosophy conferences churn out papers on the semantics of modality or esoteric issues in meta-ethics that never connect to these real conflicts. The potential niche (to bring clarity and rigor to normative discussions) is largely unrealized.

Even within areas like logic – seemingly a core philosophical domain – there’s a struggle to justify philosophy’s ownership. As mentioned, critics argue logic is just formalized common sense or math, existing with or without philosophy. Philosophers reply that logic in the *normative*, reflective sense is part of philosophy’s bedrock: “*Logic is the normative study of validity... Any field that asks ‘What is a reason?’ is practicing first-order philosophy, even if the notation migrates to mathematics or computer science.*” ³⁹ ⁴⁰ By that token, whenever we step back and justify *why* an inference is valid or *what* counts as evidence, we’re doing philosophy. This is a strong theoretical point – it suggests philosophy is less a separate subject and more a *mode of inquiry* that sits at the meta-level of all subjects. Yet this very abstract ubiquity is also a weakness: if philosophy is everywhere (whenever we reflect on reasoning), it is also nowhere as a distinct practice. Its *name* may vanish even as its *function* is performed by others under different guises. For example, a researcher in theoretical computer science exploring the limits of computation is essentially doing philosophy of logic, but they might consider themselves squarely a computer scientist. A policy maker wrestling with “should we do X?” is engaging ethical philosophy, but they frame it as public policy debate. The risk for philosophy is that it becomes an “**invisible hand**” – present in spirit but absent in credit and identity.

The harsh reality implied by critics is that **modern philosophy might have made itself dispensable**. If it continues to prize inward-looking scholarship over public relevance, others will simply appropriate the valuable parts (logic, ethics, conceptual analysis) and leave the rest to wither. The field’s own history supports this pattern: natural science emerged *from* “natural philosophy” and then left it behind; psychology emerged from philosophy and became its own empirical domain; economics, linguistics, cognitive science – all were once under philosophy’s wing and flew away. Each time, philosophy redefined itself to be the leftover meta-discussion about whatever remained. This has led to the quip that philosophy always “takes all the credit and none of the responsibility.” When something works, it was because of good philosophy; when something fails or stagnates, that’s just armchair musing (and perhaps then declared *not* “real philosophy” in retrospect). Small wonder that many regard the discipline with a mix of *exasperation and cynicism*. If philosophy wants to claim logic, it must answer for the logicians who make real contributions in math and CS. If it wants to claim moral reasoning, it must answer for why public morality seems more

influenced by activists and scientists than by philosophical ethicists. Right now, philosophy's **epistemic niche** is contested ground – arguably more a historical legacy than a living role. The *debate* about that niche, captured in exchanges about logic's status or philosophy's utility, is itself a symptom of the identity crisis. If a field has to constantly argue that it's useful, that in itself hints at a problem.

The Coherence Remedy: A Regulative Ideal

Having surveyed the litany of flaws – *ruminantion, obscurity, pathology, imperial overreach, loss of relevance* – one might well conclude that contemporary philosophy is beyond saving. Yet, some thinkers (often themselves philosophers in meta-mood) have proposed paths to redemption. A striking suggestion that has emerged is to fundamentally alter philosophy's *telos* (ultimate aim) and **reinvent its norms** accordingly. The watchword of this rescue mission is *coherence*. The idea is to treat **coherence – at multiple levels – as the regulative ideal** that philosophy must single-mindedly orient itself around if it is to escape its pathological attractor basin. Instead of pursuing clever arguments, historical scholasticism, or fashionable paradoxes, philosophers would make their North Star the *increasing coherence* of our understanding, across logical, semantic, pragmatic, and even ethical dimensions.

What would this mean in practice? First, at the simplest level, it means individual philosophical arguments should strive for **logical coherence** – no internal contradictions, clear validity of inference, etc. This sounds obvious, but recall that currently clarity and consistency are sometimes undervalued; a renewed emphasis on them would already shake up large parts of the field. But coherence as a meta-goal goes further: it's not just about one argument being logically consistent, but about the **mutual coherence of an entire body of thought**. Philosophers would aim to make *everything fit together* – our best scientific knowledge, our ethical principles, our understanding of mind, language, and reality – into one integrated, non-self-defeating worldview (or at least fewer, less glaringly incompatible worldviews). Coherence in this expanded sense touches on **semantic clarity** (do our concepts align and make sense across contexts?), **pragmatic coherence** (do our ideas lead somewhere useful or at least meaningful for action?), and **ethical coherence** (do our intellectual frameworks connect with our values and lived experience in a way that isn't hypocritical or harmful?). In short, coherence would be a **multi-level filter** through which all philosophical output is run. If something is clever but makes the overall picture less coherent, it would be set aside as a parlour trick. If a theory is internally consistent but semantically inscrutable or practically pointless, it would be seen as falling short of philosophy's aim. Only those contributions that *add up* to a more coherent understanding of ourselves and the world would count as progress. Advocates argue that this is in fact *“the most legitimate and defensible philosophical telos available”* now – perhaps the only one left that isn't arbitrary ⁴¹. If philosophy doesn't become *“the discipline of disciplined thought”* aiming at maximal coherence, then it will remain either mere *“historical pageantry or recursive pathology,”* neither of which justifies its existence ⁴¹.

Notably, the call for coherence is not meant as a return to some rigid system-building or monolithic doctrine. It is more like establishing a **direction of inquiry** rather than a fixed destination. *“Coherence is not a final destination; it is a vector,”* as one proponent puts it ⁴². The point is to always be moving toward fewer contradictions and greater integrative clarity, even if ultimate truth remains out of reach. In this sense, coherence functions as what philosophers call a **regulative ideal**: something to guide us, not something we ever perfectly attain. Importantly, it's also *multi-dimensional*. For example, one could have a very coherent formal theory that is nonetheless disconnected from reality – e.g., a perfectly consistent fantasy world. That's why the coherence ideal must span further: consistency *plus* meaningful correspondence to the world (empirical adequacy) *plus* applicability (pragmatic usefulness) *plus* alignment with humane values. These additional constraints ensure that coherence-seeking doesn't devolve into just building beautiful but

empty logical castles. In effect, the proposal bolsters coherence with **three additional “guardrails”**: empirical friction, pragmatic accountability, and ethical seriousness ⁴³ ⁴⁴ . Empirical friction means whenever philosophical claims touch on observable reality, they must submit to input from empirical sciences or evidence – data should *veto* armchair speculation that strays too far ⁴³ . Pragmatic accountability means asking of every idea: *does this help anyone reason better or act wiser?* If a theory has zero conceivable impact on how decisions might be made or how life might be lived, then it fails a basic relevance test and should be allowed to die ⁴⁴ . Ethical seriousness means not losing sight of the big questions of value – the classic “How should we live?” dimension. If a piece of philosophy cannot, even indirectly, inform that human question, then its warrant is doubtful ⁴⁵ . Together, these measures would transform philosophy into a far more **stringently self-critical discipline**. Work that is merely “ornate noise” would be recognized and filtered out, and what survives would (ideally) be that which genuinely *illuminates rather than merely impresses* ⁴⁶ .

All of this sounds well and good, but implementing it would be revolutionary. It has been suggested that philosophy would need an overhaul of its institutions to cement coherence as the guiding principle. For example, journals and conferences would prioritize papers that *solve* problems or clarify issues over those that introduce clever new puzzles ⁴⁷ . Tenure committees would value interdisciplinary lucidity and demonstrated usefulness of ideas over the current fetish for hyper-specialized novelty ⁴⁷ . Some have even proposed a formal **“public audit”** requirement for philosophical work: any major philosophical project should be required to state in plain language what it’s trying to clarify, what would count as its failure, and why anyone outside a tiny circle should care ⁴⁸ . If it cannot pass that basic audit, it wouldn’t be published or promoted. This would enforce a habit of **accountability and clarity** brutally absent from many philosophical texts today. It’s essentially saying: if you can’t explain the point of your philosophy, *to someone who isn’t you*, then perhaps there *isn’t* a point. Such measures echo the scientific method’s ethos – transparency, falsifiability, peer review by broader communities – but adapted to conceptual work. They would function as a kind of **intellectual natural selection**, weeding out the most egregiously self-indulgent speculations. Only ideas that *increase coherence* in some discernible way (logically, conceptually, practically, or ethically) would advance; the rest would be pruned as dead wood. Over time, this could reorient philosophy toward being *less* of a mysterious priesthood and more of a rigorous “open-source project” where improvements accumulate and nonsense is deprecated ⁴⁹ .

Is this a fantasy? Perhaps. It is certainly a **tall order**, amounting to a reformation as radical as any the discipline has seen since the Scientific Revolution. But given the diagnosis of pathology, nothing short of radical surgery would do. The coherence proposal is appealing in that it does not throw out philosophy’s unique strengths – the ability to question assumptions at the deepest level – but rather seeks to **channel those strengths productively**. It implicitly admits that philosophy’s current state is “sick” and that “*most people shouldn’t touch it... Most who do are broken by it*” ⁵⁰ , a stunning concession. Yet it insists that the answer is not to burn the library of philosophy down, but to **refactor** it. As one proponent put it, “*Philosophy is a cognitive trap... But that’s not a reason to abandon it. That’s a reason to apply engineering constraints to philosophy—treat it not as a cathedral but as an open-source codebase, always subject to refactor.*” ⁴⁹ This encapsulates the vision: humility and practicality in place of grandiosity and insularity. Whether such a transformation can occur is another question (addressed below), but it stands as a beacon of how things *could* be different. Coherence, as a regulative ideal, offers a compass by which philosophy might navigate out of its “terminal attractor basin” of recursive obscurity ¹² ⁵¹ . It may not solve every issue – a perfectly coherent system can still be wrong or irrelevant ⁵² – but *without* coherence, philosophy is guaranteed to drift aimlessly ⁵¹ . In summary, if there is a cure for the maladies we have dissected, **coherence-driven reform** is currently the most plausible candidate on the table.

Conclusion: Reform or Ruin?

Is philosophy as a discipline capable of this self-transformation, or is it structurally fated to remain in its dysfunctional loop? The prognosis is uncertain, but sobering. On one hand, it *is* possible to imagine philosophy reformed along the lines described – in fact, some individuals already practice philosophy in more integrative, interdisciplinary, coherent ways. On the other hand, the **institutional inertia** and depth of the problems suggest that partial measures won't suffice. As one commentator bluntly put it, *"You could resurrect it. But you'd have to destroy most of it to do so."* ⁵³ In other words, real reform might require a near-total overhaul: dismantling the current reward structures, purging whole swathes of scholastic dead wood, and rebuilding on new principles. Short of that, efforts to tweak things around the edges will likely be co-opted by the same old dynamics. To truly cure the patient, surgery is needed, not a band-aid.

What would such "destruction for the sake of resurrection" entail in concrete terms? It would mean fundamentally re-engineering the **incentive architecture** of academic philosophy. As discussed, journals and hiring committees would have to shift criteria away from the novel-but-needless and toward the clear-and-consequential ⁴⁷. Philosophers in training would need to be taught that *communication* and *cross-domain intelligibility* are virtues, not signs of dilettantism ⁴⁷. The field would likely contract in some areas – ultra-technical logic or abstruse metaphysics might continue, but as niche endeavors at the periphery rather than defining the image of the field ⁴⁷. Public engagement and **interdisciplinary fertilization** would need to be rewarded, not seen as unserious. Most radically, as suggested, a norm of **public audit** could be instituted ⁴⁸. Imagine every philosophy paper having to include an "executive summary" stating in plain English: (a) what it is trying to make coherent or what question it is addressing, (b) what it would mean for the attempt to fail (what would disprove or refute it, if anything), and (c) why anyone outside a small subfield should care about the result ⁴⁸. If an author cannot answer those, the work might be deemed not worth publishing. This would be heresy to many current academics (who often revel in the idea that their work is too complex for summaries or doesn't need real-world justification). And that signals how far the culture would need to change. Implementing such measures would indeed feel like **destroying an edifice** – the comfortable closed world of peer indulgence – in order to build something new. It is, frankly, hard to imagine the change coming from within the entrenched halls of academia alone.

So, is reform plausible? Historically, philosophy has periodically reinvented itself (think of Socrates upending Sophism, or science spinning off, or analytic philosophy reacting against Hegelian Idealism). But these revolutions often coincided with *external* pressures – societal crises, scientific breakthroughs, generational upheavals. Today, one external pressure is the dire state of the humanities in academia: falling enrollments, funding cuts, and public skepticism. Philosophy may be forced to adapt or perish. If departments start closing because students see no value, that existential threat could prompt change. Another pressure is the rising clout of **technology and science** in answering questions that were once philosophical (AI predicting behavior, neuroscience explaining mind, etc.). If philosophers don't stake out a clear, respected niche, they'll simply be ignored as irrelevant. In a way, the **doom** scenario is already partially happening – philosophy loses stature and becomes a historical footnote while big questions get answered (well or poorly) by others.

However, doom is not preordained. There remains a community of thinkers – perhaps small, but vocal – who *"still believe that thought should illuminate rather than merely impress."* ⁴⁶ If that ethos can spread, if new guardrails of coherence and relevance can be established, philosophy might yet crawl out of its hole. This would involve philosophers themselves undertaking the uncomfortable task of policing their ranks: calling out work that is obscurantist or sterile, elevating work that genuinely clarifies or synthesizes. It might require philosophical societies, journals, and conference organizers to consciously pivot their themes

toward integrative and practical topics. Essentially, it calls for *leadership within philosophy* to push for a new norm: that **confusion is not depth**, that **clarity is a virtue**, and that being *useful* (intellectually, ethically) is not beneath the dignity of the field.

The concluding assessment, then, is guarded. If one is optimistic, one could say philosophy is *not* inherently doomed – it has within it the seeds of self-correction (after all, what other field is so devoted to critical self-examination?). With the right self-awareness, it could enact the kind of “**normative reformation**” sketched above ⁵⁴. Coherence, plus empirical and ethical anchoring, could restore a compass to a ship that has been spinning in the fog ⁵¹ ⁵⁵. On the pessimistic side, the very factors we’ve identified – the attractor basin of pathology, the institutional self-interest, the lack of external checks – all conspire against change. It is quite possible that philosophy as currently practiced *cannot* pull itself out of the mire because the people within it are, for the most part, selected and trained to thrive in that mire (and may not even see it as a mire). In that case, the most likely outcome is a **slow decline into irrelevance**. Philosophy will carry on in some form, but more as intellectual entertainment or niche history (a kind of living museum of ideas) than as a forward-driving force in human knowledge. The *structural* doom would manifest as a continued brain drain of talent to other fields and a continued loss of public interest, until “philosopher” becomes a quaint antiquarian title.

In sum, **philosophy faces a fork in the road**. Down one path, radical reform – painful but possibly revitalizing – awaits, guided by coherence and accountability. Down the other, a comfortable slide into senescence, where the field survives as a caricature of itself: insulated, increasingly forgotten, occasionally mocked (until something dramatic, like the closure of departments, possibly puts it out of its misery). The truth may be that *piecemeal* reform will not suffice; a near-revolution is needed, and revolutions are never guaranteed. As one observer quipped, what’s needed is nothing less than a “**real philosopher**” – someone willing to “*destroy most of it*” in order to save the best parts ⁵³. Whether such iconoclasts will emerge with enough influence is uncertain. For now, we conclude that the **flaws of contemporary philosophy** are not only real but **severe**. They are recognized by those with the clearest eyes in the field, and they demand an urgent response. If that response is not forthcoming, then philosophy, for all its millennia of prestige, may indeed go the way of alchemy – an endeavor that contained the seeds of a science but had to die for a new science to be born. The question that remains: *Can philosophy be reborn from within, or will it be forever lost in its own labyrinth?*

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27 28 29 30 31 32 **Jordan Peterson Philosophy.txt**

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