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The Philosopher's Tone

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In many academic disciplines, including my own, philosophy, publication in peer-review journals is the gold standard: jobs, promotion, tenure and successful grant applications often depend on it. There is no official ranking of philosophy journals, or a number given to their “impact factors”, as there is in many scientific disciplines, but there is an informal consensus about which are the best: *Mind*, *The Philosophical Review*, *Ethics*, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, *Nous*, *Analysis*, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, *Philosophical Studies*, *The Journal of Philosophy* and *The Philosophical Quarterly* would be on most philosophers' lists.

Some of these journals have been around for over a century — *Mind* was founded in 1876, *The Philosophical Review* in 1892, and *The Journal of Philosophy* in 1904. Some titles are owned by learned societies (the Mind Association, the Analysis Trust, the Scots Philosophical Club) and some edited by university departments (*The Philosophical Review* by Cornell University, the *Journal of Philosophy* by Columbia). Some (e.g. *Mind*, *Analysis*) are published by university presses, and others (e.g. *Philosophical Studies*, *Nous*) are published by commercial academic presses like Wiley Blackwell or Springer Nature. This distinction has consequences for the economics of the philosophy profession: the subscription charges for institutions differ enormously between these two groups (an institutional subscription to *Mind* is €340, to *Philosophical Studies* €2,925). In addition, Oxford and Cambridge University Presses are charities whose cash surpluses must be used for their charitable (i.e. academic or educational) purposes. In many cases, profits

from the sale of their journals are given back to learned societies and distributed in the form of scholarships and fellowships. The same is not true for the “for profit” journals.

This distinction does not correspond to any difference in content or intellectual style between the journals. Otherwise the other journals mentioned publish articles in all areas of the “analytic” tradition of philosophy — the English-language tradition that is hard to define but easy to recognise — which is dominant in British and American universities: metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, philosophy of mind, philosophy language and logic, and so on. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, and *Ethics* restrict themselves to the areas indicated by their titles.

Something academic philosophy shares with other disciplines is the huge increase in the number of submissions to journals in the past few decades – in the UK this is because of the expansion of the universities, institutionally generated pressures to publish (the research assessment regime, for example), and the fact that many doctoral students are now encouraged to publish by their supervisors or institutions. To take one example, *Mind* now claims to receive about 600 submissions a year (and this is comparable to the number of submissions in the other leading philosophy journals). A former editor of *Mind*, now deceased, used to say that he edited the journal on Saturday mornings “when his wife was at Sainsbury’s”. It is now inconceivable that an editor of a major journal could do a fraction of its business in one morning a week.

One of the headaches for journal editors is to find reviewers to read the submitted papers. The editor will filter out plainly unacceptable ones, but then will usually have to find at least two people who are prepared to read those that remain (which are usually anonymized). It is common for the requests for reviewers to move

down the academic hierarchy, since better-known reviewers inevitably get asked more frequently, and there are few who have time to say yes to every request. The upshot is that journals end up requesting people (even inexperienced graduate students) to review papers who have little chance of getting published in the journals themselves. Maybe this is not in itself a problem – not all of the best reviewers will be the best researchers, and vice versa – but it does indicate how uncontrollable peer review is. This whole process can take months.

Even so, acceptance rates are implausibly low. For about two-thirds of the leading philosophy journals the rate is less than 10 per cent (this is different in many other subjects). They may think it shows how high their standards are. Maybe they are right, but one knock-on effect is that the less prestigious journals also aim for low acceptance rates to establish their credentials, and perfectly decent papers go round and round the various circles of journal hell, looking for a home and sometimes never finding one.

There is something bizarre about these acceptance rates. Eric Schliesser of the University of Amsterdam has observed that “this low rate is only defensible if you think that publication in philosophy has the kind of risk where any false positive leads to society’s catastrophe” (adding unnecessarily, “nobody thinks that”). The discipline has high standards, and the number of competent philosophers in the world and the number of articles they are trying to publish are all growing. Given this, and given the new opportunities presented by digital technology, there is no reason why the leading journals should not just publish more stuff. Of course, it might mean that publication in one of these journals may no longer be that sole decisive achievement that will get you that job or grant. But this could be beneficial: rather than evaluating

someone's work by looking at which journals they publish in, assessors would have to actually read the work itself.

But another obstacle to achieving this is the attitude of philosophers who act as peer reviewers. Many behave as if finding an objection to the claims of a paper is a sufficient reason to reject it, or to ask for revisions before publication. Authors are regularly asked to revise their papers to take account of a wide variety of more or less plausible objections. This inevitably results in papers that are longer than they should be, and in many cases far more boring and hard to read than the original. The whole "revise and resubmit" process also adds months to the publication cycle. In many cases, journal editors would do a service to their readers if they took a few more risks and published even those papers to which someone might – shocking as it may seem – make a good objection.

It will be difficult to improve this situation without making some fundamental changes to the way academic philosophers are trained. In the analytic tradition, philosophers are taught to write in a style that, in the memorable words of Bernard Williams, "tries to remove in advance every conceivable misunderstanding or misinterpretation or objection, including those that would occur only to the malicious or the clinically literal-minded". It is therefore unsurprising that the criticisms often put forward in peer review can seem uncharitable, pedantic and pointless. If philosophers are serious about improving the way their journals function, they need to consider not only how to improve the mechanics of the reviewing process, but also how to improve the way they criticize one another.