

.Should We Occupy?

Bat-Ami Bar On

Abstract: In this blog entry I ask what is the responsibility of philosophy graduate programs, philosophy faculty, and professional organizations of academic philosophers toward individuals who are interested in pursuing a philosophy Ph.D.. I am especially concerned about responsibilities toward members of groups that are underrepresented in philosophy as an academic discipline who are being actively recruited into the pool of applicants to Ph. D. programs. I ask my questions against a background of bad news about the state of philosophy as an academic profession and the academic humanities more generally, and a reasonable anticipation that there is no light at the end of the tunnel, and so the job prospects of philosophy Ph.D. aspirants are not good. Because of endemic academic inequalities, philosophy Ph.D. aspirants who are members of groups that are currently underrepresented in philosophy are likely to be even worse off than others.

I

My question, “should we occupy?” is not intended to raise doubts about the importance of social justice as a value-horizon for philosophy as an academic profession. That as a profession philosophy has a long way to go to become fairer is indicated by, for example, a persistent lack of gender parity, let alone other forms of parity in the profession.¹ My question is intended to call attention to a specific problem with an approach toward

* I presented a version of this essay in May at the *Hypatia* 2015 “Exploring Collaborative Contestations/Diversifying Philosophy” conference at Villanova University. I want to thank participants for questions and comments. Additional thankyou go to Lisa Tessman, Anja Karnein, and Nicole Hassoun.

¹. See a variety of sources from the American Philosophical Association’s Committee on the Status of Women at <http://www.apaonlinecs.org/data-on-women-in-philosophy>.

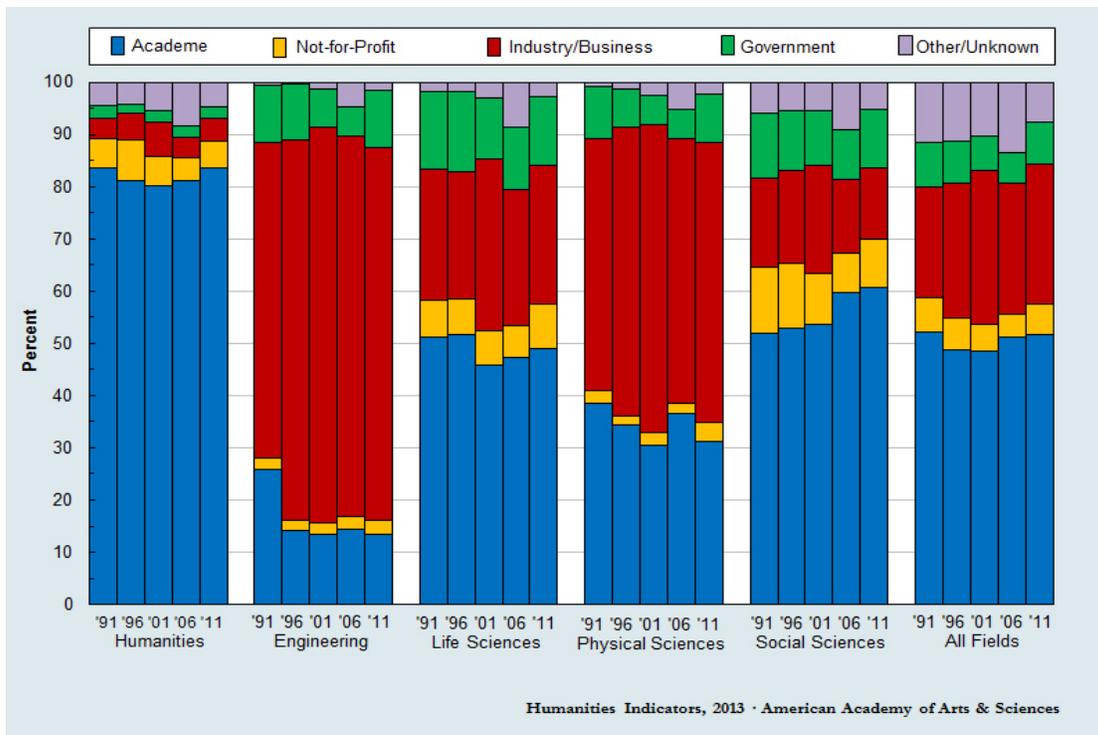
populating the profession along a more equitable trajectory, namely through increasing the diversity of the philosophy PhD pool without at the same time decreasing the size of the pool itself and committing to a serious effort to place philosophy PhDs flexibly. Feminists, critical race theorists, and others who are looking to refashion the academic profession of philosophy along more equitable lines are, of course, right to insist that diversification is an essential aspect of making the profession more equitable and that the diversification of the philosophy PhD pool is an important part of a comprehensive strategy for diversifying the profession. But, I think that we also have a responsibility of due care to the individuals who are the potential recruits into the philosophy PhD pool and given a commitment to social justice, especially if they are members of groups that this far have been underrepresented in the profession. As of now, I do not think that as a professional group or a group of professionals we take this responsibility seriously.

II

My argument begins with some statistics and some empirical speculations that I believe are well founded. What the statistics and empirical speculations suggest is that a philosophy PhD is, as an economist has recently opined with brutal frankness, a life style PhD, a PhD one pursues for its own sake because one loves studying philosophy and participating in philosophical discourses rather than a PhD one pursues instrumentally as well or only instrumentally, and either way, with realistic expectations for a qualifications based good enough job, especially an academic one.²

². The opinion is Noah Smith's, a 2012 economics Ph.D. with an academic job at Stony Brook University's Business School, where he teaches finance. See his blog entry at <http://noahpinionblog.blogspot.com/2013/05/if-you-get-phd-get-economics-phd.html>.

In what follows I am focusing primarily on the academic job market both because the great majority of philosophy PhDs are interested in this market and because as a twenty year (1991-2011) comparative chart points out, this far, it is the primary job market for newly minted humanities PhDs, a statistic from which one can safely extrapolate to philosophy, not only because it is included in the statistics for the humanities, but also because the options that philosophy PhDs have are circumscribed in a similar way to the options of other humanities PhDs.



Source: <http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/indicatordoc.aspx?i=68>.

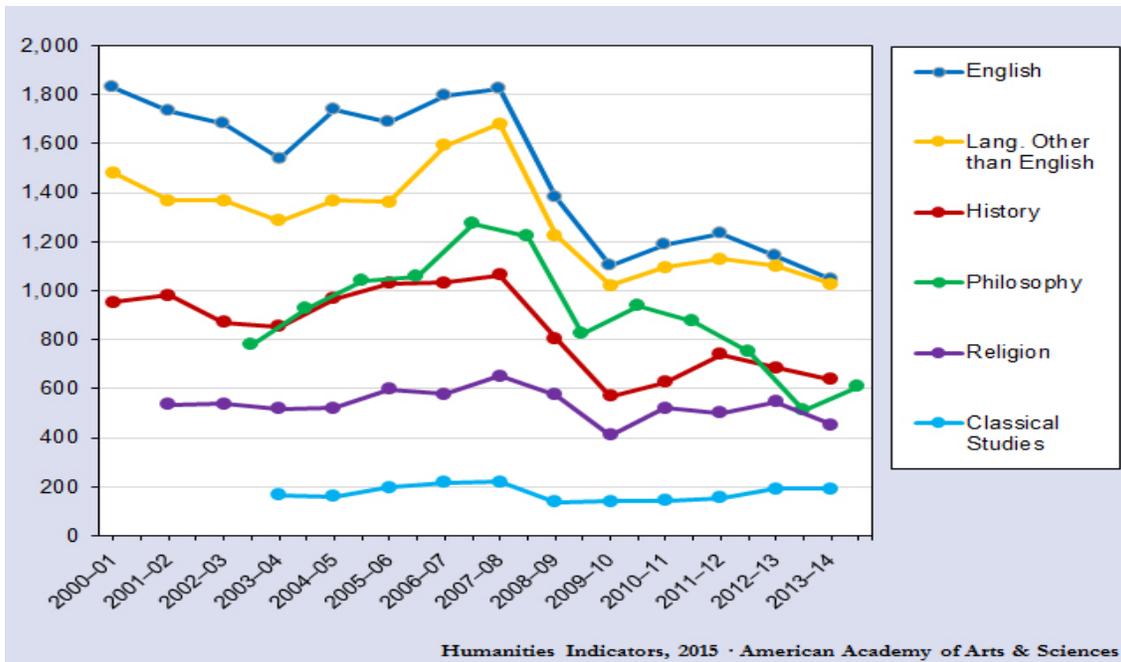
As to the academic job market for philosophy PhDs, it offers serious cause for alarm. Statistics provided by the American Philosophical Association indicate that after a rise in the number of jobs advertised in *Jobs for Philosophers* that started in 2003, when slightly under 800 jobs were advertised, and peaked in 2007, when more than 1,200 jobs were advertised, the number of advertised jobs in philosophy has been declining despite slight upward bumps.



Source: American Philosophical Association at http://www.apaonline.org/?JFP_Data.

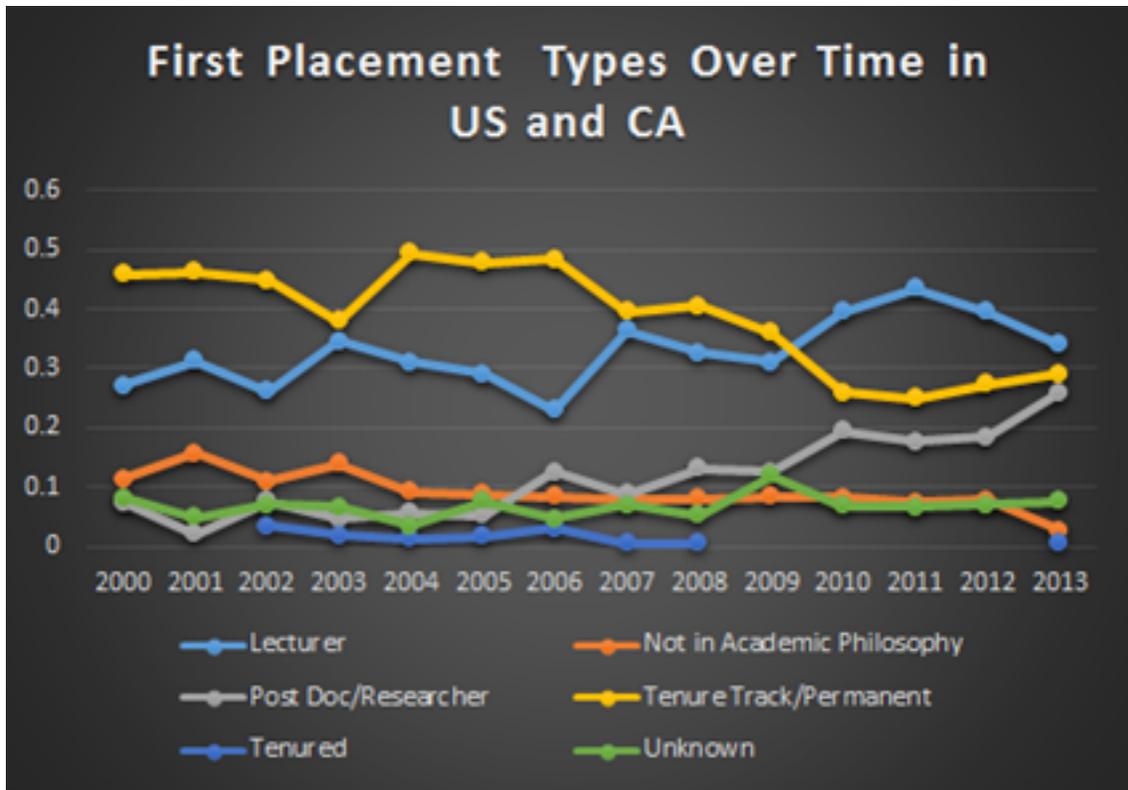
The philosophical job market does not stand out when compared to other humanities, which I think strengthens the sense of a job loss trend, even as one wonders about the accuracy of the American Philosophical Association's statistics.³

³. For a discussion of this see <https://www.amacad.org/content/research/dataForumEssay.aspx?i=21673>. According to this discussion, research suggests that a professional society's job listings are indicative of labor market demand.



Sources: American Academy of Arts and Sciences at <https://www.amacad.org/content/research/dataForumEssay.aspx?i=21673>.

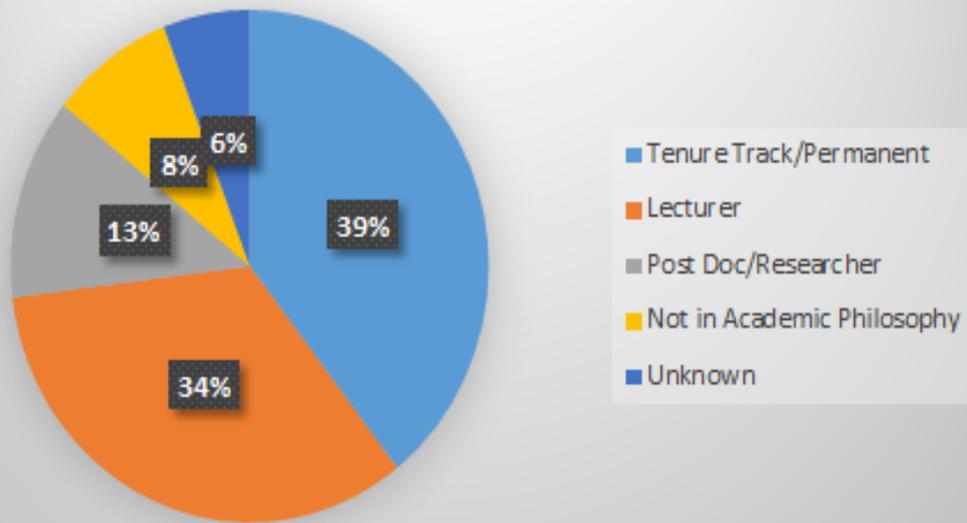
Philosophy job advertisements are for all jobs, thus both tenured and untenured jobs, and even for part time jobs. *Jobs for philosophers* also publicizes postdoctoral positions and these are counted as jobs. Thus, an analysis of actual placement records is quite important, if one wants to have a rough sense of the texture or quality of the jobs that constitute the philosophy job market. Such an analysis points at a decline of tenure track jobs and a rise of lecturer and postdoctoral positions and yields the following picture for first placement.



Source: <http://www.philosophynews.com/post/2013/10/02/Will-I-get-a-Job-Graduate-School-Philosophy-Placement-Records.aspx>.

I could put the same information in a different and perhaps more stark chart; this chart paints a picture that calls attention to the fact that only 39% of new philosophy PhDs are likely to end up in tenure track jobs if the current trend merely stabilizes rather than continue its trajectory of replacing tenure track jobs with lecturer and postdoctoral positions.

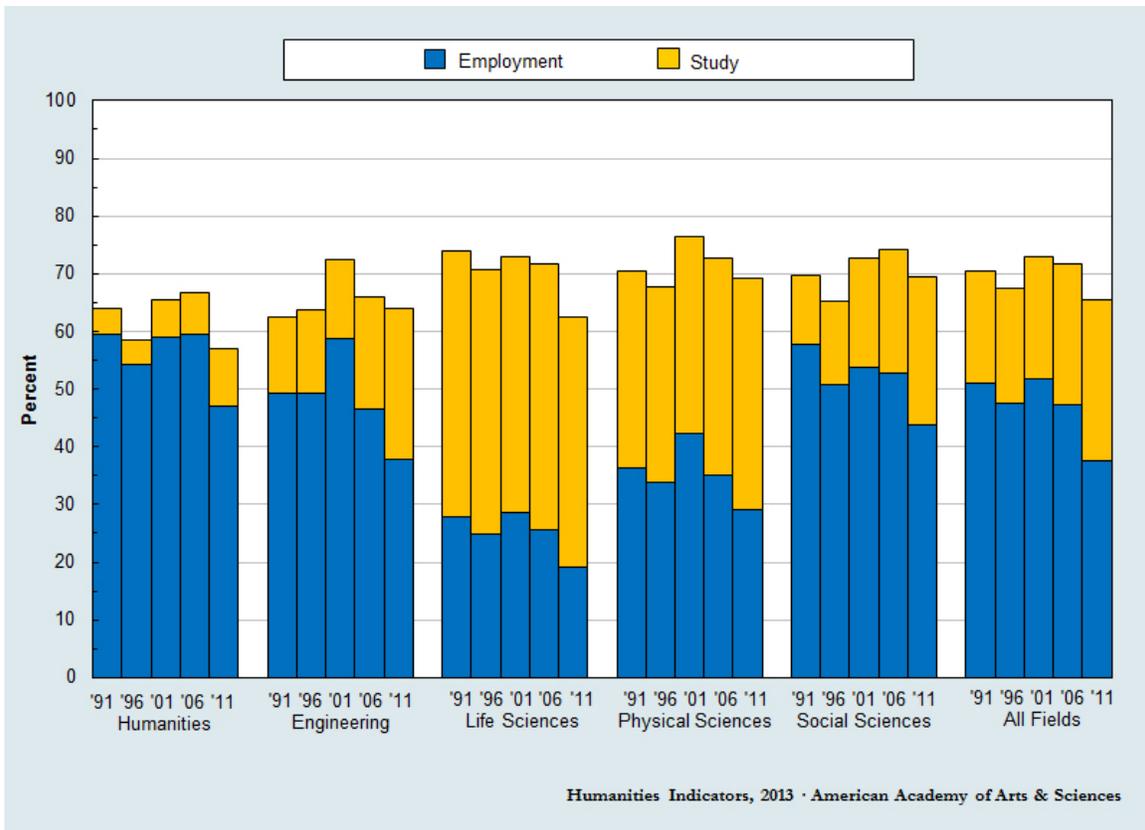
First Placement Type Percentages In US and CA



Source: <http://www.philosophynews.com/post/2013/10/02/Will-I-get-a-Job-Graduate-School-Philosophy-Placement-Records.aspx>.

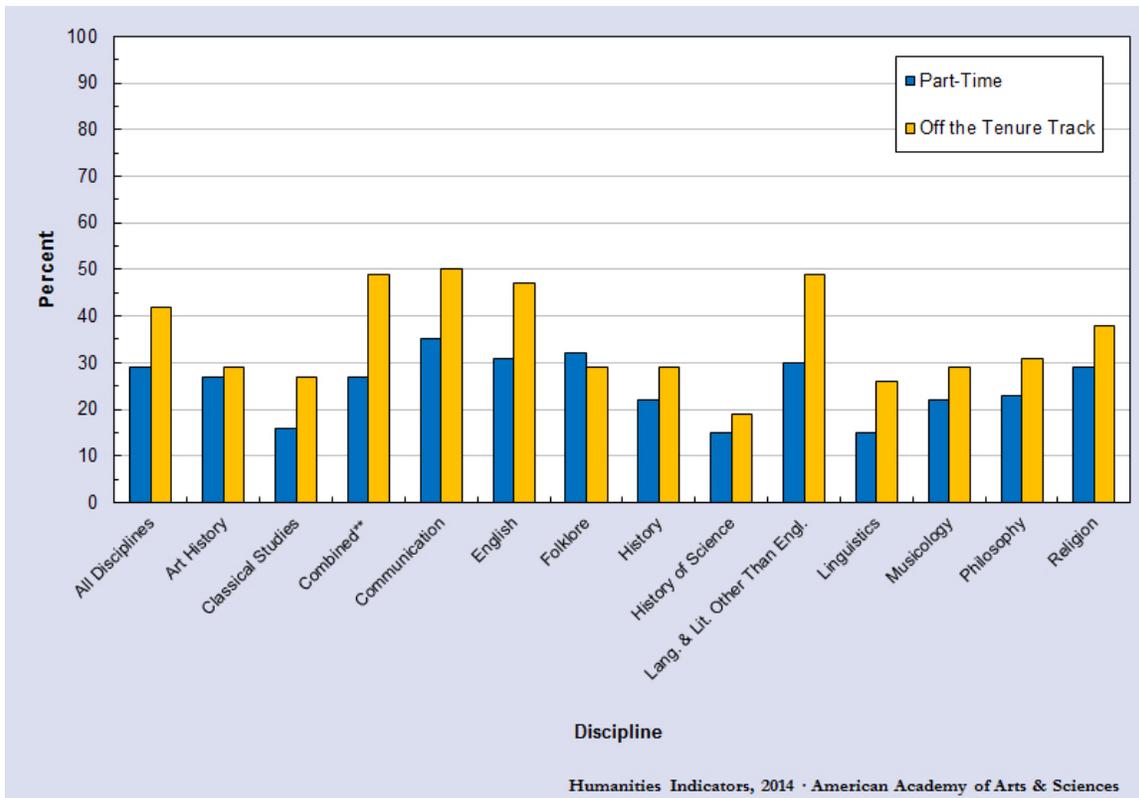
One should not read this picture optimistically by suggesting that the situation of those taking lecturer or postdoctoral positions is very likely to improve and so these jobs merely serve as additional training grounds. For some the situation will indeed improve but not for too many since there is a persistent oversupply of philosophy PhDs.⁴ Data going back to 1991 shows that the number of humanities PhD recipients with firm employment commitments by graduation was at most 60% and this number has been declining, reaching 47% in 2011. By extrapolation, one can assume a similar trend for philosophy PhDs and it is quite clear from the data that even if one adds postdoctoral positions into the mix, the situation does not improve by much.

⁴. There is no comprehensive data about the postdoctoral positions to jobs, whether academic or not, paths. Even in STEM fields, the postdoctoral positions are being re-examined because they seem to not serve to well as a career training ground. See http://www.nap.edu/openbook.php?record_id=18982.



Source: <http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/indicatordoc.aspx?i=68#fig305>.

Alternatively one can look at data at a specific time, which shows that in 2012 around 23% of all philosophy faculty were part-time and around 31% were not tenured or tenure-track.



Source: <http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/indicatordoc.aspx?i=461#fig481>.

III

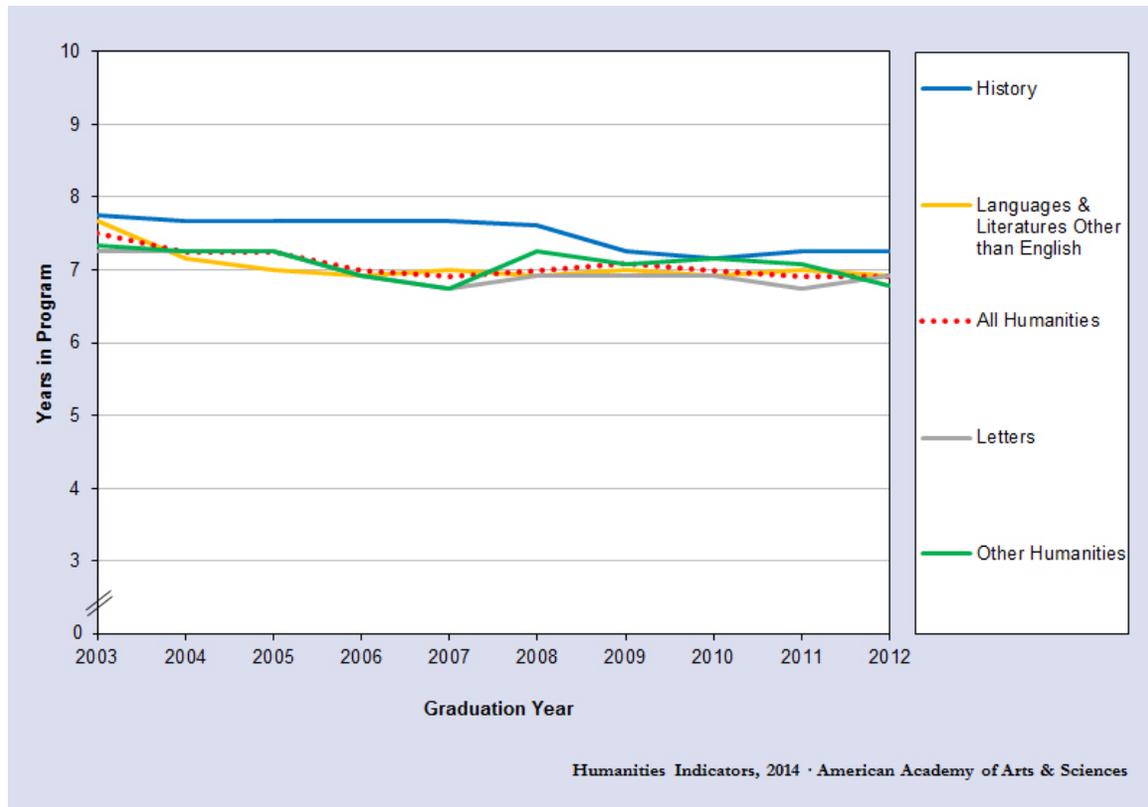
I noted above that there is an oversupply of philosophy PhDs, a fact that is simple to conclude from the data about how many new PhDs end up with an offer upon graduation and data about long term trends. This oversupply suggests that on its own the philosophy job market seems to have had little effect on what philosophy PhD granting departments do, or on the behaviour of undergraduates looking into doctoral studies in philosophy. What current data shows is the exact opposite of what one should expect given the market, namely a steady, even if slow, growth trend in the number of new philosophy PhDs.

Philosophy doctorate recipients: 2003–13⁵

2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
392	365	355	370	411	400	422	432	462	497	493

Source: <http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/sed/2013/data/tab13.pdf>

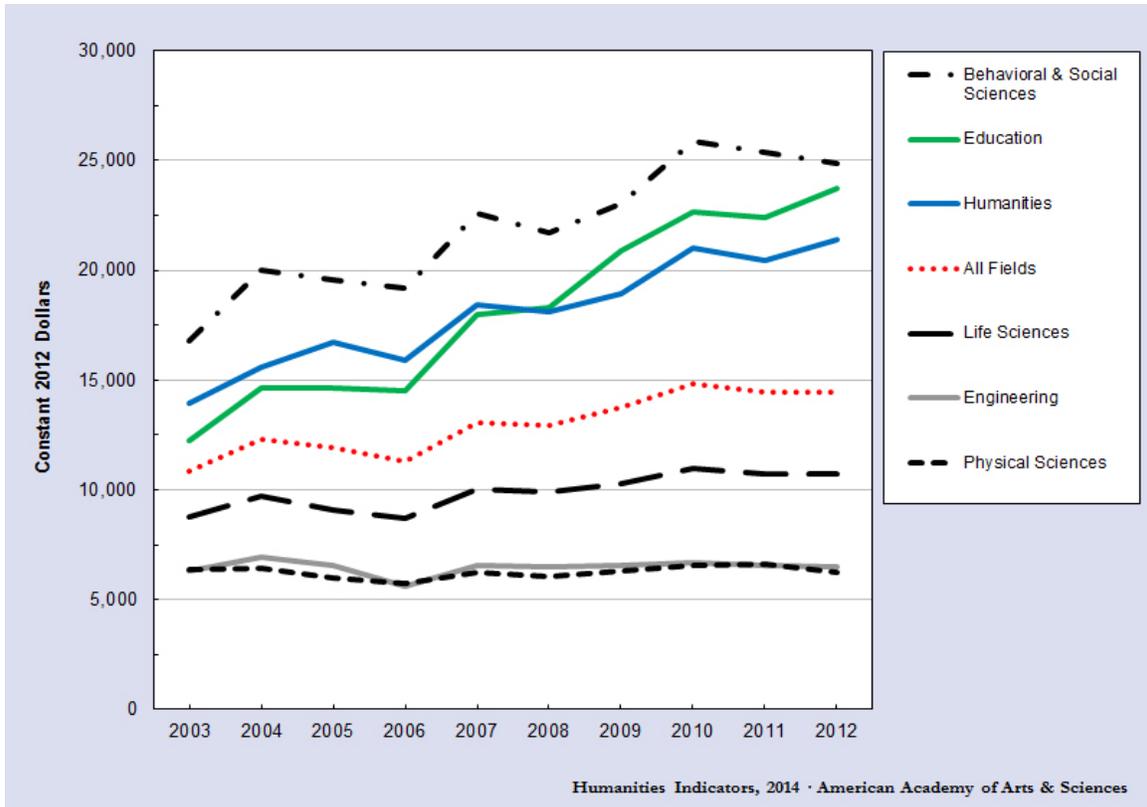
And it also shows that while there has been a slight decline in the number of years that humanities doctoral students take to complete their PhDs, on average, the most recent completers for whom there is data (2012), took just under 7 years to complete their PhDs.



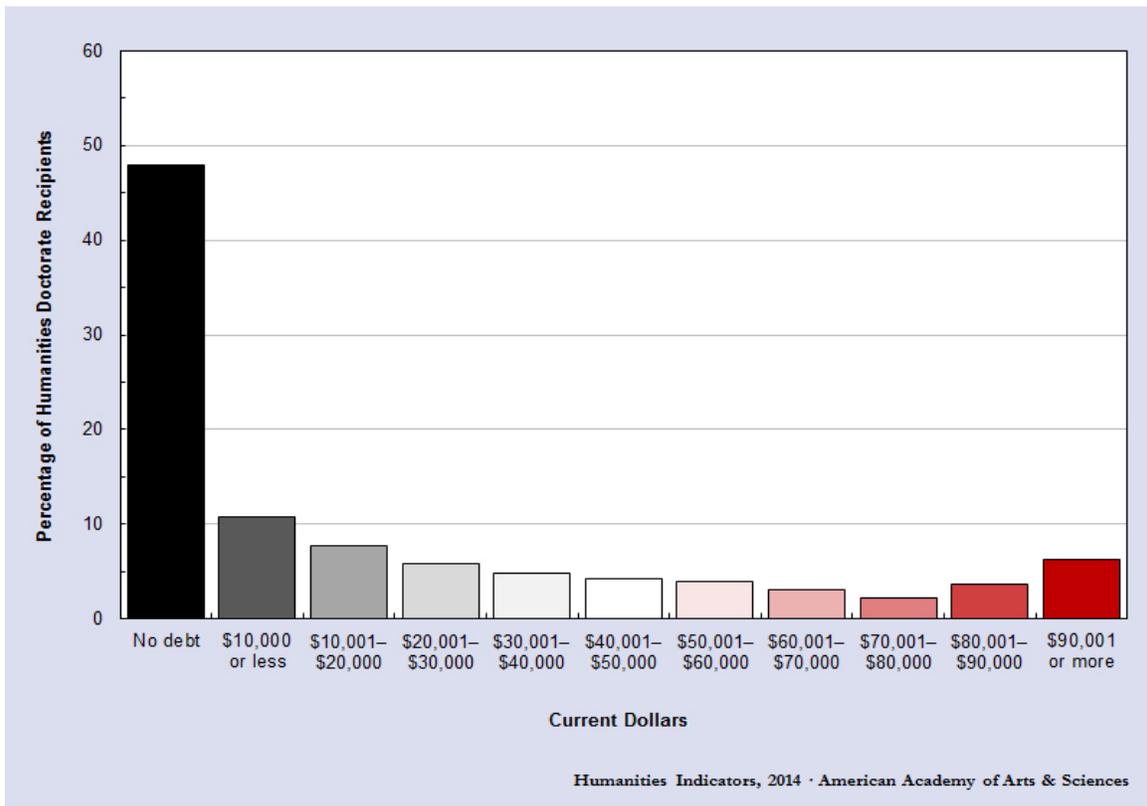
Source: <http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/cmsData/pdf/indII-15b.pdf>.

In addition the data shows that during this time, slightly more than 50% of humanities doctoral students incurred some debt, many of \$30,000 or more.

⁵. According to data collected by the American Philosophical Association the total numbers of philosophy PhD recipients are higher - 791 in 2013, 771 in 2012, 802 in 2011, and 651 in 2010. See <http://www.apaonline.org/?page=data&hhSearchTerms=%22IPED%22>.



Source: <http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/indicatordoc.aspx?i=365>.



Source: <http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/indicatordoc.aspx?i=366>

While these are general statistics, I believe that since the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, which collected and tabulated them, did not mention philosophy as different in any regard, so as an outlier, one can assume that the statistics are indicative enough for philosophy as well.

Even if one assumes that all philosophy PhD aspirants are likely to be similarly affected by the philosophy job market, time to degree, and debt, too many of these PhDs end up having spent about 7 years preparing for a job they cannot have, and are in debt. But, it is, of course, not the case that all philosophy PhD aspirants will be similarly affected. At least in the case of economically disadvantaged⁶ aspirants for a philosophy PhD, unless an aspirant is a lucky exception, she or he can expect to carry a disproportionate share of the burdens of pursuing a philosophy PhD.

First, there is suggestive information that prestigious schools, which are also usually richer schools,⁷ support their PhD students better, thereby reducing their need to go into debt. To give just one example: Yale University, which this far has supported philosophy PhD students for five years, of which three are in the form of non-teaching fellowships, has announced in February 2015 that it will add a sixth year of support to eligible humanities and social science PhD students, including philosophy PhD students, in the form of a teaching fellowship. In AY 2014-15, the minimum annual stipend for a PhD student at Yale University is \$28,400, and it is part of a package that includes a

⁶. In the United States, economic status is correlated with race and ethnicity (for a quick overview of this see <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2013/08/28/these-seven-charts-show-the-black-white-economic-gap-hasnt-budged-in-50-years/>), though as careful analysis of intergenerational mobility shows, economic status cannot be taken as a stand in for race and ethnicity without sensitivity to locality (about this see Raj Chetty et al. "Is The United States Still a Land of Opportunity? Recent Trends in Intergenerational Mobility" (2014) at http://obs.rc.fas.harvard.edu/chetty/mobility_trends.pdf).

⁷. For a quick look at the list of rich universities see this article from the *Business Insider* <http://www.businessinsider.com/10-universities-control-a-third-of-the-money-in-higher-ed-2015-4>.

tuition waiver and comprehensive health care.⁸ At my own institution, Binghamton University, philosophy PhD students are usually supported for four years, during which the students usually work as teaching assistants. Their stipends in AY 2014-15, also a part of a package that includes a tuition waiver and comprehensive health care, is \$14,500.

Though I have not found information about the demographics of philosophy PhD students that would help compare more to less prestigious philosophy PhD programs to each other along demographic lines to see, for example, how many first generation college graduates are in each program and so basically the socio-economic class composition of philosophy PhD programs, my guess is that it is more likely that less prestigious programs have more students from economically less privileged backgrounds, and more prestigious programs have more students from economically more privileged backgrounds. I am basing my guess on the tendency of economically less privileged high school students to go to less prestigious colleges and universities and an anecdote based belief that less prestigious colleges and universities are not the main feeder schools for prestigious graduate programs and institutions.⁹ More generally I base my guess on long-

⁸. For this information see the *Yale News* at <http://news.yale.edu/2015/01/29/graduate-school-provide-funding-students-their-sixth-year>.

⁹. About undergraduate education see, for example, Anthony P. Carnevale and Jeff Strohl, "How Increasing College Access Is Increasing Inequality, and What to Do About It," in *Rewarding Strivers: Helping Low-Income Students Succeed in College*, ed. Richard D. Kahlenberg (New York: Century Foundation Press, 2010), Pp. 71-207 or at <http://tcf.org/assets/downloads/tcf-CarnevaleStrivers.pdf>, Alexandria Walton Radford *Top Student, Top School? How Social Class Shapes Where Valedictorians Go to College* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2013), Anthony P. Carnevale and Jeff Strohl "White Flight Goes to College" *Poverty and Race* 2013, at http://www.prrac.org/pdf/SeptOct2013_Carnevale_Strohl.pdf, and Caroline M. Hoxby's and Christopher Avery "The Missing 'One-Offs': The Hidden Supply of High-Achieving, Low-Income Students," *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity* series, 2014 at http://www.brookings.edu/~media/projects/bpea/spring-2013/2013a_hoxby.pdf, and Anthony P. Carnevale, Stephen Rose and Jeff Strohl "Achieving Racial and Economic Diversity with Race-Blind Admission Policy" in *The Future of Affirmative Action New Paths to Higher Education Diversity after Fisher v. University of Texas*, ed. Richard D. Kahlenberg (New York: The Century Foundation Press, 2014), Pp. 187-202 or at http://tcf.org/assets/downloads/15_Achieving-Racial-and-Economic-Diversity-with-Race-Blind-Admissions-Policy.pdf. There is no similar research about the move from undergraduate to graduate education but the research about undergraduate education can be probably used safely for an educated guess of a pattern that continues into doctoral education and information about science and

term economic data and its analysis, which points out that wealth inequality in the United States has grown since the 1970s and that it combines with a growing gap among the student populations of more and less prestigious colleges and universities and low social mobility.¹⁰

Second, even those ending up with a job are not likely to be affected similarly. When one calibrates information about the job market further and looks at the relation between the prestige of philosophy PhD granting institution and those institutions' ability to place their PhD students in academic jobs, let alone better academic jobs, existing information suggests that, as one would suspect, prestige is correlated positively with successful placement. Indeed the correlation is such that the more prestigious an institution is, the more PhDs it places and the more successful it is in placing them in better academic jobs.¹¹

IV

Solving the oversupply of philosophy PhDs problem will not solve problems that arise due to differences in the prestige of PhD programs and their institutions. But, if most

engineering PhDs and their undergraduate degrees (at <http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/infbrief/nsf08311/>) supports this guess since the top 50 institutions feeding into science and engineering doctoral programs do not include the kind of schools that the great majority of economically underprivileged students go to.

¹⁰. Again, examples only. Theda Skocpol and Suzanne Mettler "Back to School" *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas* (2008) at <http://www.democracyjournal.org/10/6639.php?page=all>, Michael Greenstone et al. "Thirteen Economic Facts about Social Mobility and the Role of Education" (2013) at <http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2013/06/13-facts-higher-education>, Thomas Piketty *Capital in the Twenty First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2014), and Richard V. Reeves and Joanna Venator "The Inheritance of Education" (2014) at <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/social-mobility-memos/posts/2014/10/27-intergenerational-education-mobility-reeves>.

¹¹. For philosophy, there is some information at <http://www.philosophynews.com/post/2013/10/23/Graduate-School-Philosophy-Placement-Records-In-the-USCA-Prestige-Placement-Rankings.aspx>. More interesting information can be found in a 2015 study by Aaron Clauset, Samuel Arbesman, and Daniel B. Larremore, "Systematic Inequality and Hierarchy in Faculty Hiring Networks," that can be found at <http://advances.sciencemag.org/content/1/1/e1400005>. As to non-academic jobs, see Lauren A Rivera's 2015 *Pedigree: How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs* (Princeton).

philosophy PhDs could find good enough jobs, so jobs that are both satisfying enough and pay well enough, then the pursuit of a philosophy PhD can be recommended as more than the pursuit of a life style PhD.

There are three basic ways to solve the oversupply problem and they are not mutually exclusive. One way is to offer fewer philosophy PhD slots. Some other PhD granting disciplines have gone this way, though mostly due to demands by their institutions. Because this restructures faculty jobs in these programs by changing the ratio of undergraduate to graduate courses taught and reducing the opportunities to teach one's research, faculty tend to resist this solution.¹²

The second way is to expand the targeted job market for philosophy PhDs by offering truly flexible philosophy PhDs, namely a course of philosophy PhD level training for multiple career paths. This is a solution that is being explored by other humanities. Again, it is mostly institutions rather than faculty that have been pushing for a change.¹³ Both the Modern Language Association (MLA) and the American Historical Association (AHA), though, have made statements about the importance of preparation for multiple career paths and the AHA received a large Mellon grant to expand the career paths open the history PhDs.¹⁴

The third way is to change recruitment and attempt to reduce the number of applicants to PhD programs. It requires current philosophy faculty to offer students the

¹². See Robin Wilson's 2012 report "Cutbacks in Enrolments Redefine Graduate Education and Faculty Jobs." *Chronicle of Higher Education* (11 March). Available at http://facstaff.grad.uiowa.edu/sites/facstaff.grad.uiowa.edu/files/Graduate_Programs_in_Humanities_Are_Shinking.pdf.

¹³. See Kaustuv Basu "The Radical New PhD." *Inside Higher Education* (16 May, 2012) at <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/05/16/rethinking-humanities-phd>.

¹⁴. See the MLA Taskforce on Doctoral Study in Modern Language and Literature 2014 report at <http://www.mla.org/pdf/taskforcedoestudy2014.pdf> and the AHA 2014 announcement at <http://historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-2014/career-diversity-time-has-come>.

best advice possible and discuss with philosophy PhD aspirants the expectations that they have for their future while being honest about the philosophy job market with the hope that more aspirants will be dissuaded from pursuing doctoral studies in philosophy. Philosophy faculty, though, may be reluctant to act on their own and may defer to collective action, for example, by their primary professional organization, the American Philosophical Association (APA). As of now, though, the APA does not even seriously address philosophy PhD aspirants as consumers who should be aware of what they are about to buy.¹⁵

The APA provides a guide to philosophy PhD programs with self-reported information that may be of use for aspirants but the web page from which one can download the guide offers no comment about the oversupply of philosophy PhDs.¹⁶ The only guiding comment the Association makes to an aspirant is that it “recommends additional consultation with advisers and people directly involved with programs of interest.” While the recommendation is vague, it seems to suggest that the kind of advice that the aspirant needs is about fit between their own interests and potential philosophy PhD programs. However, due to the state of the profession, the first question an aspirant needs to consider is not “which PhD program is best for me given my philosophical interests?” but rather “should I commit myself to the pursuit of a philosophy PhD?” Good guidance for an aspirant will direct her or him to consider this question first and consider it rather seriously in light of the probability that she or he will be able to find the kind of

¹⁵. I am not sure what this says about the profession given that in the 1980s the APA was more responsive to the fact that there were not enough academic jobs to go around. See Robert Audi and Donald Scherer’s 1984 “Careers for Philosophers.” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 58 (2): 299-352, which can be found at <http://c.y.mcdn.com/sites/www.apaonline.org/resource/resmgr/careersforphilosophers.pdf?hhSearchTerms=%22graduate+and+education%22>.

¹⁶. The guide can be found at <http://www.apaonline.org/?page=gradguide>.

job that she or he may be interested in upon the completion of a philosophy PhD, about 7 years later, and perhaps in debt.

Good guidance consists of more than directing the aspirant to another webpage of the APA, where she or he can find links to some of the information I am using. Even if the information were more easily accessible than it actually is,¹⁷ sending an aspirant to information on a webpage assumes that all that the philosophy PhD aspirant needs in order to make the best decision for herself or himself is statistical information. There is nothing wrong with the assumption that rational people will seek good statistical information and perhaps even use it well. But there is something wrong with the assumption that most philosophy PhD aspirants make decisions differently than the average person who, research has been showing, does not make decisions merely rationally.¹⁸

If one does not expect philosophy PhD aspirants to decide differently than other people, a possible problem with just presenting the statistical information becomes apparent – such a presentation creates the impression that the attainment of a philosophy job is a rather difficult goal the pursuit of which involves the risk of monetary loss. There is research showing a significant correlation between a goal's difficulty and the escalation of commitment to it.¹⁹ The correlation suggests that if the statistical information merely shows a philosophy PhD aspirant that the attainment of a good enough philosophy job is a difficult goal, then the aspirant is likely to increase the commitment to pursuing a

¹⁷. This is the American Philosophical Association “Career” page <http://www.apaonline.org/?page=career>. A philosophy PhD aspirant (or her/his advisor) will actually have to go to <http://www.apaonline.org/?page=data> in order to find relevant links.

¹⁸. See Eric Schwitzgebel and Fiery Cushman (2015) “Philosophers’ Biased Judgments Persist Despite Training, Expertise and Reflection.” At http://cushmanlab.fas.harvard.edu/docs/schwitzgebel_cushman_inpress.pdf.

¹⁹. See, for example, Lee, Jong Seok et al (2015) “The Effect of Goal Difficulty on Escalation of Commitment.” *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making* 28 (2): 114-129.

philosophy PhD because it is the necessary step in the pursuit of a philosophy job. In addition, there is research showing that there is a significant correlation between discounting monetary risks when an expected outcome of a course of action is valued highly in non-monetary terms.²⁰ The pleasures of the study of philosophy and the production of philosophical knowledge, as well as the anticipated pleasure of teaching philosophy are likely to be valued very highly by a philosophy PhD aspirant and influence how she or he assesses the monetary risk involved in pursuing a philosophy PhD leading to discounting the monetary risk in question.

The problem of just presenting information gets complicated further by how the information about the state of the profession is presented. Research suggests that, just like the information presented on the APA website, the information is likely to neutralize the effects of a face-to-face conversation with a philosophy faculty advisor, who may actually take it upon themselves to review the situation of the profession thoughtfully. In a face-to-face advising session status matters and so what the faculty advisor says and the message that her or his words convey carry a certain weight. Information presented on a webpage neutralizes the effects of status, which in the case of a philosophy PhD aspirant seeking good advice may not be the best outcome.²¹

VI

²⁰. See, for example, McGrow, A. Peter et al (2010) “Valuing Money and Things: Why a \$20 Item can be Worth More or Less than \$20.” *Management Science* 56 (5): 816-830. According to other research, one has to take numeracy into account. More numerate people take probabilities into account more often and more strongly and this moderates the influence of affect. See, for example, Pachur, Thorsten et al. (2012) “Strategy Selection in Risky Choice: The Impact of Numeracy, Affect, and Cross-Cultural Differences.” *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making* 26 (3): 260-271.

²¹. I tend return to Irving Goffman’s 1967 *Interaction Ritual – Essays On Face To Face Communication* (New York: Anchor Books) when I think about face-to-face communication. But see also Dubrovsky, Vitaly J. et al (1991) “The Equalization Phenomenon: Status Effects in Computer-Mediated and Face-to-Face Decision-Making Groups.” *Homan Computer Interaction* 6 (2): 119-146.

Of the three ways to solve the oversupply of philosophy PhDs, the third stands in tension with recruitment into the philosophy PhD pool as a means to diversifying the profession. Such recruitment depends to a great extent on faculty, and for us my suggestion is that we should embrace the tension and give a clear double message to members of groups that are underrepresented in philosophy. Our message should express the desire to diversify and advise each possible recruit against just taking a plunge and applying to a philosophy doctoral program.

I think of the advice to potential recruits as a practice of radical rejection. I borrow the idea from Orthodox Judaism. An Orthodox Rabbi is required to reject an aspirant for conversion three times in order to give the aspirant time to think about their future, the future of their loved ones, and what membership in a new community that shares beliefs and practices may mean to them. A philosophy PhD aspirant should likewise be given time to reflect. A philosophy PhD aspirant that is actively recruited because she or he is a member of a group that is underrepresented in the profession should be given this time all the more.