

I am Geoff Pynn, philosophy professor at Northern Illinois University. Ask Me Anything.

geoffpynn¹ and r/Science AMAs¹

¹Affiliation not available

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Abstract

I do epistemology and philosophy of language, and I'm the graduate adviser for NIU's terminal MA program in philosophy. My recent work is on contextualism in epistemology, norms of assertion, and skeptical arguments. I'm now thinking about testimonial injustice and epistemic degradation. I like talking about nearly any philosophical topic! I've done a number of Wi-Phi videos, a few of which are part of the knowledge series spearheaded by Jennifer Nagel, who did a fantastic AMA a while ago. Proof: <https://www.facebook.com/geoffpynn/posts/10154584960522232> EDIT 5:15pm EST: thanks for all the great questions! There are still a few unanswered & I will try to get to them later tonight. I'll check back later on as well, so feel free to post more if you're interested.

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GEOFFPYNN [R/SCIENCE](#)

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Hi Geoff,

Thanks for doing this AMA! I have three questions, all of which are about graduate school. I'd appreciate any feedback on any of the questions you might be able to comment upon.

1. Can you talk a bit more about the process of applying to graduate school? Specifically, what areas of the application do you think are worth really emphasizing.
2. Can you talk a little bit about the process of choosing a graduate school (assuming one is lucky enough to get into more than one)? What are the factors that should help determine that kind of decision?
3. Can you talk a little bit about MA programs, PhD programs, joint programs (JD/PhD, MD/PhD, MBA/PhD, etc.), etc.? Not sure what would be best for me as my interests are still underdeveloped.

I know that's a lot of questions but any feedback would be much appreciated! Given that you did your PhD at Yale and now run an MA program, I thought you might have good insight into these.

Thanks!

[Philosopher at work](#)

Great questions. I'll do a separate comment for each answer.

1. I'll just speak from my own experience doing admissions for several years here at NIU, and overseeing our students who apply to doctoral programs. For getting into our program, I would say that the most important parts of the application are grades and letters of recommendation. Then, shortly behind that, the writing sample and personal statement, and shortly behind that, the GRE verbal and quantitative scores (I always ignore the analytic writing scores in my own assessments). We understand that many of our applicants are coming from places where they have not had access to the resources they would need to produce an excellent writing sample, so we are more

interested in evidence that the student would be able to succeed in our program (which is why grades and letters are central), and has interests that would be well-served here (which we get from the writing sample and statement of purpose). When applying to PhD programs, the writing sample is much more important. According to all the grad directors at PhD programs that I've ever asked directly, they don't care about GRE scores. However, in my own experience doing placement, there is definitely a correlation between GRE scores and success in PhD admissions.

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[Philosopher_at_work](#)

Two. You should absolutely try to visit every program you're seriously considering. Don't be shy about asking the contact person at the programs that admitted you about money for travel. Getting a first-hand look at the place, talking with other students and with the faculty you probably only know about through their written work --- that's all invaluable. Also, don't underestimate the significance of quality of life factors such as location, funding, and institutional resources. Statistically speaking, you're more likely not to wind up with an academic job at the end of your graduate student career than you are to wind up landing one. If possible, go somewhere you're excited to live, and with resources (career centers, alumni networks, etc.) that you can rely on to start developing a plan B.

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[Philosopher at work](#)

Three. A PhD is the professional degree you need to land a job as a college professor. Joint degree programs are often paths to academic jobs either in philosophy departments or in other fields (e.g. business or law).

Admission to PhD programs in philosophy is extremely competitive, and for many people, getting an MA in philosophy is a smart way to make themselves more competitive in the PhD application game. If you didn't major in philosophy, or if you majored in philosophy at a small or relatively obscure or low-prestige university, or you majored in philosophy but didn't do all that great overall in college, then you have almost no chance of getting into a PhD program directly. However, you may still have a great chance of getting into an MA program. And students coming out of reputable MA programs *do* have a decent chance of getting into a good PhD program (e.g., see NIU's [placement record](#), [Georgia State's](#), [UW-Milwaukee's](#)). Many MA programs offer good funding packages as well, so for stronger students at least it should be possible to do an MA without going into any substantial debt.

Copy-pasting my question from the other page.

Thank you Prof. Pynn for this AMA!

Recent work in philosophy of language has centered around pejorative language, where most theorists tend to agree that slurs, in particular, communicate derogatory content.

My question is this: Do you think there is significant similarity between the derogation present in slurring and the degradation present in instances of testimonial injustice?

[teadziez](#)

This is a great question. The short answer is yes. The long answer would probably turn into a couple of papers!

Most straightforwardly, pejoratives and epistemic degradation (as I'm thinking about it) both rely on a common stock of negative stereotypes. In some hard-to-specify way (that is being hashed out in the literature), pejorative terms convey the speaker's endorsement of a negative stereotype about a person or group of people. I think this is also true of the central cases of testimonial injustice --- when, for example, a speaker dismisses what a woman says on the grounds that it is nothing more than "female intuition", he is endorsing a negative stereotype about women.

More tentatively, I think that understanding how epistemic degradation works may help us to understand why uses of pejorative terms are (often) literally harmful. It's actually more difficult to get a handle on this than I think many people have appreciated. Ultimately, a pejorative is just a word, and words can never hurt me, right? Well, by conveying the speaker's endorsement of a negative stereotype about a person or group, uses of pejoratives often also *constitute* instances of epistemic degradation: they make it reasonable, in the context of a conversation, to wrongly treat someone as if they were epistemically incompetent. To speak picturesquely, pejoratives are tools of epistemic degradation. Renee Jorgensen Bollinger, a grad student at USC (and author of [a great recent paper on slurs!](#)), is currently working an idea like this out in more detail, focusing on the example of mental illness slurs.

I have a lot more to say about this and will if there is time later. Feel free to follow up!

Hello Mr. Professor, lately on my life I have been "learning" more and more from "Youtube videos",

without trying to take any legitimacy out of the quality of the content one may get from it, as I believe is normally done. I have seen many channels in english with amazing content, I am starting to find channels in my language, spanish, who are following the same trend french, german, etc.. not sure who started to make this kind of educative videos, like Wi-Phi, School of life, and others that require more comprehension of the topics as you get deeper, but my question is, can knowledge be developed quickly for new generations as we learn to open more receptors in order learn more from reduced transmitters of information, by this reduced, I mean, "oh its a video, you went get as much as you would get from a book, knowledge takes more than that". Hope my question is valid, if not thanks anyways!

[falz94](#)

It's an interesting question. I definitely think that reading a book about X will give you deeper knowledge and more understanding of X than watching a YouTube video about X will. On the other hand, life is short, and books are long. Online resources open up many worlds of scholarship and intellectual life to people that would not otherwise have any access to them. Obviously, I think that's great, and it's part of why I'm enthusiastic about Wi-Phi's work.

Hi Prof. Pynn! Thanks for doing the AMA.

What do you think the best response is to the problem of negative existentials? Also, how do you think we should make sense of nonexistent objects in general?

[Babadiboo](#)

Both great questions. On negative existentials, I recommend my colleague Lenny Clapp's paper "The Problem of Negative Existentials Does Not Exist: A Case for Dynamic Semantics". On non-existent objects, I am actually something of a Meinongian. I think (e.g.) Sherlock Holmes exists; it's just that he exists as a fictional character, not as a real person. I'm even (maybe) okay with the existence of impossible objects, like round squares. My ontology is the opposite of Quine's. He had a taste for desert landscapes; I'm fond of lush exotic jungles. That's not quite a solution to the problem of nonexistent objects, though; rather, my view is that it's much less of a problem than you might have thought. Once we recognize how easy it is for something to exist, we can chill out about this stuff. That's my view in a nutshell.

Hey Geoff,

I was wondering how much time as a philosopher one should spend arguing with friends on facebook. And does the right amount of time change (go up or down) with age/tenure/prestige? :p

Thanks!

[MngThf](#)

LOL I could write a book on these issues if I weren't too busy arguing with friends on Facebook.

Does knowing that p require a belief in p and a second knowing that p is true? Does this second knowing require a third that THAT belief is true resulting in a regress? In other words, does knowing that "the cat is on the mat" require knowing that ""the cat is on the mat" is true" which requires knowing that ""the cat is on the mat" is true" is true"" and so on?

[PhilAcct](#)

Knowing that P involves some kind of propositional attitude --- you can't know that P unless you have a pretty high degree of confidence that P. Epistemologists typically use the word "belief" to denote the attitude required, but actually I think that's a mistake for reasons we can talk about if you like. I don't think that knowing requires knowing that you know. Because if it did, we would be involved in a pretty bad regress pretty quickly --- which you allude to in your question. Epistemologists call the idea you're getting at the "KK principle" (i.e., that if you know that P, you must know that you know that P). One problem with the KK principle is that it seems to imply that either we don't know anything at all, or we have infinitely iterated higher-order knowledge of everything we know. Neither of those implications seems plausible.

Hi Geoff. I am glad you are doing this!

What is a norm of assertion, and why aren't there any epistemic ones?

[RelativityCoffee](#)

The first part of this question is very hard to answer. A norm of assertion is a rule that says what conditions you have to meet in order to assert. Since assertions can be criticized (seemingly legitimately) for being improper, it seems plausible that there are norms of assertion. The hard part is saying where those norms come from, and what their standing is. Timothy Williamson suggested in a paper written in the 1990s that assertion has a "constitutive" norm. The idea, roughly, is that there is a norm that is somehow essential to assertion, and that assertion can be distinguished from other speech acts (e.g. guessing, swearing) by its distinctive norm. He argued that assertion's constitutive norm is: assert only what you know. Lots of people have disagreed, both with the specific suggestion (i.e., the "knowledge norm") and with the idea that assertion has a constitutive norm. Whatever we think of Williamson's perspective, it seems hard to deny that assertion is in some sense rule-governed.

As to the second part, I'm not sure whether you're asking why there aren't any epistemic norms *of assertion*, or any epistemic norms *generally*. But in either case, my answer is the same: there are!

Do you have any female student? if yes in which percentage compared to males?

[m4tt86](#)

My undergraduate classes are typically pretty balanced, gender-wise. Women are under-represented in our graduate program, just as they are throughout professional philosophy; currently, about 1/3 of our graduate students are women.

Hi Geoff, thanks for taking the time to do this.

Philosophy has always seemed like a very isolated/independent profession, despite being applicable to, essentially, every other field of inquiry.

As a social scientist who is interested in philosophy, the more recent X-Phi movement is pretty encouraging in terms of interdisciplinary collaboration. I would love to do joint work with a philosopher, to sharpen my logic, rigor, and ideas. Any tips on how to find philosopher's interested in applied empirical research?

[TheLarryLimbs](#)

Great question! I completely agree with your assessment about philosophy's isolation. I also think this is changing now. At least, it seems to me that grad students now are *much* more interested in making

connections with other folks in the humanities and social sciences than they were when I was coming up. (That may just be an effect of my own shifting perspective though.)

To find philosophers interested in various areas, one thing you can do is search [PhilPapers](#) for written work in the area, or [PhilEvents](#) for conferences and calls for papers, and then just email people!

Thanks for doing this AMA. I've been studying language semantics and truth theories this past year. It seems that many authors grant that propositions are the fundamental truth bearers (or at least that it is plausible that they are), but when developing truth theories they default to sentences as truth-bearers for expediency. This idea is expressed in the following quote from the linked Feferman paper:

we have first to address the common philosophical issue whether truth is a predicate of sentences or of propositions. We would certainly grant that if two sentences, from the same or different languages, express the same proposition then their truth conditions agree. That would seem to argue in favor of truth as a predicate of propositions. The argument in favor of sentences is that we have excellent theories of sentences as structured syntactic objects; these can be dealt with in full precision and with great flexibility in formal theories of syntax as provided for example in concatenation theory, or elementary set theory, or in arithmetic via Godel coding. The nature of propositions is obscure by comparison; one issue is whether or not they are structured objects. And what does it mean for a sentence to express a proposition? When do two sentences express the same proposition? Are all propositions expressible in some language? Finally, do all sentences in a given language express a proposition? **When we settle, as is customary in work on axiomatic theories of truth, on sentences being the truth-bearers, one avoids dealing with all but the last of these difficulties...**

<https://math.stanford.edu/~feferman/papers/AxTruthSchwiFest.pdf>

So my question is, do you think that propositions or sentences are the fundamental truth-bearers? And do you think that it could be the case that settling on sentences to avoid some of the difficulties of using propositions necessarily comes with certain limitations (if in fact propositions are the fundamental truth bearers)?

[Houston Euler](#)

So, I'll start with a caveat, which is that I am doubtful that there is a fact of the matter as to what the fundamental truth-bearers are. That is my perspective on a lot of philosophical puzzles, though, and it kind of spoils the fun. So:

I'm a propositions person. It seems vastly more useful to me, for most purposes, to regard truth as a feature of a proposition rather than as a feature of the sentence that expresses the proposition. The quote you give alludes to one reason. Now, when we are setting up a formal language, we only have syntactic elements to play with. So in that context, it makes sense to treat truth as a property of certain syntactic units; i.e., sentences or formulas. But I think this has to be understood as a convenience, rather than a deep fact. And yes, I think that failing to understand that it is merely a convenience can lead to serious problems.

Do you have any thoughts on the "partner in crime" sort of argument for moral realism, to my knowledge popularized by Terence Cuneo in *The Normative Web*, wherein moral norms are likened to epistemic norms and, it is argued, we cannot non-arbitrarily reject one without rejecting the other?

[alephnaught90](#)

I know about Cuneo's argument but haven't read the book. As a first pass, I'll say that epistemic norms seem to me harder to get a handle on than moral or ethical norms, so the project of defending the

existence of the latter by way of the existence of the former seems to me, to borrow Hume's phrase, to make a very unexpected circuit. *But* of course as I said I haven't read the book! So I have hunches and prejudices but no full-fledged thoughts about it.

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[alephnaught90](#)

In general my meta-epistemology is pretty shaky. I've recently been reading more on the foundations of normativity. If you have good suggestions, please share them!

Hi Geoff,

As a recent Philosophy MA grad I made the tough decision to pursue a different career in tech rather than go for a PhD. There was at least one other student in my class who made the same decision. My questions are this:

1. What work do you think needs to/is being done to make pursuing a career in philosophy less risky and more of a viable option? Or do you think we (we being the philosophical community) have the power to do this at all?
2. Do you see the migration of philosophy students to other careers as a good or bad thing? To you think this helps to make other fields/areas of thought more aware of philosophy, or does it detract from philosophy as a field?

Thanks for doing this AMA!

[Vietname](#)

These are very very good questions. On 1, I don't think there is much the discipline can do to shape the number and kinds of jobs that are available. Higher education is an industry in crisis, and I don't expect it to get better in my lifetime; the facts that explain why are much bigger than anything any philosophers can do anything about. Since that is the fundamental reason why pursuing a career in philosophy is risky, I think the answer, fundamentally, is no. However, I do think we can do things to lessen the risk by working to develop practices and resources to help philosophy grad students develop non-academic careers. We need to stop talking as if grad students who decide to pursue non-academic jobs have somehow failed, or acting as if our responsibility for our students' future welfare were solely a matter of helping them secure an academic job. Of course there is no easy solution here; if there were some obvious course of action I would promote it. But even just changing our attitudes is going to take a lot of work.

On 2, I see it as entirely a good thing. I think it's good for the other fields, but I also think it could be good for philosophy! Philosophers are often surprisingly clueless about other professions. I think the more people we know and respect who are actively engaged in a different career path than the one we and our colleagues are on, the better our teaching, advising, and even research will be.

My question is about self-understanding of justification for a piece of controversial knowledge. When I took epistemology my friends and I talked a lot about a case where to all third-person external observers, an individual appeared quite guilty of a certain crime; video evidence, an eye-witness or two, etc. However, the individual in question, while recognizing how bad it looks and how reasonable

everyone is to find him guilty, cannot himself believe in his guilt because he not only has no memory of performing such criminal acts, but distinctly remembers, as well he has ever remembered anything, having done something very different at the same time on the other side of town. He sees the external evidence, but his internal sense of reality, through memory and lack thereof, prevents him believing in his own guilt.

If I were in this individual's position, how should I regard my own ken? Is my strong internal understanding of the facts enough to justify holding to my innocence against some fairly damning external evidence? Could I reasonably say 'yes, the evidence for the contrary is strong, but I *know* I didn't do this.'

edit: Can I justify the great certainty I would feel?

[coffeandbitters](#)

I don't think there is a general philosophical answer to the question of what you should do; everything depends on the details of the case. Speaking generally, we have good empirical reason to be more skeptical about our memories and self-assessments than we are naturally inclined to be. We generally understand ourselves less well than we think we do. So that would give some reason to defer to the external evidence. On the other hand, inconclusive evidence is inconclusive, and it's possible to imagine a case like the one you're describing in which the person really was innocent & they really should trust their internal sense of reality. So, again depending on the details, you may be in a position to reasonably say that you know you didn't do it.

I have a question about the particularity of life/reality and whether it is reasonable to use it as an argument for the existence of god

[NickThyname](#)

Not sure I know how the argument would go. I love arguments for the existence of God, though, so I would be interested in hearing more!

Hi Geoff,

What do you think of Continental philosophy specifically with regards to language?

Do you pay any attention to it at all, what continental philosophy have you read or considered worthwhile if any?

[thoughtsarefalse](#)

Hi, great question. As an undergraduate, I was very into continental philosophy. In fact, I wrote my undergraduate honors thesis on Heidegger and Levinas! ("Death, Dasein, and the Other" it was called.) Then in graduate school I learned that the correct opinion among serious philosophers was that continental philosophy (after Husserl at least) was basically nonsense. People would express pride in never having read Derrida, for example, whom I had spent a lot of time struggling with in college. Part of me felt liberated ("Oh, now I don't have to worry about understanding Derrida anymore!") and part of me felt nervous (what other garbage philosophers was I taking seriously?). This was in the late 1990s. So, primarily for practical and social reasons, I really got into the ideology of analytic philosophy --- the worship of "clarity", rigorous presentation of arguments (the more numbered premises and named principles --- preferably with an acronym --- the better), disdain for the big vague questions that got us into philosophy to begin with (what does it all mean?), preference for seemingly trivial problems like the meaning of "the" or whatever. And I love this tradition & have now worked in it for a decade plus,

happily. But while I do think clear and rigorous presentation of arguments is important, I no longer think they are essential to philosophical value. I also think analytic philosophers are less clear & rigorous than they think they are, and that continental philosophers are less unclear & non-rigorous than analytic philosophers portray them as being. There is a lot to be learned by engaging with the work of philosophers from traditions outside our own narrow subdiscipline. So I am much more interested now in continental philosophy than I was back then. Over the last year I've been reading Foucault, Butler, and Beauvoir. Other stuff too, but off the top of my head I can't remember! Anyway that was a long, navel-gazing answer.

Hey Geoff Pynn first of all thanks for the AMA!

Question: Will philosophy ever become useless as science progresses or will there always be things to question?

I guess this goes hand in hand with the question "Is there infinite knowledge?"

[Forklift2](#)

Scientific progress tends to close off certain philosophical questions, but it generally raises new ones as well. So, for example, given contemporary physics, 17th-century philosophical arguments about mechanism are now of primarily historical interest. On the other hand, we can now ask fascinating philosophical questions about quantum entanglement, which were totally unavailable to Descartes, Galileo, Gassendi, Leibniz, Locke, and the rest of those folks. So I think there will always be things to question, though we don't now know what they will be.

In addition, we will always be faced with normative questions --- like whether you should only assert what you know, or whether it's morally wrong to kill animals for food --- which scientific progress will never eliminate.

I'm currently reading Randall Kennedy for my Social and Political Philosophy class. Can you explain the cognitive dissonance that Kennedy is getting at when explaining how racism is more powerful in its language over hate by religious views?

[namccoy415](#)

Not familiar with the reference. Can you tell me what you're reading by Kennedy, or give me a larger quote?