



What is (my) philosophy?

By Nadav DB

***What is (my) philosophy?* is an exemplar HD-level essay written by Nadav DB for the PHIL336: World Philosophy subject at the University of Wollongong. Though written in a non-traditional format for an undergraduate essay, Nadav was awarded a High Distinction for his involved critical thought and deep engagement with the subject matter. It shows how grappling with fundamental questions is more important than finding an answer when studying philosophy.**

“This is a safe space where you can put your ignorance on full display and engage with the questions that you have when trying to understand these ideas” - Dr Bryan Mukandi 2025

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What does it mean to write or work philosophically and/or academically in 2025?

Sydney Morning Herald, front page:

Tuesday, 17 June 2025. Death and destruction in latest attacks.

Would it be too on-the-nose to call this paper “My Struggle”? (That line will get me fired one day.)

When it comes to philosophy, I can't just write and find out where I'm going: my brain doesn't work that way. I sit with my thoughts, let them play with each other. Concepts developed from readings and discussions, like behemoths in the watery depths, need time and space to move and transform. Intrusive thoughts glance in, streaking their ridiculousness in sharp contrast to the murky titans. Sometimes they ricochet off the hide of one, scattering thoughts like a sprinkler on a sunny day: they may even produce rainbows. This can facilitate philosophical thinking but also frustrates it. And this, I have now realised, is my method.

Of course, it is good to suggest alternative methods, but when one is suggested to someone such as myself, it has a comparison effect like that described by Saussure (2011, pp. 114-116): I am surer of my method because it is not another method; we need to be aware of our options to be able to exercise choice. However, this method was developed in response to traditional, modern (imperial) education. The cookie-cutter subjects of Western academic philosophy subjects present ideas

as if suspended from reality: Rawls' original position, Descartes' demon, Kant's categorical imperative (UoW philosophy lectures, 2021-2025). These people and their ideas take on substance greater than a regular person can seemingly have. Here one could apply Nusseibeh's (2011, p. 80) concept of meta-biology, what I will later call "agentification", to see the dangers of reifying these people and their concepts: showing how a concept can be granted pseudo-autonomy and therefore power to act.

A disconnect grows that says, "you can tackle these concepts, but all the original work has already been done: there are no big thoughts left to have."

There is a similar argument in the world of creative writing: there are no original stories, merely variations of the seven (or maybe six) archetypes (Booker 2004, Reagan et al. 2016). At the same time, our modern world is filled with the rhetoric of individuality. You too can be a famous streamer, actor, or sports star. But if we are the stories we tell of ourselves (Schechtman, 2024) then which is it: can we be our unique, original selves, or is there no originality left? Are celebrities hollow replications of the archetypes of popularity or are they... themselves? (Probably both regarding the latter, let's be honest.)

But I digress. I came to university to study creative writing. I thought I was pursuing my love of escapism via fiction. But academic creative writing reminded me (as I subconsciously already knew) that good creative works reflect the real world; that creative work as pure escapism could fall flat for the discerning individual. And of course, thinking back on it, all my favourite fictions make poignant observations on society, rather than avoiding the topic (pick any "good" fiction, but my personal favourite is the philosophical/anthropological ideas littered throughout *The Malazan Book of the Fallen* by Steven Erikson, as well as it being an interesting fictional case study of imperialisation.)

Enter PHILOSOPHY, stage left.

NADAV: Hello there.

PHILOSOPHY: Hey bro, remember Plato? Suck on these ideals.

Logic (the UoW subject, PHIL151) reminded me of something I had pushed aside long ago: the structure of my brain-scape allows for fast, analytical, and reasoned thinking.

In further subjects we were served little red pills of thought, and I applied my strong intuitive process to a reading: ripping assumptions to shreds, toppling faulty towers of logic.

Even in my most recent subject, PHIL318, which I took simultaneously to PHIL336, while presented as a progressive subject (Phenomenology! Experience is particular to the subject! Owen Wilson: "Wow!"), still presented cookie-cutter topics from which I cherry-picked a reading – *The Philosophy of Work*, Kwame Anthony Appiah – and pulled it apart: the entire argument relied on the unjustified assumption that

Humean morality (or “the process of social rejection”) is an objective truth. This concept states that something is good or bad if, and only if, the popular consensus agrees (Hume 1739-1740).

I continued to practice my fearful escapism (funnily enough, my counsellor says this partially stems from the culture of critical language in my family...) even in the face of overwhelming connections to reality through my favourite process: abstraction. Nominalisation is a process where a verb is transformed into an abstract noun, removing the people from the process (Fairclough 1989, p.61). I wasn’t just strategic about my education, I fucking nominalised it. If abstraction is reaching towards an ideal, then Plato would be proud. However, *I* am the one doing this work, writing this, and struggling through it. I will not nominalise myself (at the very least, my ego won’t let me).

Enter TEACHER, stage right, probably laughing.

TEACHER: Nadav, mate. What are you doing?

NADAV: You’re really going to make me say it? Isn’t it obvious?

TEACHER: Maybe. But if it is, pretend it isn’t and see what happens.

NADAV (flexing his brain): Sure thing. Let’s grapple.

In this essay, I explore the concept of philosophy as an active practice to be used in the real world and in conversation with other people. Enough tired old white men have taken a shit on local stone tablets and presented it as universal truth (Chen 2010, p. 3). But probably still don’t kill your neighbour. Nor is it likely that Moses was white. But I’ll stop breaking my analogy, it was crude (in both senses of the word).

I take Chen’s (2010) academic approach, what I call “playing by the rules”, and Nusseibeh’s (2011) activist approach, or “protesting the rules”, seeing where resonances lie and then articulating the different approaches to the resonating concepts. Through this, I hope to reveal the deimperialistic nature of Nusseibeh’s work, the importance of this angle of questioning and including discussion (word limit depending) on peripheral elements such as temporality, technology, and education.

In 2010, Duke University Press published Kuan-Hsing Chen’s ‘Asia as Method’. On the website’s “About [us]” page: “Duke University Press supports scholars in doing what they are passionate about: learning, teaching, and effecting positive change in the world.” (accessed 2025). The home page boasts publications discussing issues such as decolonisation and decentralising knowledge. For a North American-based academia-related institution, this is very progressive (see Connell 2018 regarding the exclusionary process of Western academic work and citation). It is a real life example of academics following the process described in *Asia as Method*: “those on both sides of the imperial divide must assess the conduct, motives, and consequences of imperial histories” (Chen 2010, back cover).

Chen played by the rules with what therefore seems like some success. One cannot

discount the rigour with which he conducts his historical and other research, as well as the honesty in his attempts to diagnose and think through the extremely complex issue of imperial colonisation: both causes and impacts, using Taiwan as a case study. Chen (2010) traces local and global histories to show (and psychoanalyse) the differences between Taiwan's recent generations, and therefore extract the substance of what it means to:

- be colonised (affects every generation differently, the earlier embracing Japan imperial ideology, then later Chinese, and finally EU/USA via globalisation), and
- take on colonial/imperial ideas (affects later generations – those moving business elsewhere to exploit people in less-well-off countries).

Chen's (2010) real-world historical approach provides strong empirical and anecdotal evidence that shows the importance of contextualising this kind of work in the world: that these broad issues may extend systematically across the globe but can have different effects depending on the local history. This shows how hard it is to pin anything down under a simple reductionist statement (e.g. "Democracy is good. Communism is bad") when the real world is involved, but also how important it is to do this work instead of nominalising away the people and their history. This can be seen through his anecdotal evidence: inclusion of his own personal family history, as well as using fictional and real-world examples that involve specific people and their stories. Would his work have the same impact without these stories? What if he only spoke of "Taiwan" or "The Taiwanese People" instead of specific people?

My cousin lives in central Tel Aviv with her two little girls, aged 5 and 7. To say we're worried is an understatement. She was born in Australia but has lived most of her adult life over there so we're not too close, but not strangers either. And she's family. But she's a Zionist. When things first kicked off a few years ago, she would tell us about making sandwiches with her girls for their friends in the army. Now she's quieter about her allegiance. I was asking mum if they're OK and thankfully they are. Mum said, "I wanted to say to her, "Now you might have an inkling of what it's like to be a Gazan [Palestinian living in Gaza]"". Of course she didn't say that.

This is too hard to write explicitly. I can't do the work of making the connections for you, I can only outline the picture.

Just as Chen's Taiwanese have moved and been influenced by greater forces and ideologies, so too have Israelis. So too have Palestinians and other Muslims. So too have we all. That is the power of imperialisation, especially when hidden behind the force of technological globalisation (nice nominalisation Nadav). Chen (2010, pp. 1-13) carefully illustrates how this concept of globalisation hides the colonial/imperial process. But where are the people? Who is driving globalisation and why?

Nusseibeh (2011, p. 81) addresses a similar process, which can be called "agentification". He discusses the anthropomorphising of concepts like states and ideological movements, giving them sentience and power to act in ways which non-human objects shouldn't have the agency to act. A quick glance at the latest news confirms this process: "Israel launched further attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities",

“Iran fired a new wave of attacks...” (I was going to reference ABC, but pick any news source reporting on the Middle East). How can a country press a button to fire a missile? While one could analyse these passages linguistically to show how they position a reader to think about the events and players in specific ways (Lukin 2005), Nusseibeh jumps straight into folk-psychologising the process:

“Different psychological shades of meaning at the individual level are multiplied at the collective level, when discourse about what I feel and believe turns into discourse about what we feel and believe, and when these feelings and beliefs are then projected onto a meta-biological being—such as the state itself, or a political movement—as if that larger entity now has a mind of its own.”

(Nusseibeh S 2011, p. 80)

Despite such deep thinking as evidenced above, and intuitively sound arguments, Nusseibeh (2011, p. 18) states early in his book, “This is not an academic study”. This is reflected in the work in a few ways: there is a distinct lack of referencing or empirical evidencing for these deep philosophical concepts, although he does still refer to the work of other academics. My mind immediately rejects this work as inferior: it will probably contain problematic assumptions, and yet I find myself agreeing with most of what Nusseibeh writes. My own assumption/bias is therefore revealed: philosophical work that isn’t “academic” isn’t strong. Or unjustified claims are bad.

Upon closer inspection, my agreeing with the non-academic and disagreeing with the academic (such as the paper discussed in PHIL318) would seem to suggest my bias is wrong – or at least misguided. A strong education in Western academic philosophy, along with my background of (and knack for) critical thinking, has provided me with a bias that is quickly, if anecdotally, dismissed. But if it is the case that “academic” can be unsatisfactory, and “non-academic” the opposite, what is the distinction between the two?

I am not entirely prepared to answer this question, but here I highlight a major problem for myself and my thinking about philosophy and academia. Non-academic work can be “good” work (for lack of a better word). But I find it hard to motivate myself to work outside of the structure and deadlines of the academic world (and even then, it can be a struggle). Is there space then to write “non-academically” for an academic setting or audience? Whose academia is it anyway? Nusseibeh was still published by an academic press. Judge me harshly for this attempt, but that is the space I am exploring in both thought and practice.

At the beginning of this I said I can’t write philosophy and “see where I’m going”. But an area I do this almost exclusively is in my creative writing. So here, I venture down an avenue related to ficto-criticism, but with less story and more flowery idiocy. “Poeti-criticism” perhaps. Something like spoken word, but with more references and less *emphasis* on random words for the sake of it.

Nusseibeh (2011, p. 21) asks, “How did we come to this?” and that’s a bloody good

question. He acknowledges in his tracing of the history of Israel since its formation after WW2 that he can't cover every aspect, every little turn and twist that led to the "now" (of 15 years ago). In the same vein, I can't do the same to get from there to here. But perhaps the agentification of states is a good place to start. Not only have these countries acted in ways a person wouldn't (even though it's actually people doing these things – don't look at the man behind the curtain). Now we also have the nominalisation "globalisation". As mentioned earlier, Chen (2010, p. 2) states, "Globalisation without deimperialisation is simply a disguised reproduction of imperialist conquest."

The lack of deimperialisation in the broader world context (ignoring some pockets of academia) is very telling indeed.

So how did we get here? Summarising how I see it: the lack of deimperialisation, and the growth of a now any% speedrun version of globalisation (late-stage capitalism anyone?), ushered in through the spread of social media via smartphones creating distraction, disturbance, and now even further exacerbated by the rise of generative AI. The only people spared from this are those who can't afford a phone and/or internet connection, and I doubt that's what they're worrying about.

Chen (2010, p. 121) discusses the concept that the cold war era stymied decolonisation efforts, slowing things down or even reversing progress. I argue that the process of globalisation under late-stage capitalism actively prevents itself from being decolonised. Once upon a time, we had anti-communism ideology which saw the rise of the US as the world's greatest superpower, which labelled any oppositional talk as "communist", sending you straight to the gulag and therefore stripping people not only of their ability to criticise the regime, but as a result, even the ability of knowing *how to criticise* a regime (Chen 2010, p. 123). Now, we have the same thing happening on a global scale – with those in charge of social media acting as the censoring force (or lack thereof and promoting other messages in the process). For example, Musk's purchase of X, formerly known as Twitter™, and opening the floodgates to hate speech and promotion of ideologies that perpetuate such speech and underlying ideology (Hickey et al. 2025). Of course, X isn't alone in this, nor is it the first. Before it, we had the unmoderated cesspools of 4chan, and then the rampage of Reddit (first-hand anecdotal experience). However, if it was censorship then, does the complete opposite have the same effect? Are people less able to criticise in the technologically evolving world? Han (2017, pp. 55-56) thinks so, and lays the blame on information overload due to internet/social media.

According to Nusseibeh (2011, pp. 93-96ish), the type of person who would speak or think in a bigoted way is a product of the system, seemingly forced to follow the bigger (picture) thinker. And the system (social media) is literally allowing it with the lack of censorship. In a way I don't blame these so-called bigots, even if they should still be held accountable for their actions.

If this diagnosis is correct, where do we go from here? Can we decolonise at the academic level and push change onto the hypnotised masses? Am I being far too cynical and alarmist?

To the last question, probably. But in the same way Nusseibeh (2011, pp. 179-

185) explores positive potentialities to prosper faith, I see it of equal importance to explore negative potentiality to prepare for the worst. In the same vein as Black Mirror (Brooker 2011-2019), an exploration of the worst can be both entertaining as well as informative (although I dislike this show, it's a great example). An imagining of the process of how to get there gives one the tools to avoid going down that path. I wanted to include discussion about faith, but it comes down to definition (and lack of word count): what Nusseibeh calls faith, I see as trust, but the result is the same – except that calling it trust could make it easier to separate the problem from religion.

I find myself at my limit, both physically (word), and mentally (mental). The world is kinda fucked right now, and in the last fifteen years since Chen and Nusseibeh wrote their books it's only become worse. We can imagine positive and negative ways of moving forward, to help guide our actual method of moving forward. But we have to move, and predictions are often wrong. Academic philosophy hasn't stopped this relentless engine of capitalism and war, and neither has activism.

I've learned how to write philosophically already, I don't need to prove that here. Instead I grapple with this issue on my terms, which in the end, like every other philosophical concept I have tackled in this education, doesn't seem to have a clear answer. Maybe that's the real lesson.

And hey, maybe the world leaders will do the right thing... fingers crossed for Mr. Trump! Haven't heard much about him, but he seems like a nice, sensible guy.

Peace and love,
From Nadav.

PS. That last bit was written before the bunker busters were dropped. Hmm...

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CIVILISATIONAL COLLAPSE

BY AMELIA YATES

Collapse is a topic that I have attempted to write about many times but have found to be increasingly frustrating and difficult. The whole collapse clusterfuck is a mess that involves many interweaving forces, which I want to be able to write about in a way that ameliorates that mess and confusion, and rather sifts through the madness to get to the core of what it means. Therefore, I decided to ditch the numerous Word documents of 'collapse drafts' and instead draft this article out in the old school fashion: on paper, by hand. Handwriting goes at the same speed as discerning thought, which I think is essential for this particular topic.

So what does this ominous term 'collapse' mean under the circumstances we face today? In simple terms, it refers to the decline of all things we have previously known to grow and improve: great things like income, education, healthcare, comfort, equality, standard of living, and so on. Collapse also refers to the climate, and how our destruction of it, through our extractive relationship with it, has caused once-stable weather patterns and ecosystems to, well, collapse.

All these interrelated collapses (known as a polycrisis or the metacrisis), brought about by our highly complex societies and systems, are contributing to the overall collapse of our post-industrial civilisation. We have only recently entered into the initial stage of this civilisational collapse. Still, there are signs of it all around us. Think natural disasters, the rise of the oligarchs and tech bros, the increasing wealth gap, increasing cost of living, declining life expectancy, pandemic outbreaks, rise of authoritarianism, polarisation, and so on.

The truth is that the impending collapse of our civilisation has been known about by some for a while now. However, it has been kept quiet to allow capitalism to prevail. In 1972, a group of thinkers and economists from all around the world grouped together at the Club of Rome to investigate whether or not it is possible to sustain continuous economic and population growth on a finite planet. They researched and examined five basic factors (population increase, agricultural production, non-renewable resource depletion, industrial output, and pollution generation) that determine and ultimately limit growth on this planet. These factors were, and continue to be, the pillars that hold our current civilization together, and are things that we have come to rely on in our day to day lives – but, alas, they are things that cannot be sustained into the future. The findings of this research were compiled into a report titled *The Limits to Growth*, which later became a bestselling book. The report concluded that the planet cannot continue to meet and accommodate the demands of humanity (such as energy, resources and large populations) and that the planet would reach its holding capacity for such demands in the mid 2020s and collapse around the 2040s. Yikes!