

How Modern Academia Shapes Philosophical Questioning Institutional Conditions, Logics of Publishability, and Institutional Silence

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Abstract

This article challenges the widely held assumption that philosophical questions arise spontaneously from thought itself. By situating contemporary philosophy within the institutional transformations of neoliberal higher education, it argues that inquiry is pre-structured by what is termed the logic of publishability. Through an analysis of evaluation metrics, grant-based project governance, and journal gatekeeping, the paper conceptualizes a “triple mechanism” that regulates not the answers philosophers produce, but the forms, tempos, and boundaries of the questions they are permitted to ask.

The dominance of gap-spotting as a model of innovation, the demand for methodological controllability, and the requirement for definitive conclusions function as anticipatory filters at the inception of inquiry. Building on insights from agnotology and the sociology of absences, this article introduces the concept of Institutional Silence to describe the structural exclusion of foundational, slow, or non-instrumental philosophical problems. It further examines the paradox of metacritique, arguing that reflexivity itself has become institutionalized and ritualized within contemporary academic writing.

Rather than advocating for administrative reforms, the article introduces the concepts of slow questions and Quiet Research as intellectual approaches that resist acceleration, metric fetishism, and epistemic domestication. The paper concludes by leaving open the question of whether philosophy, under current institutional conditions, is still genuinely asking questions or merely managing them within a standardized regime of conceptual production.

Keywords: Publishability Logic; Institutional Silence; Neoliberal Academia; Metacritique; Slow Questions

1. Introduction: Do Questions Truly Arise from Thought?

In the classical image of philosophy and in popular imagination, questioning is often romanticized as a purely cognitive event or a spontaneous eruption of the spirit. From Socrates’ interrogations in the streets of Athens to Descartes’ meditations by the stove, and Kant’s radical inquiry into the limits of human reason, the history of philosophy has become accustomed to portraying “questions” as the direct intellectual responses of thinkers confronting the universe, existence, and morality throughout time.

When we examine the actual operations of contemporary knowledge production, this intuitive assumption—that questions naturally arise from thought—faces unprecedented destabilization. The profound transformation of modern academic institutions has begun to undermine this premise at its core. The contemporary academic system encourages—indeed, compels—researchers to generate new questions with unprecedented intensity. However, few pause to ask a more fundamental inquiry: within today’s highly specialized and institutionalized system of knowledge production, how are philosophical questions actually generated?

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The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, in his incisive analysis of academic life in **Homo Academicus**, exposes what he terms the “scholastic illusion”—a structural blind spot within the academy itself. Bourdieu argues that academic fields are characterized by ongoing “wars of subjects,” in which disciplines compete to distinguish themselves from one another to secure epistemic legitimacy and symbolic dominance. Within such a field, philosophers are particularly prone to overlooking the social and institutional conditions that enable their philosophical activity. Immersed in a self-referential network of disciplinary conventions, technical vocabularies, and inherited modes of inquiry, thinkers operate within a highly structured academic field whose boundaries remain largely unexamined. Radical doubt often halts at the edge of the institution.

Bourdieu’s sociological analysis reminds us that epistemic autonomy may be, at least in part, an illusion. A researcher’s horizon of vision, sense of what constitutes a problem, and even the trajectory of theoretical innovation are deeply embedded within the institutional networks in which they are situated.

This article advances the central claim that contemporary philosophical questions are not spontaneous products of pure cognition but rather outcomes shaped by specific institutional conditions. Academic institutions do not directly dictate the answers philosophers must produce. Instead, through a finely calibrated system of implicit norms and evaluative mechanisms, they predefine which questions are considered “viable,” which are deemed “legitimate,” and which must be systematically marginalized. The boundaries of inquiry are established before research even begins.

This study, therefore, focuses on the mechanisms through which questions are generated. It begins by examining the historicity of problems and the triple structure of contemporary academic governance. Next, it analyzes the “logic of publishability” as a tacit pre-selection mechanism that shapes the very form of inquiry. Building on this analysis, the paper introduces the central concept of Institutional Silence, drawing on theoretical frameworks from agnotology and the sociology of absence to illuminate how certain questions become unaskable. Subsequently, it engages in a self-referential exploration of the paradoxes confronting metacritique within academic institutions. Finally, it gestures toward the possibility of “slow questions” and “Quiet Research” as potential spaces for resisting institutional normalization.

2. The Institutional Conditions of Problems: From Knowledge Production to Evaluation Structures

2.1. The Historicity of Problems and the Advent of the Neoliberal Paradigm

Philosophical problems are never posed in a vacuum. They emerge within specific historical, material, and social conditions. Medieval scholastic questions were structured by theological orthodoxy; early modern philosophical inquiries were shaped by the Scientific Revolution and the rise of natural law traditions. Contemporary philosophical questioning, by contrast, is inseparable from the global expansion of neoliberal models of higher education.

Neoliberalism is not merely a macroeconomic doctrine advocating deregulation and efficiency. It is an ideological force that seeks to subject all domains of human life—including thought, education, and theoretical inquiry—to the evaluative logic of the market. Under its pervasive influence, the university has undergone a profound transformation. It has shifted from a public sphere devoted to deliberation and non-instrumental truth-seeking into a knowledge factory governed by corporate managerialism.

Within this framework, both students and scholars are redefined. Students become consumers calculating “return on investment,” aspiring to maximize employability and productivity. Professors and researchers, in turn, are recast as academic laborers accumulating human capital, competing for tenure, promotion, and symbolic prestige.

In this marketized environment, universities operate under chronic fiscal vulnerability and intensified competition for resources. Humanities disciplines—philosophy in particular—must constantly justify their “usefulness” and “competitiveness” to policymakers, corporate actors, and the broader public. The fundamental *telos* of philosophical inquiry thus shifts: from pursuing truth, challenging common sense, and interrogating the human condition, to ensuring the sustainability of projects and the promotability of careers.

Academic capitalism fosters what might be described as a form of social amnesia: intellectuals internalize the colonization of thought by market rationality and come to perceive this condition as a natural order. Performance metrics are no longer experienced as external constraints but as self-evident norms.

2.2. The Triple Mechanism of Contemporary Academia and Its Disciplinary Effects

Within this broader neoliberal horizon, contemporary universities have developed a technocratic apparatus that structures academic production through what may be termed a Triple Mechanism. These three interlocking systems function as an invisible apparatus of intellectual regulation, shaping not the answers philosophers provide, but the kinds of questions they dare to ask.

1. Metrics and Performance Evaluation

Modern universities rely heavily on quantitative metrics to allocate funding, prestige, and institutional survival. Departmental viability often depends on rankings such as the Philosophical Gourmet Report, citation indices, or publication counts in elite journal clusters.

This fixation on quantification—sometimes described as a form of “metric fetishism”—encourages scholars to treat research as the accumulation of numerical capital. Philosophical projects are fragmented into “minimum publishable units.” Large, synthetic inquiries give way to narrow, rapidly producible articles optimized for citation impact. Scholars are incentivized to write more while risking the gradual thinning of conceptual depth.

2. Grant Funding and Project-Based Logic

As funding for the humanities declines and resources flow increasingly toward STEM fields, philosophical research must secure external competitive grants to sustain institutional legitimacy.

The genre of the grant proposal imposes a powerful epistemic discipline. Researchers are required to articulate expected outcomes, measurable milestones, and projected “deliverables” before genuine inquiry has begun. Radical, exploratory, or negative lines of questioning—especially those aimed at demonstrating the impossibility of certain approaches—struggle to survive this anticipatory framework.

Highly uncertain, foundational philosophical problems often fail at the stage of proposal writing, unable to conform to the rigid temporality and predictability demanded by project-based governance.

3. Journal Publication and Gatekeeping

Peer-reviewed journals serve as the ultimate gatekeepers of academic recognition. Tenure decisions, grant awards, and reputational capital are deeply tied to the ability to publish consistently in high-status venues.

The existential pressure of “publish or perish” compels philosophers to master specialized jargon and conform to established argumentative templates. Intellectual heterodoxy must be translated into standardized academic prose. The dominant model favors puzzle-solving within accepted paradigms, while discouraging questions that might fundamentally destabilize the framework itself.

Structural Closure and the Domestication of Thought

Taken together, these three mechanisms form a closed circuit. They do not directly instruct philosophers which theories to endorse. Rather, they predefine the legitimate forms, tempos, and horizons of inquiry.

Within this structure, thought is domesticated into projects; philosophical questioning is reduced to knowledge production; and attempts to transgress these boundaries carry significant professional risk.

The regulation of inquiry operates not through overt censorship, but through the pre-structuring of possibility. What appears as intellectual freedom unfolds within a tightly calibrated field of institutional constraints.

3. The Logic of Publishability: The Pre-Selection Mechanism of Questions

Perhaps the most subtle and profound way in which institutional structures shape philosophy lies in the internalization of what may be called the logic of publishability. This logic transcends disciplinary boundaries and functions as the general grammar of contemporary academia. As a tacit norm, it operates at the very inception of thought, serving as a pre-emptive filtering mechanism that determines which questions may legitimately come into being.

3.1. The Hegemony of Gap-Spotting and the Problem of Underproblematization

In contemporary theoretical and empirical research alike, the dominant script for constructing a research question follows a highly standardized sequence: context → problem → gap → research question.

Mats Alvesson and Jörgen Sandberg, after extensive textual analysis of leading academic journals, identify this “gap-spotting” model as the prevailing paradigm of inquiry formation. Whether in quantitative studies or philosophical argumentation, scholars are required to demonstrate legitimacy by identifying an unaddressed void in existing literature. The research question derives its authority from occupying this vacant space. Yet gap-spotting represents a deeply conservative epistemological strategy. It formalizes innovation as incremental “gap-filling,” implicitly presuming that the existing theoretical framework is fundamentally coherent and correct. The researcher’s task is not to interrogate its foundations but to refine and extend it.

The result is what might be called “footnote-on-footnote research”: minor elaborations built upon increasingly granular distinctions. Through techniques of synthesized coherence—juxtaposing literatures not typically cited together—scholars artificially construct micro-gaps in order to generate minimally disruptive questions.

This dynamic raises a crucial philosophical concern: can genuinely transformative philosophical questions be reduced to literature gaps? If Plato, Kant, or Nietzsche had confined themselves to filling textual lacunae, the history of philosophy would appear radically impoverished.

As an alternative, Alvesson and Sandberg propose *problematization*: a mode of inquiry aimed at identifying and challenging the unarticulated assumptions underlying existing theories—and even those embedded within the researcher’s own conceptual apparatus. Problematization does not merely extend paradigms; it destabilizes them.

However, within competitive publication systems, radical problematization carries high rejection risks. Challenging disciplinary foundations may threaten reviewers who themselves embody the dominant paradigm. Consequently, scholars often gravitate toward safer, incremental gaps, leading to a condition of systemic *underproblematization*—a collective reluctance to question foundational assumptions.

The contrast may be summarized conceptually:

Table 1: Conceptual Contrast: Gap-Spotting vs. Problematization

Gap-Spotting	Problematization
Seeks omissions in existing literature	Exposes hidden assumptions
Reinforces prevailing paradigms	Disrupts theoretical consensus
Produces incremental knowledge accumulation	Risks paradigm destabilization
Highly aligned with publishability expectations	Marginalized within publication regimes

Under the logic of publishability, gap-spotting achieves hegemonic dominance.

3.2. Methodological Controllability and the Conservatism of Peer Review

A second pillar of publishability logic is methodological controllability. Contemporary academia is influenced by a diffuse scientism that demands questions be operationalizable, verifiable, and archivable. Even philosophy, in some quarters, seeks legitimacy by emulating the epistemic style of the natural sciences—occasionally distorting its own methodological character in pursuit of measurable rigor.

In this environment, uncertainty must be rendered manageable. Intellectual risk must be domesticated into procedural clarity.

The institution of pre-publication peer review intensifies this demand. Although originally conceived as a quality-control mechanism, peer review often functions as a structural conservator of established norms. Remco Heesen and Liam Kofi Bright, in their analysis of peer review, argue that

empirical evidence does not clearly demonstrate its effectiveness in detecting fraud or significantly improving research quality. What it reliably produces, however, is delay and gatekeeping.

More importantly, peer review exhibits a structural preference for methodological safety. Familiar frameworks, precise methods, and clearly bounded claims are rewarded. Ambitious philosophical projects—especially those in early, exploratory, or speculative stages—are vulnerable precisely because they lack procedural perfection. Anonymous reviewers, frequently aligned with dominant paradigms, may reject or heavily reshape submissions until they conform to conventional expectations.

Anticipating these risks, philosophers often engage in anticipatory self-censorship. Questions are pruned at their inception, reshaped into forms unlikely to provoke reviewer resistance. Publishability thus precedes inquiry; safety precedes thought.

3.3. The Demand for Clear Conclusions and the Compression of Thought

Publishability logic regulates not only the beginning of inquiry but also its end. Academic articles must culminate in clear, determinate conclusions that articulate a recognizable “contribution.”

Within this stylistic regime, incomplete thinking, unresolved tension, or philosophically tragic suspension find little accommodation. The processual nature of thought is compressed into outcome-oriented structure. Intellectual wandering must be retroactively reconstructed as linear argument.

One might speculate that if certain historically transformative works—such as chapters from Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, or even Plato’s allegory of the cave—were submitted to contemporary journals, they might face desk rejection for lacking explicit methodological framing, insufficient gap articulation, or insufficiently convergent conclusions.

The insistence on clarity and decisiveness thus excludes forms of inquiry inseparable from ambiguity, hesitation, and conceptual struggle. What cannot present itself as finalized knowledge risks exclusion from the domain of legitimate scholarship.

4. Institutional Silence: The Unaskable Questions

When the logic of publishability and its underlying triple mechanism hover above every academic subject like a Damoclean sword, the academic machine does not merely produce knowledge—it actively produces ignorance and manufactures silence. This marks the conceptual core of the present argument.

4.1. What Is “Institutional Silence”?

Institutional Silence does not imply that philosophy has ceased to think or that new questions are no longer generated. Rather, it designates a structural condition in which numerous genuine and urgent questions fail to enter the space of academic visibility due to institutional constraints. The field of agnotology reminds us that ignorance is not simply the natural absence of knowledge. Ignorance can be selectively cultivated, strategically sustained, and actively produced. Institutions shape attention, define evaluative standards, design incentive structures, and deploy gatekeeping mechanisms that systematically exclude certain lines of inquiry from intellectual circulation.

Within the neoliberal and increasingly politicized university, institutional silence often operates as a subtle form of structural violence. It rarely manifests as overt censorship. Instead, it mobilizes the language of “academic objectivity,” “methodological rigor,” “peer-review standards,” and “political neutrality” to marginalize inquiries that challenge prevailing power structures, capital dominance, or the academy’s own internal hierarchies. Such inquiries are dismissed as “emotional,” “unprofessional,” or simply “unpublishable philosophy.”

Institutional silence also interacts with the phenomenon of pluralistic ignorance. Many scholars privately recognize distortions within the knowledge regime, yet assume that their peers endorse the system. This misperception reinforces collective quietism. Silence thus becomes self-sustaining.

4.2. The Sociology of Absences and Three Forms of Silenced Philosophical Questions

Boaventura de Sousa Santos’s “sociology of absences” and “epistemologies of the South” provide a powerful framework for analyzing this condition. Santos argues that dominant Western epistemology draws an invisible “abyssal line” separating legitimate knowledge from that which is actively produced as non-existent. Entire forms of experience and thought are rendered invisible through what he calls epistemological monocultures.

Applied to contemporary philosophy, we can identify three major categories of silenced questions under the regime of publishability logic:

1. The Monoculture of Knowledge and Rigor

This monoculture privileges empiricist and scientific standards, dismissing other forms of inquiry as irrational or insufficiently rigorous.

- *Silenced questions*: Foundational or existential inquiries—especially those interrogating the legitimacy of academic institutions themselves or exposing epistemic injustice embedded within knowledge systems.
- *Mechanism of silence*: Such inquiries are often judged by elite journals as lacking formal precision or methodological clarity. The uncritical elevation of scientific standards leads to the exclusion of speculative, experiential, or marginalized epistemologies.

2. The Monoculture of Linear Time

This monoculture privileges accelerated productivity aligned with modern narratives of progress.

- *Silenced questions*: Long-duration inquiries whose significance may only emerge over decades; exploratory or uncertain research trajectories that resist predictable milestones.
- *Mechanism of silence*: Performance systems demand short-term outputs (a *chronos*-oriented temporality), dismissing slow, iterative research as inefficient. Thought is forced into compressed timeframes, eroding the *kairos* dimension of intellectual maturation.

3. The Monoculture of Capitalist Productivity

This monoculture recognizes value primarily in terms of measurable impact or market utility.

- *Silenced questions*: Non-instrumental inquiries that resist capitalization, refuse immediate policy translation, or lack measurable “impact metrics.”
- *Mechanism of silence*: Projects that cannot be converted into funding opportunities, public-policy outputs, or quantifiable societal impact are marginalized within administrative decision-making processes.

Through these monocultural operations, *epistemicides*—forms of cognitive destruction—occur quietly within institutions that publicly present themselves as guardians of rationality.

When philosophers attempt to critique structural exploitation within academia (for example, the precarity of contingent faculty) or to articulate decolonial analyses of geopolitics and racial domination, their submissions often encounter institutional inertia. The language of neutrality and disciplinary boundaries functions as a shield, deflecting systemic critique while maintaining the appearance of procedural fairness.

4.3. The Consequences of Silence: Temporal Compression and the Invisibility of Failure

One of the most devastating effects of institutional silence is the compression and alienation of intellectual time. Under the neoliberal maxim that “time is money,” the qualitative temporality necessary for reflection, meaning-formation, and kairotic insight is displaced by relentless acceleration.

The rise of the gig academy and the casualization of academic labor intensify this pressure. Early-career philosophers, especially those in precarious positions, must produce rapid, norm-conforming outputs to secure temporary contracts. Intellectual labor seeps into every fragment of personal time, leaving little space for sustained critical reflection.

In such a temporal economy, long gestational thinking approaches extinction.

Even more troubling is the disappearance of failure, hesitation, and wandering from academic discourse. Many transformative insights in both philosophy and science emerged through prolonged trial and error. Yet contemporary evaluation systems refuse to reward unfinished exploration or negative results. To survive, researchers often sanitize the research process—retrospectively reconstructing a nonlinear intellectual journey as a seamless progression from hypothesis to polished conclusion.

The lived drama of thought is erased.

Silence thus operates not only at the level of questions excluded, but also at the level of processes concealed.

5. The Institutionalization of Reflection: The Paradox of Metacritique

If contemporary academic problem-consciousness has been so deeply disciplined and distorted by institutional structures, then this very report—along with the growing body of critical scholarship exposing neoliberal universities and epistemic violence—must itself be subject to the same structuring forces. Here emerges the central paradox of contemporary critical theory and metacritique.

5.1. Is Reflexivity Itself Structured? “Limitations” as Ritual

Academic writing today has institutionalized reflexivity to such an extent that it risks trivialization. Nearly every major journal article must include a section on “limitations” or positionality statements. Authors are required to acknowledge the partiality of their perspective and to perform awareness of their own epistemic location.

Yet precisely because reflexivity is mandated, it often devolves into ritual. Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski have observed that contemporary academic critique operates through recognizable rhetorical gestures: the vigilant posture of self-scrutiny, the proliferation of scare quotes, and the compulsive signaling of awareness regarding constructedness.

This culture of metacritique—obsessed with “post-” prefixes and perpetual demystification—frequently results in an infinite regress of suspicion. Deconstruction follows deconstruction, each wary of reproducing essentialism or grand narratives. In this regime, reflexivity no longer functions as transformative critique but as a marker of intellectual sophistication.

To acknowledge limitations becomes less an act of humility than a strategic shield against reviewer attack—a preemptive defense mechanism securing legitimacy within the field.

5.2. The Paradox of Metacritique and Domesticated Resistance

This produces a profound irony: critiques of academic structures must conform to those very structures in order to be visible. A paper criticizing peer review must pass peer review to gain authority. A denunciation of metric fetishism must cite extensively within the same citation economy it condemns.

Under such conditions, resistance is domesticated. Institutional critique becomes a recognized subfield within the academic marketplace—productive, fundable, and publishable. The academic machine can absorb and metabolize critique because critique itself generates outputs: articles, monographs, grants, conferences.

This report is entangled in the same tension. By offering structured argumentation, meticulous citations, and formal conceptual analysis to expose publishability logic and institutional silence, does it not reproduce the very textual form it seeks to interrogate?

Metacritique thus encounters its own structural limit: it risks becoming another genre within the institutional grammar it questions.

6. Possible Exits: Slow Questions and Quiet Research

Rather than offering administrative reforms or policy prescriptions—which would risk re-entering the logic of instrumental optimization—this study proposes an internal reorientation of intellectual posture: the cultivation of slow questions and the legitimacy of unfinished inquiry.

6.1. Slow Questions and the Struggle to Reclaim Time

The Slow Science movement emerged as a response to academic acceleration. The 2010 Slow Science Manifesto declared that science needs time—to think, to read, and to fail.

Isabelle Stengers, in *Another Science is Possible*, radicalizes this position. “Fast science,” she argues, is not merely about speed but about the imperative never to waste time. Deceleration is necessary not to restore academic comfort, but to disrupt the capture of knowledge production by capital and managerial metrics.

Applied to philosophy, slow questions resist the demand for annual output quotas. They permit inquiry to unfold over extended durations without immediate visibility. Slow questions do not rush toward definitive closure; they allow themselves to remain open, suspended, even unproductive by institutional standards.

6.2. Unfinishedness as a Legitimate Form: Toward Quiet Research

Contemporary academia demands closed argumentative loops and definitive contributions. Yet philosophical thought is inherently unfinished—often contradictory, exploratory, and open-ended.

Quiet Research reclaims intellectual sovereignty over tempo and exposure. It resists the noise of visibility competitions, declines the compulsion to market intellectual identity, and withdraws from perpetual networking circuits designed to accumulate symbolic capital.

Quiet Research is not withdrawal from rigor; it is withdrawal from acceleration. It seeks to restore a workshop-like mode of philosophical labor, where depth takes precedence over frequency and silence becomes a condition for thinking.

6.3. The Positive Meaning of Silence

While institutional silence functions as a mechanism of exclusion, chosen silence may operate as tactical resistance. In an environment where every experience must be converted into discourse, metrics, and academic capital, refusal to immediately publish or perform visibility can become a form of non-cooperation.

Silence, in this sense, preserves potential. It withholds thought from premature formatting. It safeguards intellectual intensity from instrumental capture.

7. Conclusion: Is Philosophy Still Asking?

This study began by challenging the assumption that questions arise naturally from thought. Through analysis of evaluation metrics, funding regimes, and publication gatekeeping, it argued that the logic of publishability functions as a pre-selection mechanism shaping philosophical inquiry. Gap-filling flourishes; paradigm-challenging questions risk descent into institutional silence.

More paradoxically, even reflection on this distortion is vulnerable to ritualization and domestication.

We are thus returned to a stark question: if the philosophical problems circulating in elite journals, international conferences, and grant proposals have already been formatted, filtered, and pruned before articulation—if curiosity has subtly transformed into a calculation of publishability and return on investment—then is philosophy still genuinely asking?

This paper refuses a consoling conclusion. Any prematurely decisive answer would replicate the clarity imperative it critiques. To preserve structural tension and uncertainty may itself be the first step toward slow questioning and Quiet Research.

Only when philosophers recognize the possibility that they have internalized institutional conditioning can genuinely disruptive thinking re-emerge—perhaps in the long, unfinished silences where thought has not yet been forced into form.

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