

## EXPERT VS. INFLUENCER: PHILOSOPHY PRESENTED UNDER CONDITIONS OF SECOND-ORDER OBSERVATION

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**Abstract:** Philosophy is presented in a wide range of forms, none of which can be convincingly claimed to be the “genuine” one. Historically speaking, there is not one “proper” way of doing philosophy, evidencing what may be called the social contingency of philosophy. This paper aims to provide a “critical” philosophy of today, in the Kantian sense of a philosophy that reflects on the conditions of its possibility, and thereby acknowledges the limitations they impose. Conceptually, our approach is grounded in Niklas Luhmann’s social systems theory, in which “functional differentiation” and “second-order observation” are two crucial characteristics of modern society. The paper discusses how presentations of philosophy align themselves with the second-order observation mechanisms of the specific social systems in which they are “hosted.” This paper deals in particular with two such systems: academics and social (or mass) media. These forms of presenting philosophy produce two different kinds of philosophy presenters: the expert and the influencer.

**Keywords:** academic system; peer review; social media; YouTube; second-order observation; Niklas Luhmann.

### Introduction

In a survey of modes of philosophizing throughout the history of Western thought, Werner Stegmaier (2021) discusses fifty different forms in which philosophy has been presented. The list of forms (which is not meant to be complete) includes, for instance: poetry, dialogue, and proverbial sayings in ancient times; prayer and commentary in the middle ages; essay and philosophical system in early modernity; manifesto and lecture in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries; and academic journal papers and online publications today. The list could easily be expanded much further, especially if Non-Western philosophy were to be included.

Reflections on the historical diversity of forms of philosophizing are useful. They show clearly that there is, in actuality, no such thing as a standard method of philosophy. Philosophy has been presented in multiple forms and, given the sheer diversity, none of them can be convincingly claimed to be the “genuine” one—although there is no shortage of such claims. That, historically speaking, there is not one “proper” way of doing philosophy shows what may be called the social contingency of philosophy. Philosophy is not, as Martin

Heidegger somewhat conceitedly presumed, in any privileged relationship with language. It is certainly not, as he (in)famously claimed, in such a relationship with the Greek and German languages (Heidegger, 1994, pp. 50–51). Like all other ways of thinking, speaking, and writing, philosophizing is contingent upon existing modes of communication. It operates within historically evolving social structures and makes use of available linguistic and communicational means.

Different forms of philosophizing correspond to different audiences of philosophy. Just as there is no standard method of philosophy, no one particular style in which it needs to be presented, and no specific language that “naturally” lends itself to philosophizing better than others; there is also no one particular community or readership that it exclusively addresses. The audience of a philosophical work, like its form, is contingent upon the social and historical context within which such a work is written or spoken. This contingency also indicates that philosophical communication, like any other type of communication, never speaks simply to “everyone.” While there is no one exclusive realm where philosophy has its native home, there does always need to be *some* concrete social framework within which it is communicated. This necessity contradicts the implicit or explicit assumption found, for instance, in the works of Kant or Habermas, that philosophy gives voice to a supposedly universal reason or rationality in an unspecified “public sphere” (*Öffentlichkeit*)—consisting, in principle, of all humankind or all rational beings. While philosophical works may often claim to express generally valid truths that everyone ought to heed, their respective forms limit their reach and significance to the respective social contexts within which they are produced and presented. Here, we will focus on two contemporary forms of philosophy listed by Stegmaier—papers in academic journals and online publications—and discuss how they align themselves with the operations of the specific social systems that “host” them, namely the academic and the (mass or social) media system. These different forms of presenting philosophy produce two different kinds of philosophy presenters: the expert and the influencer.

Conceptually, our approach is grounded in Niklas Luhmann’s social systems theory. According to Luhmann, modern society consists of numerous communication systems—such as politics, law, the economy, academics,<sup>1</sup> the mass media, and education—each of which fulfils a specific function in society, operates with specific codes, and develops many more system-specific features distinguishing it from other systems in its social environment (Luhmann, 2012–2013). Luhmann calls this “functional differentiation” and regards it as a defining characteristic of modern society. The historical shift toward modernity, for him, consisted in the transition from “stratified differentiation”, i.e., a social structure based on the division between different strata (which very roughly correspond to what in Marxist language is called “classes”), to functional differentiation, i.e., a social structure based on the division between different function systems such as those just named.

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<sup>1</sup> “Academics,” “academia,” and “academic system” refer to what Luhmann calls in German *Wissenschaftssystem*. The German word *Wissenschaft* is often translated as “science.” However, this translation can cause misunderstandings since the English word “science” primarily refers to the natural sciences whereas the German word *Wissenschaft* refers equally to all academic disciplines, including arts and humanities.

Philosophy is neither a function system in its own right nor confined to just one system. Philosophy is communicated (or presented) in various systems; not only in academia and the media, but also, for instance, in the education system. However, as mentioned, in this paper we will only deal with the presentation of philosophy in academics and social media.

Besides functional differentiation, “second-order observation” is another crucial characteristic of modern society for Luhmann. Social systems are, for him, observing systems. The economic system, for instance, observes its environment in economic terms and communicates accordingly; similarly the legal system observes its environment in legal terms and communicates accordingly. In modernity, the observations of social systems have become increasingly complex. As Luhmann argues, virtually all systems now operate in the mode of second-order observation. In contrast to first-order observation, that is the mere observation of something, second-order observation not only observes something but it also observes observations. Something is not just seen, but seen in terms of how it observes and/or how it is being observed. In the economy, for instance, value is not constructed by simply observing companies or commodities, but by observing how companies and commodities observe and/or are being observed “on the market.”

The pervasiveness of second-order observation throughout all social systems today inevitably effects the observation of philosophy—both in the active sense of how philosophy observes (i.e., how it presents itself and its contents) and in the passive sense of how it is being observed (i.e., how its presentation becomes visible). The specific aim of this paper is to reflect on how conditions of second-order observation in academics and social media guide the presentation of philosophy in these two systems. Thereby, the paper is, in a sense, “post-Kantian.” While, for Kant, philosophy needed first and foremost to reflect on (transcendental) cognitive conditions which enabled it to operate, we take a Luhmannian route and instead reflect on (empirical) social conditions facilitating philosophical presentations.

### **The presentation of philosophy in the academic system**

For Luhmann, the emergence of the modern academic system consists in the formation of an “autopoietic”, or self-reproducing, discourse on the symbolically generalized communication medium “truth” (*Wahrheit*). This discourse became systemic by generating its own code (true/false) and assumed a specific social function, namely the production of “innovative findings” (*neue Erkenntnisse*) that it makes available to society (Luhmann, 1992). Within this social system, a profession with specific institutions, publications, and career opportunities emerged. During the present Covid-19 crisis, for instance; politics, the media, the law, and other social systems tend to appeal to the academic system—typically represented by academic professionals who are regarded as “experts”—to establish the “truth” about the pandemic and to generate new findings. That contemporary society tries to make sense of and deal with the crisis by using terms provided by scientists (e.g., “virus,” “pandemic,” “Covid-19,” and “vaccination”) and hesitates to give priority to alternative terminologies suggested by non-academic sources (e.g., “China Virus” or “divine punishment”) illustrates the functioning and the function of the academic system in modern society.

While the academic system is “structurally coupled” with other social systems—for instance by providing input on political decisions and information for media reports during the current pandemic—it still remains “operationally closed,” just like all other social function systems. Its operational closure consists in the fact that academic communication can only be produced within the academic system. Academic texts are generated in the academic system by referring to other academic texts referring to other academic texts. These texts must be published in publication venues within the academic system and be produced with an academic methodology, otherwise they are not academic. Of course, an academic can also, for instance, be interviewed in the media, but in this case her statements are clearly identifiable as media communication and do not constitute “research.” Politicians may well make decisions based on academic research. However, these decisions are political and not academic. They are not publicized in the form of academic essays. Politicians cannot communicate new regulations regarding quarantine measures through a virology journal. They must go through the proper political channels provided within the political system in order to be effective.

Philosophy too has found a place within the academic system (although it seems that it is increasingly pushed toward the fringes). In his lengthy monograph *Die Wissenschaft der Gesellschaft* (*Society's Academic System*), Niklas Luhmann summarized laconically what happened to philosophy once it settled within this social realm: “What was once philosophy degenerates<sup>2</sup> in this way to mere expertise in the treatment of philosophical texts; and philosophers become philosophy experts.”<sup>3</sup> (Luhmann, 1992, p. 159) Luhmann's point seems to be warranted: In order to get a job as an academic philosopher, one needs to become an expert by establishing an *area of specialization*, and one does so precisely by giving “treatment” to existing philosophical texts by other philosophical experts who became experts in the exact same way.

In *Die Wissenschaft der Gesellschaft*, Luhmann (1992) analyzes in great detail the autopoiesis of the academic system. As in all other contemporary function systems, second-order observation plays a crucial role in the self-reproducing communication process. Philosophers become academic experts by observing the observations of other academic philosophy experts. In this mode of second-order observation, they participate in the autopoiesis of the academic system. While Luhmann's monograph is heavy on theoretical elaborations on processes of second-order observation, it is, however, relatively light on concrete discussions of how these practically manifest themselves in academia. One reason for this imbalance is simply that in 1992, when the book was first published, the institutionalization of academic second-order observation as we know it today was still in its infancy. In particular, two major institutionalized forms of academic second-order observation,

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<sup>2</sup> To avoid misunderstandings, it needs to be noted that Luhmann speaks here in an ironical register; he does not truly lament the emergence of modern academic philosophy as a “degeneration.” To him, the shift toward modernity and functional differentiation represents an evolutionary increase in social complexity—though not necessarily “progress.” Philosophy, too, participates in this process. In the course of this evolutionary development, however, it became “completely impossible” for philosophy to claim, as it once did, “a leading position” (*Spitzenposition*) in the production of knowledge. In this sense it underwent a sort of “degeneration.” (Luhmann, 1992, p. 457.)

<sup>3</sup> Translations from German in this essay are ours.

which also have a great impact on the academic presentation of philosophy, did not yet exist (at least not in the highly formalized shape they have now taken on): academic (double-blind) peer review and academic rankings and ratings (of, for instance, journals and universities).

As is the case with the present paper, today's academic philosophy essays are written bearing in mind the peer review process through which they must go in order to be published and count as academic communications. For younger academics at the beginning of their careers it may be surprising, as Melinda Baldwin has shown, that "it was only in the late twentieth century that peer review came to be seen as a process central to scientific practice." (Baldwin, 2018, p. 538). Baldwin traces the origin of contemporary academic peer review geographically to the U.S.A. and academically to the natural sciences. It has since extended globally and to all academic disciplines. It can be safely assumed that when Luhmann published *Die Wissenschaft der Gesellschaft*, peer review practice had not been established by the publisher of his book, the then renowned Suhrkamp Verlag. It can also be safely assumed that Luhmann would have hardly encountered the peer review process in publishing his hundreds of journal papers and book chapters.

In her study on the history of academic peer review, Baldwin argues that its standardized form had its origins in the need to provide scientific legitimacy to funding bodies of the natural sciences. She explains:

In the 1970s, in the wake of a series of attacks on scientific funding, American scientists faced a dilemma: there was increasing pressure for science to be accountable to those who funded it, but scientists wanted to ensure their continuing influence over funding decisions. Scientists and their supporters cast expert refereeing—or "peer review," as it was increasingly called—as the crucial process that ensured the credibility of science as a whole (Baldwin, 2018, p. 538).

While there is no reason to doubt Baldwin's findings, the funding situation for scientific research in the U.S.A. in the 1970s on its own can hardly explain the rapid global expansion of this process which took the whole academic world by storm in the past two decades. From our point of view, this sudden rise can be explained with reference to second-order observation: Academic peer review succeeded because it standardized and institutionalized pre-existing second-order observation practices in the academic system. The logic behind the now outdated idea that editors individually select the papers to be published in their journals was based on an emphasis on first-order observation: Editors would personally read a paper and then judge it in terms of its academic "truth value" and its capacity to present "innovative findings." Peer review shifts the emphasis from first-order to second-order observation. Now editors do not simply read the paper but read it in light of expert reports on the paper. Instead of only observing the paper, they simultaneously and systematically observe observations of the paper. Observing the paper in light of how it is observed within the academic system is more in line with other systemic second-order observation mechanisms in society (such as establishing economic value not by simply observing a commodity but by observing how the commodity is observed "on the market"). Due to their greater degree of complexity, such second-order observation processes guarantee greater legitimacy and validity than mere first-order observation.

As Luhmann stated, "We no longer need to know what the world is like once we know how it is being observed and once we are capable of orienting ourselves in the realm of

second-order observation. [. . .] The observation of observers [. . .] has become the advanced mode of perceiving the world in modern society.” (Luhmann, 2013, p. 100) This “advanced mode of perceiving the world” has also become the advanced mode of perceiving academic philosophy essays. The peer review system has established more or less strictly regulated norms and procedures allowing all academics—editors, reviewers, and writers (each of whom frequently switch roles)—to orient themselves with relative ease in the complex realm of academic second order-observation. The massive amount of autopoietic academic text production has made it impossible to orient oneself within the system only by means of first-order observation. There is simply no time to actually read the thousands of publications one needs to observe to be an academic specialist. Fortunately, we no longer need to read as much once we have become experts in academic second-order observation. While some scientists “have argued that peer review could be eliminated with little cost to the scientific quality of the scientific literature” (Baldwin, 2018, p. 558), such considerations are beside the point precisely because they assume, at least implicitly, that “scientific quality” can be measured by first-order observation alone. The academic system has moved on to a determination of scientific quality by means of second-order observation and it is difficult to imagine how this movement could be reversed. Who should be able to compare and assess the quality of all those papers by actually reading them?

A further level of complexity in academic second-order observation has emerged in the form of rankings and ratings of universities and journals. Numerous such rankings exist today and it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss them in any detail. Most if not all of these rankings are derived from metrical analyses of second-order observation data such as reputation surveys and citation numbers. Their history is even more recent than that of the peer review process with which they share an Anglo-American and natural science background. The influential Times Higher Education World University Rankings, for instance, originated as late as 2004.<sup>4</sup> During the past two decades, journal rankings developed out of journal article indexing for research purposes and out of the Journal Impact Factor calculated by Thomson Reuters, which had been “originally created as a tool to help librarians identify journals to purchase.”<sup>5</sup> Today, the primary function of such metrics, similar to the peer review system, is to provide institutionalized (and commodified) guidance for second-order observation orientation within the academic system. The academic value of an academic essay correlates, for instance, with the SCImago Journal Rank of the journal within which it is published and the reputation of the indices which cover it. Typically, the website of the publisher of an academic journal—as in the case of *Human Affairs*<sup>6</sup>—makes such data readily available so that potential contributors and purchasers can decide if it is worth submitting or subscribing to (whether it is worth reading is quite a different issue).

Combined institutionalized academic second-order observation mechanisms, such as peer review processes and journal rankings, build academic *profiles* (Moeller & D’Ambrosio, 2021). A profile is an identity that is constructed under conditions of second-order observation. Given that they each determine their value and status within the academic

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings>

<sup>5</sup> <https://sfdora.org/read/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.degruyter.com/journal/key/HUMAFF/html>; <http://www.humanaffairs.sk/>

system, academics and journals both need to curate their academic profiles. The presentation of philosophy in the form of academic journal articles is a central element of academic profile curation. The profile of an academic “philosophy expert” is promoted by publishing in highly ranked journals and—vice versa—a philosophy journal can boost its profile by publishing articles by “high profile” authors, promising more citations and an increase in reputation.

In short, the presentation of philosophy in academic journals takes place within systemic profile curation loops based on institutionalized second-order observation processes. This is also the case for the present essay: Its publication will help us fulfil certain academic profile requirements stipulated by our employers.<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, academic philosophy papers are not just written with readers (i.e., individual first-order observers) in mind but, and often more importantly, with how they contribute to an academic profile that emerges only through second-order observation. Philosophical journal papers are not primarily presented to any specific individual peers, but to the impersonal “general peer” (Moeller, 2020) who takes shape in the second-order observation processes of a social system.

### **The presentation of philosophy on social media**

There is a wide variety of forms in which philosophy may be presented online. Among them are, to name just a few: academically oriented networks for making one’s written work available, such as Academia.edu; personal blogs by professional and non-professional philosophers; podcasts presenting interviews or dialogues with philosophers; lectures by professional philosophers on video sharing platforms; and, also mostly on such platforms, popular channels introducing individual philosophers and philosophies or discussing various issues from a philosophical perspective. Each of these forms of presenting philosophy through social media has its specific characteristics which we cannot outline within the scope of the present essay. We limit our discussion here to a brief reflection on one aspect of the social media presentation of philosophy that links it to the preceding reflections on academic philosophy: second-order observation. We will do so by focusing on one specific social media platform where we have a presence: YouTube. (We cooperate on a YouTube channel on Daoist philosophy and we have other channels where we present our own philosophical musings.)

Second-order observation is central to all communication on social media. On YouTube it is manifested concretely on the screen. The number of views is shown below each video along with the number of likes and dislikes. In addition to these numerical data, most YouTube presentations allow comments. Popular videos often have hundreds or thousands of comments, many of which are commented on in turn. This results in feedback loops. Viewers on YouTube (and generally on social media) do not simply watch videos; they also watch how what they watch is being watched. This is a highly dynamic process: numbers, likes, and comments change over time—they grow. Videos on YouTube invite fragmented, random, and non-linear viewing: Most of the time, a video is not watched in full and most comments

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<sup>7</sup> Universities require publication of a specific number of peer-reviewed essays in Scopus-indexed journals for contracts to be extended or to be able to graduate.

remain unread.<sup>8</sup> And yet, viewers may well return to a video and watch different segments of it and read different comments.

Second-order observation operations not only determine how one watches videos on YouTube, but also what one watches there. Algorithms decide which videos are offered to the viewer—even if one actively searches for themes. The choices given are generated by observations of viewing habits which remain quite obscure to the viewers. YouTube explains only vaguely:

We're constantly testing, learning, and adjusting to recommend videos that are relevant to you. We take into account many signals, including your watch and search history (if enabled) as well as the channels you've subscribed to. We also consider your context, such as your country and time of day.<sup>9</sup>

When we watch YouTube, we observe ourselves in the mode of second-order observation. By looking at the selection of videos we are offered, we see our personal viewer profile emerge. The same is the case when we present videos: Here, too, we see how our profile takes shape and evolves by observing how our videos are observed as being observed. Viewers, including ourselves, do not simply see our videos, they also see how our videos are liked and disliked and commented on. Not unlike citation metrics and peer reviews in academics, social media feedback mechanisms allow us to establish and curate an identity that is not constituted through recognition by any particular individual peer, but by communicating with a trans-personal general peer enabled by a communication system.

The presentation of philosophy on social media, too, is oriented to the general peer. As in the academic system, individual profiles of philosophers are built through second-order observation processes. In the academic system these profiles are those of experts. High profile experts get cited frequently, have an impressive H-index, and are able to publish in top journals. On social media, high profile philosophy presenters become philosophy influencers. They reach wide audiences, generate extensive feedback loops, and are seen as being seen, or known to be known. Philosophy experts may also become philosophy influencers—Harvard philosopher Michael Sandel is an example—but more often their success in the academic system is not complemented by equal success in social media. The converse is also true: high-profile philosophy influencers, like PhilosophyTube host Abigail Thorn whose channel has close to one million subscribers,<sup>10</sup> typically do not even compete for a high profile in the academic system.

## A short conclusion

This brief academic essay aims to show that the presentation of philosophy is conditioned by the modes of communication of the social systems within which it takes place. There is no “genuine” way of presenting philosophy, and there is no “philosophy system” as such, but there is, for instance, academic philosophy and social media philosophy. The presentation

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<sup>8</sup> <https://uhurunetwork.com/the-50-rule-for-youtube/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/howyoutubeworks/product-features/recommendations/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/user/thephilosophytube>



of philosophy evolves along with the evolution of society. Today's social systems operate with increasingly complex, elaborate, organized, institutionalized, commodified, and metrically assessed second-order observation mechanisms. These mechanisms not only shape presentations of philosophy but also the identities of the presenters—the profiles of philosophers. The academic expert and the social media influencer are two profile types available to contemporary philosophers. A “critical” philosophy of today, in the Kantian sense of a philosophy that reflects on the conditions of its possibility, can analyse these conditions and dispassionately acknowledge the limitations they impose on overly enthusiastic philosophical ambitions.

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