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Graduate Students, Speak Out!

WAYS TO WORRY ABOUT THE JOB MARKET

Jordan Bartol

The anxiety of those awaiting job offers is matched only by that of current PhD candidates who anticipate doing the same in years to come. They fall into two groups. First is the group of graduate students not yet on the market who are pre-emptively and anxiously preparing for their future. Imagine 3rd year graduate student Jo who knows what lies ahead, having heard horror stories from those before her.

Second—and more interesting—is the group of students who, upon witnessing the boundless anxiety of the first group, become alarmed at their own *lack* of panic. Imagine 3rd year Simon, who works along side pranic-stricken Jo. Witnessing Jo engrossed in *advice*, *blog posts*, and *news stories* about the *philosophy job market*, Simon begins to

worry that he's missed out on *something*. If studious Jo is worried that she won't land a *job*, in spite of her apparent preparedness, then, reasons Simon, his prospects are bleak. Simon's meta-anxiety is brought about by a lack of first-order anxiety.

I've spent time being a Simon and wishing I was a Jo. I've also spent time being a Jo and wishing I could be more relaxed and take-it-as-it-comes, like a Simon. My sample size is small, but I'm led to believe that most places are a mix of Simons and Jos.

The Jos are aware that the market looks bad. A *recent report* from Philosophy News reminds us that, 'if you start a PhD program this year ... there will be an additional 1200 philosophy students graduating ahead of you, all looking for jobs.' And this figure only includes students from the top 60 or so schools in North America. There are prob-

ably thousands of PhDs in the English-speaking world alone, and they're all fighting for fewer than 1000 positions per year. There are not enough jobs to go around.

Some Jos know they will find work but are worried about the quality of that employment. The Internet has *been awash* over the past few years with *stories* about the *proliferation* of *adjunct* or temporary work. As Universities search for ways to save money in a cash-strapped economic environment, nearly all have begun to rely increasingly on low-cost temporary employees. The number of permanent and tenure-track positions in North America has dipped over the last 15 years, while the number of adjunct positions has risen by at least the same amount. This means candidates are less likely to land a permanent position and more likely to end up in temporary/adjunct employment. As recent discussions have *highlighted*, adjuncts

are often paid extremely low wages and are forced to take on very high course loads in order to earn a sufficient income. Add to this the fact that many adjuncts do not receive benefits and you can imagine why the Jos of this world have trouble sleeping at night.

By most accounts, it's better **not** to be at the extreme Simon end of the spectrum. That is, it is probably best to have a solid awareness of what sorts of jobs you might aim for, what makes for a strong candidate, the state of the job market, and the process of the job hunt. But it seems sensible to say that the extreme Jo end of the spectrum is **a dangerous place to be**, too. In the time it takes to get caught up on even one of this year's big discussions about the profession, a Jo could make considerable progress on a thesis chapter, writing sample, conference presentation, or cv. Perhaps more importantly, a Jo could have used that time to go for a run, hang out with friends, watch a film, or whatever Jos do to relax.

The Jos would do well to remember that, bleak as it seems, many philosophy PhDs do find employment in academic philosophy. The Philosophy News report claims that 85% of philosophy PhDs since 2000 are currently working in academic philosophy in one form or another. And we should not assume that the 15% of graduates who left the discipline did so unhap-

pily. There is also no reason to suspect that these 15% are underemployed. In fact, for the Simons and Jos who decide to leave professional philosophy, there are many opportunities that await. Former PhilSci PhD Michael Steiner has a **detailed guide** to finding a job outside of academic philosophy. Focussing on the transferable skills we acquire while planning, funding, and writing dissertations, Steiner explains, 'You have valuable skills that you've developed during a PhD in philosophy, and you can and will find a job outside of academia'.

Part of Steiner's message, one that was recently echoed **elsewhere**, is this: '99% of the cool jobs that exist you aren't even aware of'. Philosophers of science are probably incapable of imagining all of the diverse fields in which they might work, let alone the diverse positions in which they might be happy.

Though the Jos are right to be concerned about the general trend toward adjunct teaching, they might take some comfort in the simultaneous rise in postdoctoral and other temporary research positions. According to Philosophy News, the number of postdoc positions has risen steadily with both the increase in adjunct positions and the decrease in permanent positions.

In the many areas of the sciences, PhD students have regularly sought positions as postdocs for some time. This has only recent-

ly become the trend in philosophy – perhaps as funding structures have become more favourable toward this type of position. Though postdocs are temporary, they provide a reasonably well-paid opportunity to develop your cv while working somewhere new, with new people, on a new project. A postdoc can be exciting. For the Simons worried that they're ill-prepared for a permanent academic position, landing a postdoc might buy the time needed to get caught up.

Whether you're a Jo or a Simon it is important to be at least a little **in the know**. And when you do start to worry, remember that forums and blog posts are no substitute for human beings. Computer screens are bad at empathy.

Since groups of anxious graduate students tend to bring about a Jo/Simon cycle, it is helpful to reach out to a member of academic staff. Many departments now have placement officers —academics in charge of preparing students for the job market. If your department has a placement officer, go see them. If your department doesn't have a placement officer, ask them to appoint one. ϕ

Best of Luck!