

Philosophy and Current Affairs: The Russia-Ukraine War

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According to one founding myth, philosophy begins in Ancient Greece with Socrates abstracting from concrete examples of just activity in order to determine the timeless and eternal essence of justice. To this day, few philosophy journals are dedicated to the analysis of historically contingent current affairs, let alone a specific event of historical significance, like Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. So, to explain why I am editing a special issue of *Studia Philosophica Estonica* on the protracted conflict between Russia and Ukraine, I will briefly: detail my involvement in the current Russia-Ukraine war; describe the connection between my philosophical commitments and my recent activity in Kyiv; and elucidate the dialectical relation between academic and public philosophy, generally. Finally, I will offer a short summary of each essay in this special issue of *SPE* on the Russia-Ukraine war.

1. Current affairs: Reporting on the Russia-Ukraine war

Ukrainians have been fighting Russian or Russian-backed troops since Russia annexed Crimea in 2014. However, the backstory for this special issue of *Studia Philosophica Estonica* begins with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. I was in Toronto at the time, and I was horrified by Russia's attack on Kyiv. Yet there was something else nagging at me: very few people in my proximity seemed to grasp the significance of a nuclear power invading a neighboring country with 100 000+ troops. So, a few months later when a colleague in the Canadian press explained that they would have gaps in their Ukraine coverage over the summer and thus could use a freelance journalist on the ground, I figured this was an opportunity to put my public philosophy skills¹ to good use, by providing Canadian read-

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¹ From 2018–2022, I edited a popular philosophy column, *Agora*, in *The New Statesman*. See <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2021/05/agora-a-marketplace-of-ideas>.

ers with reports on daily life in Kyiv, Lviv, Kharkiv, Odesa, and other major cities.²

After publishing a few articles for *The Toronto Star* and doing some background research for the *CBC*, *The Wall Street Journal* commissioned me to write a piece on the state of higher education in Ukraine. Unsurprisingly, Ukrainian colleges and universities were in disarray. At the time, some seven thousand scholars had fled Ukraine and thousands more had been displaced within the country. Two years later, over 170 Ukrainian institutions of higher education have been damaged and more than 20 have been completely destroyed. And the academics who stayed in Ukraine continue to conduct their research, teaching, and public service in very challenging circumstances.³

That said, two things really stood out to me when doing my initial research on higher education in Ukraine. First, nearly every Rector and senior administrator noted that Western universities were providing plenty of support⁴ for Ukrainian students and scholars who had fled the country, but that there was little or no help for Ukrainian academics working in Ukraine. Second, Ukrainian academics were doing amazing work inside and outside the classroom to keep their local communities running and to raise funds for the Ukrainian war effort. And ultimately, these two facts got me thinking: “I could write a story about the state of higher education in Ukraine, or maybe I could do something to help my fellow academics in Kyiv...”

As it turns out, I never wrote that *Wall Street Journal* story. Instead, I followed the example of public outreach set by Ukrainian students and scholars by returning to Toronto and organizing a benefit conference to assist academic and civic institutions in Ukraine. Specifically, the benefit conference was designed to support the work students and scholars at Kyiv Mohyla Academy were doing to counteract the destabilizing impact that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine had on higher education and civilian life in Kyiv. The conference was entitled “What Good Is Philosophy?—The Role of the Academy in a Time of Crisis”, and it took place on 17-19 March 2023 at the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy in the University of Toronto.

Keynotes at this benefit event were delivered by world-renowned author, Margaret Atwood, one of the most celebrated scholars of Ukrainian history, Timothy Snyder, and two of Ukraine’s preeminent public intellectuals, Mychailo Wynnycky and Volodymyr Yermolenko. Lectures were also given

² For an example of my reporting from Ukraine, see (Wendland 2022).

³ See “Overview of the current state of education and science in Ukraine in terms of Russian aggression (as of October 26–November 25, 2022)”, report by Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine https://reliefweb.int/attachments/025fdb15-9b5e-4070-aca2-e1d28e21a4a7/overview_of_the_current_state_november_25_2022_oglyad_potochnogo_stanu_25_listopada_2022.pdf.

⁴ See <https://allea.org/support-for-ukraine/>

by some of the most influential philosophers writing today, including Peter Adamson, Elizabeth Anderson, Seyla Benhabib, Agnes Callard, Quassim Cassam, Tim Crane, Simon Critchley, David Enoch, Peter Godfrey-Smith, Sally Haslanger, Angie Hobbs, Barry Lam, Melissa Lane, Dominic Lopes, Kate Manne, Jeff McMahan, Jennifer Nagel, Philip Pettit, Kieran Setiya, Jason Stanley, Timothy Williamson, and Jonathan Wolff. The closing remarks were delivered by Ukraine's Ambassador to Canada, Yulia Kovaliv.

The benefit conference raised \$50 000 CAD for Kyiv Mohyla Academy. And shortly after the event, the editor-in-chief of *Studia Philosophica Estonica*, Toomas Lott, asked if I would be interested in editing a special issue of their journal on the Russia-Ukraine war. In fact, Toomas asked me to build on the work I did for the benefit conference by transcribing the keynotes and commissioning an original set of accessible essays on the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, with the aim of sharing philosophical analyses of the war with academics and the general public, alike. And since my civic engagement in Ukraine was inspired by my study of philosophy, and given that I believe philosophy can be effectively used to elucidate current events, I gladly accepted Toomas' invitation to edit this special issue of *SPE* on the Russia-Ukraine war.⁵

2. Philosophy: authenticity, responsibility, and the Russia-Ukraine war

Just as editing a special issue of *Studia Philosophica Estonica* on the Russia-Ukraine war deviates from standard academic practice, I appreciate that reporting from a war-torn country and supporting civic institutions in a foreign state are hardly typical activities for a professor of philosophy. That said, much of my work in and for Ukraine has been informed by my reading of two key figures in the history of philosophy: Martin Heidegger and Emmanuel Levinas. Specifically, Heidegger's analysis of human existence and authenticity combined with Levinas' work on responsibility, vulnerability, and proximity influenced my decision to cover Russia's invasion of Ukraine and then organize a benefit conference for Kyiv Mohyla Academy. And I hope briefly reflecting on the connection between my philosophical commitments and my recent activities in Kyiv will help us see the dialectal relation between academic and public philosophy as well as the value of public outreach.

⁵ This section draws on the introductory remarks I made at the benefit conference I organized for the Ukrainian academy as well as an interview I gave about that conference to the Polish philosopher, Przemysław Bursztyka. See (Wendland 2023b).

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger offers a detailed analysis of *Dasein* (Heidegger 1962). “*Dasein*” is an ordinary German word that means “existence”. Yet in *Being and Time*, Heidegger uses “*Dasein*” as a technical term for “human being” to push back against notions of a fixed human nature and show that our essence lies in our existence. This means that who and what we are is a function of the historical contingency, manifold abilities, and future indeterminacy that characterize a human life, generally. The education we receive, the careers we pursue, or the relationships we cultivate depend upon the time, place, and circumstances of our birth. These historical realities undoubtedly shape who we are, but they are contingent insofar as we are born with the capacity to study a host of subjects, pursue a variety of careers, or cultivate all kinds of relationships. The contingency of our upbringing combined with our ability to lead alternate lives allows us to question the identity we inherit, and this questioning puts us in a position to choose who and what we will be going forward. The fact that we can make this choice indicates the uncertainty of our future and presupposes that a portion of our life still lies ahead of us. Taken together, the contingency of our past, the multiple abilities we possess, and the indeterminacy of our future enable us to define our own identity through the choices we make over time. And as Heidegger sees it, when we take responsibility for our existence by making life-defining choices, we lead an authentic human life.

Taking responsibility for who and what we are through life-defining choices raises questions about the basis upon which we make such decisions, and this brings us to the work of Heidegger’s student and critic: Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas largely accepts Heidegger’s analysis of *Dasein*, but he worries that the historical contingency and future indeterminacy that characterize human life implies that we are absolutely free to make any life-defining decision we please—i.e., we are equally free to choose to be Mother Theresa or a Nazi—a therefore our existential choices are ethically arbitrary. To address this concern, Levinas offers a detailed analysis of what Heidegger calls the “existential situation” in which we make life-defining decisions, and Levinas argues that taking responsibility for who and what we are is based on our ability to respond to the wants and needs of others. Briefly, the idea is that I am free to teach Heidegger and Levinas if there are students who want to study philosophy, and I am equally free to be an orthopedic surgeon if there are patients who need their knees repaired. That said, Levinas is famous for stating in *Totality and Infinity* that ethics is infinitely demanding and that human agency (our ability to make choices and act upon them) is based on the vulnerability of others (Levinas 1969). To see what these claims mean just think of the civil war currently being fought in Sudan, the suppression of women in Afghanistan, the homeless crisis in North American cities, and

all the other strife and suffering that offers us endless opportunities to act ethically by supporting others in need. At the same time, Levinas realizes that human finitude imposes a limit on the amount we can do to mitigate the misfortune of others. For that reason, he develops an account of ethical activity in which we use our skills and abilities to facilitate the flourishing of others within our proximity. So, taking responsibility for who and what we are by making life-defining decisions is ultimately based on our ability to respond to the wants and needs of others in our specific existential situation.

As strange as it may sound, Heidegger's arcane work on historical contingency, manifold abilities, and future indeterminacy as well as Levinas' esoteric writing on responsibility, vulnerability, and proximity influenced my decisions to report on the Russia-Ukraine war and run a benefit conference for the Ukrainian academy. When Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, I was scheduled to spend that summer editing *Heidegger's Being and Time: A Critical Guide* as well as teaching a seminar on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (2013) at Massey College in the University of Toronto. This work would have been in keeping with my education and career path to date, but I had also spent a significant amount of time since completing my PhD writing, editing, and producing public philosophy for *The New Statesman* and *CBC*. So, when a colleague in the Canadian press asked if I would be interested in traveling to Ukraine to spend several months covering the ongoing conflict, I was put in a position to question my current commitments and choose between continuing with my academic duties or working as a war correspondent. And since Canadians clearly needed to enhance their understanding of the Russia-Ukraine war, I decided that reporting on Russia's invasion of Ukraine was the best use of my ability to write for a general audience at this pivotal moment in history. Similarly, when I started doing research for a story about the state of higher education in Ukraine, I realized that I might be able to use my connections at various western universities to generate support for students and scholars in Kyiv, but then I had to choose between completing my story on higher education or figuring out a way to assist the Ukrainian academy. And since the needs of students and scholars in Kyiv were obviously greater than the needs of the Canadian reader, I decided to return to Toronto to organize a benefit conference for Kyiv Mohyla Academy. Of course, nearly every aspect of Ukrainian society needed support following Russia's invasion, and arguably the Ukrainian military was the most vulnerable and thus the most in need of assistance. Yet my background and abilities meant that there were limits on the type of work I could choose to do in and for Ukraine. And in the end, I thought fundraising for students and scholars in Kyiv was the best

way for me to simultaneously live up to my philosophical commitments and employ my distinctive skillset in this specific situation.⁶

3. Philosophy and current affairs: A virtuous circle

Drawing on Heidegger and Levinas to inform my decision-making and inspire my civic engagement in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has helped me appreciate the connection between my academic training and my public outreach. It has also helped me perceive the nature and value of public philosophy, generally. Specifically, public philosophy runs along a spectrum from the popularization of academic ideas, through the application of those ideas to current affairs, to an active participation in social and political movements. This suggests that public philosophy presupposes the esoteric work done by professional philosophers in universities. But philosophical engagement with current events often raises new questions that require further academic research. So, to illustrate the essence and importance of public philosophy, I will tease out the dialectical relationship between our scholarly and civic activities and then conclude with a few words about the public philosophy in this special issue of *Studia Philosophica Estonica* on the Russia-Ukraine war.

While the essence of philosophy is contested within the academy, the practice of academic philosophy involves asking a series of questions of a metaphysical, ethical, or aesthetic nature, and then answering them in creative ways to enhance our understanding. This attempt to expand our knowledge starts with a deep appreciation for the history of philosophy and may require subtle distinctions, detailed argumentation, and a new vocabulary. Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Sidgwick's *The Methods of Ethics* (1874), and Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (1970) are all excellent examples of academic philosophy. And although these books were written in different eras, they have at least one common feature: each demands a certain level of academic expertise before their key ideas shine through.

Since we need to know something about the work of Kant, Sidgwick, and Adorno before we can share their ideas with the wider world, academic expertise is the basis of public philosophy. But it is just the beginning. The process of popularization requires translating an idea *from* the vocabulary needed to test it in the academy *to* a language the lay person understands. Transcendental deductions, synthetic a priori judgments, and the unity of apperception are more or less intelligible phenomena to Kant scholars. But these technical terms mean very little to the uninitiated. So, some form of

⁶ For a detailed account of the connection I see between my philosophical commitments and my public philosophy, see (Wendland 2023a).

translation is necessary to turn the idioms of the academy into publicly accessible philosophy.

Translating technical terms into ordinary language calls for real literary skill. It may also involve placing an academic idea in its historical context or explaining it through a set of examples. Yet after an arcane idea is translated into accessible prose, it can be used to introduce students to philosophy and educate the public, generally. Nigel Warburton offers a clear distillation of perennial philosophical issues in *Philosophy: The Basics* (2012), and his book is often used to teach new undergraduates. Similarly, Angie Hobbs does a fine job placing the writing of influential philosophers in context, and her contributions to *In Our Time* on BBC Radio have given Plato, Aristotle, and many others a broad audience. Collectively, Nigel and Angie have produced a lot of user-friendly philosophy, and the translation work of popularizers like them has paved the way for applied public philosophy.

Once an arcane academic idea has been made generally intelligible, it can be applied in everyday life. In fact, applied public philosophy is meant to help us make sense of current events and provide us with the insight we need to make difficult decisions. As editor of *The New Statesman's* *Agora* series, most of the articles I published were designed to clarify current affairs or contribute to controversial debates. Eric Schliesser and Eric Winsberg's piece, "Climate and Coronavirus: The Science is Not the Same" (2020), was an attempt to clarify current events, whereas Judith Butler's column, "The Backlash Against 'Gender Ideology' Must Stop" (2019) was a contribution to a contentious debate. But Carrie Jenkin's article, "Love Isn't About Happiness: It's About Understanding and Inspiration" (2020) signifies that applied public philosophy is equally concerned with human flourishing. And as a public service, the application of academic ideas to daily life requires a willingness to look beyond the confines of the university, while also providing an opportunity to follow through on one's philosophical commitments via civic engagement.

Using suitably clarified academic ideas to analyze contemporary social and political issues presupposes a robust understanding of the actors and institutions in a specific social movement as well as a feel for what is at stake in a given political debate. Acquiring this insight often involves a mix of independent research and regular contact with civic associations. This interaction may enable a philosophical assessment of current events, but it can equally encourage philosophically inspired participation in various social and political struggles of the day. As noted above, my civic engagement in Ukraine has been motivated by my study of Heidegger and Levinas, and I see my work in Kyiv as one small way to contribute to a larger fight for liberal democracy. At the same time, my public work in Ukraine has prompted me

to rethink Heidegger's and Levinas' notions of freedom and responsibility in the context of mass mobilization, and I can envision a research project on the ethics of conscription where I analyze the extent to which the vulnerability of others within our proximity can impose strict limits on our ability to make life-defining decisions. In short, my philosophically inspired social and political engagement in Ukraine has forced me to question my conception of agency and thus prompted me to further my academic work.

With that said, we've come full circle: public philosophy presupposes and contributes to philosophy as it is practiced in the academy. Specifically, public philosophers translate arcane academic ideas into popular prose for the purpose of general education. Once academic ideas are suitably clarified, public philosophers can use them to elucidate current affairs and motivate participation in social and political movements. This philosophical engagement with contemporary events often raises new questions that inspire fresh academic research. And academic and public philosophy prove their worth through the collective contribution they make to advancing human understanding, educating citizens, and inspiring social and political progress.⁷

4. Philosophy and current affairs: Reflections on the Russia-Ukraine war

The dialectical relation between academic and public philosophy suggests that the Socratic distinction between examples of just activity and the essence of justice is not as clear as contemporary philosophy journals imply, and each publicly accessible article in this special issue of *Studia Philosophica Estonica* on the Russia-Ukraine war combines academic insight with an analysis of current affairs to enhance our understanding of the most significant geopolitical event of the 21st Century.

In "Grappling with Evil Amidst Russia's Invasion of Ukraine", **Mychailo Wynnyckyj** details his experience of Russia's attack on Kyiv in the spring of 2022 and then he argues that the notion of individual rights that lies at the foundation of Western legal and political institutions is incapable of dealing with the collective evil exhibited by the Russian army during their invasion of Ukraine.

Timothy Snyder's essay, "Thinking About Freedom in Wartime Ukraine", recounts his meeting with President Zelensky shortly after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine and it explores the philosophical implications of Zelensky's decision to stay in Kyiv as Russian troops marched on the Ukrainian capital. Specifically, Snyder explains what Zelensky's brav-

⁷ For a detailed and scholarly account of the relation I see between academic and public philosophy, see (Wendland 2021).

ery during the first few days of the full-scale invasion shows us about the relations between freedom and speech, freedom and risk, freedom and obligation, and freedom and security.

In “The Sword is Mightier Than the Pen”, **Aaron James Wendland** asks world-renowned author, **Margaret Atwood**, about: the power of poetry and literature; the relationship between fiction and political commentary; the social and political impact of her dystopian and anti-authoritarian work; modern utopias and the role of hope in utopian writing; her undergraduate studies in logic and the history of philosophy; and the ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy.

Volodymyr Yermolenko examines the power of ideas to shape social and political events in his article, “Thinking in Dark Times”. He is particularly interested in the way misguided or false ideas about Russian and Ukrainian history and politics have contributed to the current Russia-Ukraine war. He also reflects on the way this war has transformed his understanding of some key philosophical concepts, including life, death, and social solidarity.

In “Just War Theory and The Russia-Ukraine War”, **Jeff McMahan** draws on revisionist just war theory to analyze the morality of action by both sides in the current conflict. He argues that virtually all uses of force by the Russian military in Ukraine are impermissible; that Ukrainian forces are bound by moral constraints, such as the requirement of proportionality, which requires the most careful attention to risks of escalation to the use of nuclear weapons; and that some Russian civilians are liable to some harms.

Gerald Lang’s article, “Against the Odds: Defending Defensive Wars”, looks at the “reasonable prospect of success” condition in just war theory and the “problem of bloodless invasion” to see whether they present the Ukrainian resistance with justificatory headaches. Lang concludes that there is no principled barrier to Ukraine’s resistance, but that civilian and combatant casualties must be taken into consideration by the Ukrainian government when prosecuting their just war.

In “What Is This Thing Called Peace?”, **Fabio Lampert** scrutinizes discourse surrounding the Russia-Ukraine war in Western nations, where, despite widespread support for Ukraine, a contingent advocates for peace by rejecting military aid. As Lampert sees it, this “pacifist” stance gains traction through public demonstrations in European countries and political endorsement. Yet by opposing military aid while advocating peace, Lampert argues these “pacifist” messages distort genuine efforts for establishing peace in Ukraine.

Jonathan Wolff provides a framework for analyzing and assessing the value of nationalism in his essay, “Nationalisms: Purification, Privilege,

Pride, and Protection”. According to Wolff, there are different types of nationalism, used in different circumstances, and for different purposes, and he attempts to distinguish acceptable and unacceptable forms of nationalism by distinguishing four functions of nationalism: purification, privilege, pride, and protection. These functions can be mixed together in different ways, and Wolff claims that purification and privilege are both highly problematic, while pride, and especially protection, are far more defensible.

In “The Antinomies of The Russia-Ukraine War and It’s Challenges to Feminist Theory”, **Irina Zhrebkina** looks at the difficulties a large-scale war in Europe presents for a number of feminist, pacifist, and leftist certainties. Zhrebkina considers the view that Ukraine should stop resisting aggression in the face of the threat of a world nuclear war or if the conflict turns into a war of extermination, but then she argues that a true Ukrainian victory over an authoritarian aggressor would amount to preserving and empowering democracy in Ukraine, and she claims that this is possible only on the basis of building broad transnational anti-Putin alliances, including alliances with all the forces opposing Putin in Russia and Belarus.

Siobhan Kattago’s article, “The Russia-Ukraine War and The Sediments of Time”, frames Western responses to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine within what Reinhart Koselleck calls “the sediments of time”, or *Zeitschichten* that contain different temporalities, speeds, and directions. Specifically, Kattago looks at Western reactions to the Russia-Ukraine war through distinct temporal lenses, including *Zeitenwende*, *déjà vu*, *interregnum*, and Never Again, and then she examines what these temporalities mean for the post-war international legal and political order.

In “Putin’s Use and Abuse of History as a Political Weapon”, **Cynthia Nielsen** discusses Putin’s account of history in the context of Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine. Nielsen focuses on Putin’s Imperialist History of Russia, his “Great Patriotic War” narrative, and his NATO *ressentiment*, and then she explains how these accounts of history help us see that a central factor driving this war is Russia’s inability to see it itself as anything other than an empire.

George Pattison considers calls to ban Russian literature in his essay, “To Cancel or Not to Cancel?—Questioning the Russian Idea”. Taking his cue from Putin’s use of Dostoevsky to support his critical view of Western culture, Pattison challenges the view that Dostoevsky can be straightforwardly corralled into the Russian President’s nationalistic and imperialistic agenda. Instead, Pattison follows the approach taken by George Lukacs in response to National Socialism’s self-representation as the authentic inheritor of the German cultural tradition, namely, to show that any great cultural

work is going to be resistant to the kind of one-dimensional interpretations typical of authoritarian regimes.

In “Academic Dialogue Against the Background of War”, **Nataliia Viatkina** examines pleas to boycott the Russian academy after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Against the view that such a boycott would prevent Western academics from working with their Russian colleagues to counter Kremlin propaganda and to co-produced Western-Russian research that may benefit everyone, Viatkina argues that the Russian censorship and policing of the academy combined with Russian ideology means that there are currently no conversation partners for Western academics within the Russian academy.

Orysya Bila and **Josh Duclos** explore the instrumental and intrinsic values associated with teaching philosophy in their article, “Utopia, Dystopia, and Democracy: Teaching Philosophy in Wartime Ukraine”. Duclos argues that teaching philosophy in Ukraine can cultivate habits of thought and action that promote democratic citizenship while opposing authoritarian dogmatism. Conscious of Ukraine’s Soviet past, Bila cautions against using philosophers and philosophy departments as an ideological arm of any political party, and then she argues that philosophy has value as a distinct form of thinking with the power to provide consolation and promote change.

Finally, in “Ukrainian Civil Society: Past Lessons and Future Possibilities”, **Nataliia Volovchuk** looks at the evolution of Ukrainian civil society and considers what that evolution means for Ukraine going forward. Specifically, Volovchuk examines the interaction between Ukrainian civil society and the state and then she explains how Ukrainian civil society has struggled with different utopian ideas over the 20th and early 21st centuries. Volovchuk concludes her essay with an analysis of some utopian obstacles for Ukrainian civil society that may come with European integration.

As the editor of this special issue of *Studia Philosophica Estonica* on the Russia-Ukraine war, I appreciate the commitment of my contributors and I believe curating this collection of essays is an extension of my previous efforts to assist Ukraine in its time of need. As we have seen, philosophy is not confined to the academy. It can be used to elucidate current affairs and simultaneously serve as the basis of social and political progress. And so, I sincerely hope that the articles in this special issue not only enhance our understanding of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, but equally inspire us to marshal all the support Ukraine requires in its fight for freedom and democracy.

Acknowledgments

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