

# Running on Empty

## Blanks and Voids in Academic Publishing

Von: Alexandra Irimia

I love a quick read – perhaps you do, too. Editors generally agree that concision and clarity are good things, especially in light of the current informational overload which weighs heavily on our ever-diminishing attention spans. Media outlets have begun to include estimated reading times on their written pieces, and the New York Times has even published a one-word article, albeit exceptionally.<sup>1</sup> But when it comes to academic journals, how long is a short article?

In other words, what is the minimum acceptable length for a piece of scientific writing to still be considered a legitimate publication? How do we – and how should we – think of the relation between wordcount, on the one hand, and authority and authorship, on the other? Under what conditions does less actually mean more? Intuitively, it seems unlikely that an article of only a few words would be able to claim any scientific authority, let alone score reputation points for its author's CV. There is a distinct – and dreadful – quantitative logic behind the imperative to “publish or perish.” For the sake of pushing a thought experiment to its limits, we can certainly imagine white space where an article should be; many writers have indeed seen this disquieting picture and stared into its abyss in the wake of a pressing deadline. But would the result be publishable as a scientific contribution?

A few weeks ago, a [tiny storm](#) in the Academic Twitter teacup sent ripples through my newsfeed: Joshua Habgood-Coote, a philosophy scholar from the University of Leeds, announced that “the (second) shortest philosophy paper”<sup>2</sup> ever has been published in an issue of *Metaphilosophy*. Together with Lani Watson (University of Oxford) and Dennis Whitcomb (Western Washington University), he had co-authored an empty article.<sup>3</sup> Mind you, it was as empty as it could be – which means, not quite: the piece was not devoid of various sorts of inscriptions that mark the genre of scientific publishing. Even though there was no body of text *per se* and certainly no abstract, the article had a title (“Can a good philosophical contribution be made just by asking a question?”), three footnotes, complete citation information, and a digital object identifier (DOI). It was signed by 3 co-authors, one of whom acknowledged support from an ERC grant for his contribution (the grant agreement number was, of course, included, as per contractual requirements). Additional legal obligations inscribed the authors' institutional affiliations, correspondence details, information about the publisher (Wiley Online Library

owned by John Wiley and Sons Ltd.) as well as a note on the terms and conditions of use under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License that governed its publication in Open Access.

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Can a good philosophical contribution be made just by asking a question?<sup>1</sup>

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Figure 1a – The full article authored by Joshua Habgood-Coote, Lani Watson, and Dennis Whitcomb

It is easy to notice how this list makes for a rather intricate assemblage with its own jargon, full of acronyms and proper nouns disposed on the otherwise empty page according to consecrated layout and standardized formatting rules. This paratextual apparatus exposes the wider, less visible infrastructure behind contemporary scientific communication, heavily reliant on symbolic capital, indexing, funding agencies, and legal agreements. Although the philosophical content of the paper does not go beyond its self-referential title, the article is quite eloquent – albeit obliquely – about the conditions of its production and consumption,<sup>4</sup> largely dictated by the (often conflicting) interests of publishing monopolies,<sup>5</sup> on the one hand, and centralized, tax-funded research programs, on the other.

But is there ever such a thing as a completely empty page? Craig Dworkin does not think so: “Although it may appear uninked, the blank page is [always already] culturally inscribed with an indelible text.”<sup>6</sup> The lack of actual content in the article certainly did not trouble the online library’s algorithm, whose programmers have already reduced knowledge to indexable data. Following an indexical logic, whereby any one entry item counts as much as any other, the simple granting of a DOI – and not the presence of actual written text – is enough to constitute the article as article. The reader continues to receive reading recommendations based on metadata associated to this editorial skeleton, whose exposed bare structure had already gathered 21 094 “full text views” at the moment of the writing of this post.

**METAPHILOSOPHY**

ORIGINAL ARTICLE | [Open Access](#) |

### Can a good philosophical contribution be made just by asking a question?<sup>1</sup>

Joshua Habgood-Coote, Lani Watson, Dennis Whitcomb

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<sup>1</sup> The authors are listed in alphabetical order. Joshua Habgood-Coote and Dennis Whitcomb conceptualised this paper. All three authors contributed to writing it and signed off on its final version. Joshua Habgood-Coote's research on this project received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement no. 818633).

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It must be added that, in the same issue of *Metaphilosophy*, the three co-authors published a five-page letter to the editors that functions as a commentary on their radical gesture. After a brief contextual section titled “Stage Setting” – which points directly to the performativity of the act through the use of a theatrical vocabulary (“we pull the curtain,” “we invite you to imagine”<sup>7</sup>) – the scholars insist on their good intentions: “We assure you that it is an earnest submission, not a joke or a hoax.”<sup>8</sup> A more serious section ensues, in which they delve into the history and pragmatics of philosophical interrogations, inseparable from presuppositions. The authors justify the choice of an experimental form with a clear concern for the visibility of their object of study. Accordingly, the article’s extensive blank is a productive strategy<sup>9</sup> in itself, pointing neither to “the aftermath of a deletion,” nor to “the origin of inscription”<sup>10</sup>:

Perhaps most productively, in its minimal presentation, the paper may bring the topic of questions and their relationship to philosophical practice to the attention of a broader audience across philosophical sub-disciplines – philosophy of art, science, law, metaphysics, ethics, and so on – where questions are, again, central but often do not receive explicit treatment in their own right.<sup>11</sup>

Deepening the interdisciplinary reach of their empty article, the authors bring in Arthur Danto’s theory on artworks that embody their own meaning and confirm that their paper “is an instance of that same phenomenon. The paper’s meaning amounts to the semantic content of the interrogative sentence that is its title.”<sup>12</sup> The circular logic of tautology and self-referentiality is therefore excused as artistic or poetic license, resonating with advice that is often dispensed in the increasingly prominent world of scientific communication: “cut the jargon but not the poetry.”<sup>13</sup>

Finally, the authors cite other instances of “Dantoesquely artistic writings” that are “not unheard of in academic philosophy,” while also acknowledging that they are remnants of a time in which this type of creative experimentation was more easily tolerated in scientific publications than it is now.<sup>14</sup> Among these examples figures what they identify as the shortest paper in the history of the discipline, published seven years prior. Tyron Goldschmidt’s 2016 article in *Dialectica* is fittingly titled “A Demonstration of the Causal Power of Absences.”<sup>15</sup> Its absent text is not available in Open Access and remains behind a paywall without institutional login or the privileges of a privately paid subscription. It is, presumably, shorter than the 2023 paper only because it lacks footnotes. However briefly, it also treats a different subject, but its title is equally performative and self-referential, in a move inspired perhaps by a 1990 paper published in the journal *Mind*.<sup>16</sup> The author of that paper boldly stated: “This is, I believe, the first article in the whole history of philosophy the content of which is concerned exclusively with its own self, or, in other words, which is totally self-referential. The reason why it is published is because in it there is a proof that it should not be rejected and that is all.”<sup>17</sup>

So far, I have only mentioned empty articles published in philosophy journals, but this is not to imply that the practice belongs exclusively to the discipline – or, indeed, to the humanities. In fact, the oldest known example dates back to a 1974 medical journal: Dennis Upper’s “The Unsuccessful Self-Treatment of a Case of Writer’s Block.”<sup>18</sup> This

article features only the heading of the “References” section in the middle of several rows of typographic blank space arranged on two columns. The layout is only visible due to a single footnote and one humorous comment from Reviewer A.

*THE UNSUCCESSFUL SELF-TREATMENT OF  
A CASE OF "WRITER'S BLOCK"*<sup>1</sup>

DENNIS UPPER

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<sup>1</sup>Portions of this paper were not presented at the 81st Annual American Psychological Association Convention, Montreal, Canada, August 30, 1973. Reprints may be obtained from Dennis Upper, Behavior Therapy Unit, Veterans Administration Hospital, Brockton, Massachusetts 02401.

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COMMENTS BY REVIEWER A

I have studied this manuscript very carefully with lemon juice and X-rays and have not detected a single flaw in either design or writing style. I suggest it be published without revision. Clearly it is the most concise manuscript I have ever seen—yet it contains

sufficient detail to allow other investigators to replicate Dr. Upper's failure. In comparison with the other manuscripts I get from you containing all that complicated detail, this one was a pleasure to examine. Surely we can find a place for this paper in the Journal—perhaps on the edge of a blank page.

Figure 2 – Screenshot of Dennis Upper's article, courtesy of the Society for the Experimental Analysis of Behavior

Its publication almost 50 years ago has occasioned an avalanche of variations on the theme, among which the two most recent are a 2014 empty “meta-analysis”<sup>19</sup> comprising only an abstract, and the 2019 article “A Multidisciplinary Replication of Upper’s (1974) Unsuccessful Self-Treatment of Writer’s Block”<sup>20</sup> written by 6 authors and consisting entirely in an editor’s note, a declaration of compliance with ethical standards, one footnote, and one reference to Upper’s original article. Finally, it is interesting to note that Nature rejected the publication of an empty article titled “A Comprehensive Overview of Chemical-Free Consumer Products” by Alexander Goldberg and CJ Chemjobber – accepting it, nevertheless, for the journal’s blog.

Stephen Heard, entomologist at the University of New Brunswick and author of *The Scientist’s Guide to Writing*, compiled more examples of infinitesimal academic publishing.<sup>21</sup> Stefan Washietl assembled a similarly playful inventory of “The Shortest Papers Ever Published” for his start-up’s blog.<sup>22</sup> Academic inner jokes aside, why is this fragile and precarious form so fascinating? <sup>23</sup>“There’s something irresistibly, geekily cool about publishing a two-word abstract or a four-word paper,”<sup>24</sup> says Heard. And he adds, riffing on a recommendation from the style guide of *The American Naturalist*, the journal of the American Society of Naturalists: “a paper should be as short as it can be, but no shorter.”<sup>25</sup> To compensate for the absence of a suggested wordcount in the journal’s manual of style, the original guideline was: “Papers should be thorough but succinct: as long as they need to be and not one word longer.”<sup>26</sup> After all, who doesn’t like a quick read?

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4. The article can be saved in .pdf, for free. On the right-hand margin, the downloaded file will include metadata that identify the time and location of each download.
5. Interestingly, three of the four (more or less) empty articles this post refers to are available through Wiley’s online library, whereas the fourth is published by the blog of a journal (*Nature*) associated with Springer.
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8. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
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