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Aaron J. Wendland  
Vision Fellow in Public Philosophy  
Department of Philosophy  
King's College London, UK  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8556-8660>  
aaron.wendland@kcl.ac.uk

Przemysław Bursztyka  
Editor-in-Chief  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4978-198X>  
pbursztyka@uw.edu.pl

## Philosophy and the Fight for Freedom

Aaron J. Wendland interviewed by Przemysław Bursztyka

**PB:** You recently organized a major online benefit conference for the Ukrainian academy, entitled: “What Good Is Philosophy?” Can you tell us a little bit about this conference?

**AW:** “What Good Is Philosophy?” took place on 17–19 March 2023, and it aimed to raise the funds required to establish a Centre for Civic Engagement at Kyiv Mohyla Academy. This Centre will provide support for academic and civic institutions in Ukraine to counteract the destabilizing impact that Russia’s invasion has had on Ukrainian higher education and civilian life.

Keynotes at the conference 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 Wynnnyckyj and Volodymyr Yermolenko. Lectures were also given 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.

This benefit event was designed to provide members of the public, individual academics, colleges and universities, professional associations, charitable foundations, and private companies with a way to support students, scholars, and civic institutions in Ukraine. The entire conference is now available to be viewed online via on the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy's YouTube channel. Here is the relevant [link](#). I encourage everyone who watches the conference to make a donation to support students, scholars, and publicly engaged academics in Ukraine. All donations can be made [here](#). And as the conference organizer, I am extremely grateful for any and every contribution to this cause.

**PB:** What inspired you to organize this conference? Could you tell us something more about the context?

**AW:** Ukrainians have been fighting Russian or Russian-backed troops since Russia annexed Crimea in 2014. However, the backstory for this benefit conference 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. But there was something else nagging at me: i.e., very few people in my vicinity 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 skills to good use, by providing Canadian readers with reports on daily life in Kyiv, Lviv, Kharkiv, Odessa, and other major cities. 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. To date, over 170 Ukrainian institutions of higher education have been damaged and more than 20 have been completely destroyed. And the academics who remain in Ukraine now conduct their research, teaching, and public service in very challenging circumstances. 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 support 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, despite state-wide cuts to education in order to fund the war. And these two facts had 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 the *Wall Street Journal* story. And following the example set by Ukrainian students and scholars, I've spent much of the past year thinking about the conflict and working on "What Good Is Philosophy? – A Benefit Conference for Ukraine."

**PB:** So, your stay in Ukraine was not limited to journalism. And apart from working on conference, it sounds like you were involved in many other activities. Could you expand a bit on that?

**AW:** The aim of my initial trip to Ukraine was to provide the Canadian public with a bit more context on the Ukraine conflict, and I hope the writing and podcasting I have done over the past year has served that pedagogical purpose to some extent. Publications aside, most of my Ukraine-related work has been done in support of the work students and scholars have been doing in Ukraine.

Specifically, I have been working with students and faculty at Kyiv Mohyla Academy, where students have been volunteering their time to visit elderly citizens whose families have left the country. Or where faculty have been running public seminars on Ukrainian history to counter Russian propaganda. Or where psychology professors have volunteered their expertise to counsel civilians who spent months under Russian occupation. Or where faculty have been drawing on their research to offer much needed insight to foreign correspondents and the international community, generally. Of course, Ukrainian students and scholars are not the only ones doing exceptional work in Ukraine. I met nurses and medics who were taking double shifts and then using the extra money they earned to buy much needed medical supplies for their patients. Comedians were putting on benefit gigs and donating the proceeds to the Ukrainian army. Computer programmers were using their spare time to help secure Ukraine's digital network. And just about everyone I spoke to, from students and scholars to comedians and programmers, saw doing their day job as an act of defiance and their own small way to help keep their country running.

But stepping back from these concrete examples, I'd say my work and fundraising efforts in Ukraine aim at mitigating the brain drain and supporting the civic institutions that are absolutely crucial in a burgeoning democracy. And this brings me to my final point. Based on my experience in Kyiv, Lviv, Kharkiv, Kramatorsk, and Mykolaiv, it's clear that Ukrainians from all walks of life are defending something we (hopefully) hold dear: freedom. So, their fight is our fight. And while I'm personally in no position to push back the Russian army, I am doing what I can to support the civic institutions that Ukrainians are striving for and fighting to protect.

**PB:** Following the title of the conference, what role/s can philosophy play in the Ukrainian context? What good can it bring?

**AW:** One of my keynote speakers, Timothy Snyder, said in a recent interview that bad ideas can kill people, and he provided several examples in which Russian ideas about history, culture, and language were catalysts to the current conflict.

At its very best, philosophy is an antidote to bad ideas. Of course, this image of philosophy as a remedy to poor thinking is found in Plato's cave allegory, where prisoners of darkness are led to see the light via philosophical training. But Plato's imagery has become rather concrete in Kyiv, where philosophers like Mychailo Wynnyckyj and Volodymyr Yermolenko have been drawing on their scholarship and academic background to counter Russian mythology. And if Snyder is right, then Wynnyckyj and Yermolenko are genuinely fighting for the lives of their fellow citizens and the future of their country.

Speaking of the future, Ukrainians have been vigorously discussing what their institutions will look like in the post-war period, and moral and political philosophers can contribute much to these debates. Put otherwise, the damage Russia has inflicted upon Ukraine facilitates the rethinking that often comes with rebuilding. This means Ukrainians are currently working through foundational questions in moral and political philosophy, but they are doing so with a real opportunity to institute whatever answers they settle on. And they have the whole history of philosophy to draw upon.

Finally, on a far more personal level, there are the consolations of philosophy. Existentialism, Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Hadot's *Philosophy as a Way of Life* were in demand when I was in Kyiv. And even if the practical recommendations of philosophers fail to meet the practical needs of citizens in a war-torn country, there is always the pleasure of blocking out the world by reading a good book.

**PB:** Do you think there is anything more philosophers and philosophical institutions can do to practically support Ukraine in the time of war?

**AW:** In the *Republic*, Plato characterize a just society as one in which each individual or group does its part for the benefit of the whole. I bring this up, because colleges and universities around the world are clearly not responsible for waging war against the Russian army. This is obviously the responsibility of the Ukrainian military and its allies in NATO. However, colleges and university across the globe should be doing their part to support the Ukrainian academy, for the good of Ukraine as a whole. Unfortunately, colleges, universities, and academic societies are not particularly well placed to provide support for students and scholars in need outside their own region or country. For example, scholars at risk funding is often tied to a given university within a specific country, and this goes some way to explain why there is plenty of support for Ukrainian academics who have fled, but very little assistance for students and scholars who stayed in Ukraine.

With that said, “What Good Is Philosophy? – A Benefit Conference for Ukraine” was designed to help individual academics and scholarly associations overcome some of the institutional obstacles they may face when trying to support the academy in Ukraine. And I certainly encourage any and everyone who watches this benefit event to give what they can to assist their Ukrainian colleagues.

**PB:** You mentioned that the main aim of the conference was to establish Centre for Civic Engagement. Could you tell us a bit more about this institution and its cultural mission?

**AW:** As I mentioned above, “What Good Is Philosophy?” was meant to generate the funding we need to set up a Centre for Civic Engagement at Kyiv Mohyla Academy. This Centre will offer institutional, intellectual, and financial support to the Ukrainian academy in three stages: foundation, expansion, and reconstruction.

At the foundational stage, the Centre will counteract Ukrainian brain drain by supporting and building upon several academic and civic initiatives underway in Ukraine. In particular, the Centre will aid and advance the work Ukrainian faculty, staff, and students have been doing in podcasting, journalism, public education, and civic engagement.

At the expansion stage, the Centre will establish two fellowship programs to provide displaced academics with a chance to resume their research, teaching, and public service in Ukraine. Specifically, the Centre will set up a domestic “scholars at risk fellowship” for academics displaced within Ukraine due to the fighting in Donbas, Kharkiv, Mykolaiv, Zaporizhia, and Kherson. The Centre will also work to repatriate exiled Ukrainian academics through a new “repatriation fellowship.”

At the reconstruction stage, the Centre will work with its international partners after the war to ensure that world class education is available in Ukraine. And in the post-war period, the Centre will reconfigure its domestic “scholar at risk fellowship” to repatriate more Ukrainian academics and to invite international faculty to spend an academic year in Ukraine.

But again, “What Good Is Philosophy?” aimed to raise the funding required to establish a Centre for Civic Engagement at Kyiv Mohyla Academy. So, donations at this stage will support the exceptional work Ukrainian students, scholars, and publicly engaged academics are currently doing in very difficult circumstances. And I sincerely believe that supporting higher education in Ukraine in its time of need will help ensure that Ukrainian civil society flourishes in the twenty-first century.



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