

# Adjuncts are Exploited

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## Abstract

Jason Brennan and Phillip Magness (2018) and (2020) argue that adjuncts are not exploited. We are sympathetic to some of their points. We agree, for example, that certain ways in which adjuncts are compared to sweatshop workers are offensive. For, as Brennan and Magness point out, there are many respects in which adjuncts are much better off than sweatshop workers. However, we show that the core insights of their paper are compatible with the view that adjuncts are exploited. Furthermore, their more general views about exploitation expressed in *Cracks in the Ivory Tower* actually lend support to the claim that adjuncts are exploited.

## I. Introduction

There is some controversy as to the details, but there appears to be something of a consensus that exploitation occurs when one person takes advantage of another person in a way that is unfair. This often occurs when the victim is vulnerable in some way, and the exploitative arrangement then takes unfair advantage of this vulnerability. It is also fairly uncontroversial that exploitation need not involve harm; exploitative arrangements are often beneficial to the victim, given the available alternatives. (See Benn, p. 138; Feinberg, pp. 176 – 9; Brewer, p. 86; Levine, pp. 66 – 7; Moore, p. 53; Wertheimer 1996 pp. 13 – 15; and Wood, p. 148) This yields the potentially counter-intuitive result that it can be rational for the victim of an exploitative arrangement to voluntarily agree to be exploited. Wertheimer distinguishes between exploitation that is mutually advantageous, in which both the exploiter and the person being exploited benefit from the arrangement, and exploitation that is harmful to the person being exploited, as well as between exploitation that is non-consensual, in which the exploited person withholds consent or in which her ability to consent is eroded, and consensual exploitation, in which the exploited person is able to and has given appropriately voluntary consent to the exploitative arrangement. (Wertheimer p. 14) Wertheimer illustrates how mutually advantageous, consensual exploitation can occur by reference to an example:

An unexpected blizzard hits an area and people rush to the hardware store to buy a shovel. The hardware store owner sees the opportunity to make an abnormal profit and raises the price of a shovel from \$15 to \$30. If B agrees to pay \$30 for the shovel, because the shovel is worth more than \$30 to B under the circumstances, then the transaction is clearly Pareto superior. Both parties gain. But B feels exploited because B gains less (or pays more) than B thinks reasonable. ...We need not deny that B gains from [the] transaction, all things considered. Rather, we say that A exploits B because we believe that B pays too high a price for what he or she gains. (Wertheimer, p. 22)

In this case, the storm has created a vulnerability, in the form of an urgent need for a shovel; the hardware store owner then takes unfair advantage of the situation by charging an unreasonably high price for the shovels. Wertheimer continues:

There are at least some cases of alleged exploitation in which B's consent is not defective... In many cases of alleged exploitation, A takes advantage of B's cir-

cumstances to get B to agree to a mutually advantageous transaction to which B would not have agreed under better or perhaps more just background conditions, where A has played no direct causal role in creating those circumstances, where A has no special obligation to repair those conditions, and where B is fully informed as to the consequences of various choices. Although B might prefer to have a different range of options available, B can make a perfectly rational decision as to the advisability of the various options. (Wertheimer p. 27)

For example, consider a wealthy investor who acquires the patent for a life-saving medication and then immediately raises its price, such that it is now fifty-five times more expensive than it was. If the patient really does require the medication to survive, it might be rational for her to willingly pay the higher price. But it is still exploitative, because the investor takes unfair advantage of the patient's vulnerability. And it seems no less exploitative if the medication treats such conditions as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease or cirrhosis, which the patient may have had a hand in creating. Now that the patient requires the medication to survive, it is unfair to take advantage of that fact to compel her to pay such an inflated price.

## II. Adjuncts and Good Exit Options

Brennan and Magness argue that adjuncts have good exit options. As they put (2018, p. 65) it:

[T]o defend the Adjunct Exploitation Thesis, one would need to show that adjuncts' employers are like [sweatshop owners], and adjuncts are like [sweatshop workers]. But, as we discussed above, this analogy seems false, in general, because adjuncts, unlike [sweatshop workers], have good exit options.

This suggests an argument:

### *The Argument from Good Exit Options*

- (1) If one has good exit options, then one is not exploited.
- (2) Adjuncts have good exit options.
- (3) So, adjuncts are not exploited.

Premise (1) is an implication of some standard theories of exploitation. Premise (2) is motivated by a host of empirical data and analysis marshaled by Brennan and Magness. Among other things, adjuncts could find much better work at GEICO. Let's say that an option is a 'good exit option' relative to another option iff it is better than the other option.

We will assume that (2) is true and do not challenge any of the empirical claims Brennan and Magness make. Our target is instead premise (1). First, Brennan and Magness cannot accept premise (1). In *Cracks in the Ivory Tower*, they argue that university faculty use gen ed requirements to exploit undergraduates. As they put it (2019, p. 157):

Why do universities require gen eds...? [T]he real reason for gen eds is that they represent a way for certain faculty to capture student's tuition dollars. Faculty exploit students for their own selfish benefit.

They also say (p. 183) that: “It’s difficult to avoid the conclusion that the responsible professor is inappropriately exploiting the student’s needs to meet the university’s graduation requirements.” Finally, Brennan and Magness suggest (2019, p. 185) that:

We’re not saying gen eds are a complete disaster. And there are some schools, such as the University of Chicago, that have well-designed curricula that really do seem (anecdotally) to create well-rounded, liberally educated students. But what most universities do is require students to take a smattering of unconnected classes from here and there, plus a stream of classes in the most enrollment-dependent department(s). This is best explained as academic rent-seeking, as a means for professors to exploit students for their own benefit.

Suppose university faculty exploit students enrolled in gen eds in the way Brennan and Magness suggest. Then (1) is false. Just as adjuncts have good exit options, students enrolled in gen eds have good exit options. They could quit college and work for GEICO just as adjuncts could quit their jobs and work for GEICO. They could do a little research to find the very best gen ed satisfying courses and take those. They could study on their own and then test out of many of the gen ed courses. They could take gen ed courses at a community college for a much better price. If Brennan and Magness are right that university faculty exploit students through gen ed courses, then exploitation is not ruled out by the presence of good exit options. And so (1) is false.

Second, we can imagine hypothetical sweatshops in which employees have good exit options but are nevertheless exploited. Imagine on the road to the factory, there is a billboard advertising jobs that are much better than the one the sweatshop offers. But the employees will never look up high enough to see the billboard. Perhaps this is because they have been trained to think it is shameful to look up while walking to work. Or perhaps they have unconscious biases that prevent them from looking up. Perhaps it is because they have a strong sense of vocation regarding the particular sort of work done at the sweatshop. Maybe they are just weirdly devoted to making clothes. Sometimes they think about looking up. But the shame or unconscious biases or strong sense of vocation prevents them from doing so. It still seems like they are being exploited. Indeed, there is a respect in which the sweatshop workers are more gravely wronged in a case like this. In normal cases, if the sweatshop weren’t there, the employees would be worse off. They would starve to death or have an even worse domestic job. But in the hypothetical case, sweatshop workers would be better off if the sweatshop was not there. For in that case, there would be no one to take advantage of their socialization and quirks. And they would end up with a much better job.

We don’t think it is completely implausible to think that the way in which adjuncts have good exit options is morally similar to the way in which college students and the workers in the hypothetical example have good exit options. Anyone who has gone to grad school knows that would-be academics are socialized to feel great shame at the idea of leaving the profession and to develop a strong sense of academic vocation. Being an academic becomes so much a part of one’s identity that leaving the profession can feel like going through divorce or having a loved one die or that one is abandoning one’s duties. Perhaps there are other viable employment options, but it is plausible there are all sorts of unconscious biases at work in would-be academics that make them feel as if they have invested all this time in pursuing an academic career and should therefore keep going. Or, in spite of the evidence, they may feel unqualified to do anything else. It is plausible that adjuncts are partly to blame for this. If they were just more rational maybe they would look into a job at GEICO. But people in general aren’t rational. Perhaps the sweatshop workers are irrational for refusing to look up. Perhaps they deserve part of the blame for their predicament. Nevertheless, they are exploited. In the same way, it is not completely implausible to hold that adjuncts are exploited even if they have good exit options.

### III. Adjuncts, Good Exit Options, and the List

There is a different way of understanding Brennan and Magness' argument. They provide a long list of features of adjuncts. The list includes ways in which adjuncts typically differ from sweatshop employees. We can add to the list ways in which adjuncts typically differ from students enrolled in gen eds.

#### *The List*

- Adjuncts are highly educated.
- Adjuncts are good at collecting data and analyzing trends.
- Adjuncts had lots of time to think about alternatives, analyze risks, and seek alternatives.
- Adjuncts' work isn't worth that much.
- Adjuncts are not underpaid for the amount of work they do and if they work a lot of hours it is because they are bad at their jobs.
- Students reasonably repose trust in their institution and their faculty to promote their interests whereas adjuncts are mere employees.
- Students are lied to<sup>1</sup> by faculty about the purpose of gen eds whereas adjuncts are not.

The List allows us to offer a new argument. The presence of good exit options is not sufficient to rule out exploitation. But perhaps the presence of good exit options together with all the other items on the list is. This suggests:

#### *The Revised Argument from Good Exit Options*

- (1) If one has good exit options and also possesses all the other features on the List, then one is not exploited.
- (2) Adjuncts have good exit options and also possess all the other features on the List.
- (3) So, adjuncts are not exploited.

We think premise (1) of the revised argument is false. With one exception to be discussed below, the items on the list are irrelevant to exploitation. Or, at the very least, they are only relevant insofar as they suggest that adjuncts have good exit options. And the issue about good exit options, though pressing, has already been addressed. And it is one that we think cannot be accepted by Brennan and Magness based on what they say in *Cracks in the Ivory Tower*. The one item on the list that we think might be relevant is the claim that adjuncts' work isn't worth that much. We disagree with Brennan and Magness about this and will discuss it in the next section. Keeping our disagreement with Brennan and Magness about the value of adjunct work in mind, our argument against premise (1) is this:

#### *The Argument from Individual Irrelevance*

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<sup>1</sup> An anecdote: One of us has a spouse who has adjuncted at five institutions. At each institution, at least one person has told her that adjuncting would be "a way to get her foot in the door." They have always said that, and it has worked out only once--one institution offered this person a full-time, non-permanent, non-tenure track position after five years' worth of semester-to-semester adjunct contracts.

- (1) The items on the List are individually irrelevant to whether exploitation occurs.
- (2) There is no reason to think that a bunch of items that are individually irrelevant to whether exploitation occurs would together be relevant to whether exploitation occurs.
- (3) If (1) and (2), then the fact that adjuncts satisfy the items on the List is not relevant to whether adjuncts are exploited.
- (4) So, the fact that adjuncts satisfy the items on the List is not relevant to whether adjuncts are exploited.

Let us say a bit about why (1) is true: Consider sweatshop workers. Sweatshop workers are not lied to about the job they take. But they are nevertheless exploited. If sweatshop workers were highly educated and good at analyzing patterns and trends, that would not imply that they are not exploited. Unlike students at universities, sweatshop workers do not reasonably repose trust in the sweatshop. But they are still exploited. If sweatshop employees worked so much just because they were bad at their jobs or because they were so devoted to their vocation, that would still count as exploitation. If fast sweatshop workers did the relevant work in an hour, the sweatshop workers that take all day to get their pay would still be exploited. Regarding the fact that adjuncts are to blame for their predicament: Exploitation theorists allow that culpability for one's vulnerability is compatible with exploitation. As Zwolinski puts it (2018, p. 156):

To exploit someone is to take unfair advantage of their vulnerability. But that vulnerability need not be the product of force, or indeed of any injustice at all. It might simply be the product of bad luck, or even a (culpably) bad choice. One can take unfair advantage of a bad situation one had no role in creating.

Brennan and Magness (2018, p. 56) seem to accept this point as well.

Imagine adjuncts routinely die. No one disputes that the deaths are due to stabbing. No one disputes that it is university administrators doing the stabbing. But there is a dispute about whether adjuncts are *murdered*. There are a number of embarrassing features adjuncts have that make their deaths different than typical murders. Adjuncts had lots of good exit options. Adjuncts got themselves into a position to be killed by administrators and should have seen it coming. Adjuncts were not deceived in the course of being killed. Adjuncts, unlike students, cannot reasonably repose trust in their institution and administrators. No theory of murder implies that any of these things is relevant. No standard example of murder has that implication either.

We think that if one wanted to know whether adjuncts are murdered, one would not do well to think about all of the ways in which adjuncts are to blame for their deaths. In the same way, the embarrassing empirical claims about adjuncts that Brennan and Magness cite are not relevant to the question of whether adjuncts are exploited.

Note that adjuncts do not have their fingernails pulled out by university administrators. Nor do university administrators openly mock adjuncts in front of their children. These are bad things. If these were to be added to an act of exploitation, they would make things even worse for adjuncts. But none of that implies that in their absence one is not exploited. Similarly, adjuncts enjoy freedom from a bunch of other bad things (as the items on Brennan and Magness' List indicate). But that does not imply that they are not exploited.

So our view is this: Brennan and Magness have not done enough to explain how the various items on the List are relevant to exploitation. We can see how some of the items on the List might be embarrassing to adjunct advocates. We can see how other items on the list indicate additional bad things that would make adjunct exploitation worse. But we can't see how they are relevant to the question of whether exploitation occurs.

About premise (2) of our argument: We don't see how taking a bunch of things that are not relevant to whether adjuncts are exploited and combining them generates something that is relevant to whether adjuncts are exploited. It's not that we have an in principle objection to the idea that combining individually irrelevant things adds up to something that is relevant. It's just that we think Brennan and Magness have not done enough to indicate how the combination of all of these factors that we find to be irrelevant to exploitation supports their view that adjuncts are not exploited.

In summary: We are open to the idea that these things are somehow sufficient to rule out exploitation. But we just don't see it. Brennan and Magness should take this as a friendly invitation to further spell out their argument and to further explain how the items on the *List*, if indeed we are correct in interpreting them as giving the *List* argument, are relevant to exploitation.

#### **IV. The Value of Adjunct Work**

Brennan and Magness think that adjunct work is not valuable. Colleges and universities pay adjuncts. But what they get for that pay is not valuable. They get a little bit of teaching. But universities get much more, Brennan and Magness suggest, from other sorts of faculty. As they put it (2016, p. 57):

To test whether adjuncts are underpaid, we must first identify a suitable comparison group among the ranks of full-time faculty. A realistic analysis should compare adjunct faculty pay and working hours to full-time positions with comparable work obligations and which requiring qualifications similar to those adjunct possess.

They then say a bit about what it would take to find the right comparison group. They can't be compared with full-time and tenure-track faculty at four-year colleges. One reason is that they don't have the same credentials.

Note that most full-time and tenure-track faculty positions at four-year colleges and universities require applicants to possess a PhD or equivalent terminal degree. Multiple statistical studies find that most adjuncts lack a terminal degree; only 18–30% of adjuncts possess a doctorate. The majority of adjuncts only hold master's degrees (or less). These credentials may suffice for certain types of undergraduate instruction on a per-class basis, but someone with only a master's degree is not a serious applicant for a full-time position at most four-year institutions.

We don't think identity of credentials is necessary for meaningful comparison of pay between two groups. For example: The authors of this paper have PhDs. If we worked in a sweatshop alongside people with masters degrees and if we did similar work but got much more money, health insurance, etc. than our colleagues with masters and bachelors degrees, we think it would be meaningful to compare what we make to what our colleagues with masters and bachelors degrees make. Furthermore, with the way the job market is heading, we would be very surprised if the ranks of adjuncts with PhDs did not continue to increase. And we personally know many adjuncts with PhDs. Even if they are in the minority, it is nevertheless worth asking whether they are exploited.

So Brennan and Magness take differences in credentials to be relevant. They also discuss differences in work:

A second consideration for any comparison is the actual workloads associated with different levels of faculty appointments. Adjuncts are hired to teach; contractual expectations for most adjunct positions are confined to teaching-related activities. This includes time spent on lecture preparation, time in the classroom, timely submission of grades at the end of the

semester, and interacting with students via office hours or email. In contrast, full-time faculty are expected to do, and in fact do, much more.

Brennan and Magness give another list. This time the list is about all the things faculty do that adjuncts don't do. They then find a certain class of full-time faculty with heavy teaching loads that they think still can't be meaningfully compared to adjuncts, but that nevertheless are the best comparison. And so we think there are really two arguments here. Which argument is operative will be determined by which horn of a dilemma one accepts. Either adjuncts can be meaningfully compared to the relevant faculty or not. If they cannot, then we get this argument:

*The Argument from Incomparability*

- (1) Non-adjunct faculty are expected to do a lot more than adjunct faculty.
- (2) If (1), then the pay adjuncts receive cannot be meaningfully compared to the pay that non-adjunct faculty receive.
- (3) If (1) and (2), adjunct labor isn't worth that much.
- (4) So, adjunct labor isn't worth that much.

We reject (3). We think that even if adjunct work is incomparable with non-adjunct work, adjunct work is valuable.<sup>2</sup> This is mainly because we think the value of work need not be compared to the value of other work in order to be valuable. Here is our argument: A typical adjunct is paid around a certain amount per course. A typical course taught by an adjunct gets the university much more than what they pay the adjunct. An investment that gets you a lot more money than you put in is worth a lot. So a typical adjunct's work is worth a lot. No comparison is needed to show that adjunct work is valuable.

Brennan and Magness have another argument. They think that although adjunct work and non-adjunct work are incomparable, they can make generous assumptions to the adjunct that will allow for a comparison. But that comparison is nevertheless unfavorable. Here is their argument.

*The Argument from Unfavorable Comparison*

- (1) Non-adjunct faculty make less per hour than adjunct faculty.
- (2) If (1), then adjunct labor isn't worth that much.
- (3) So, adjunct labor isn't worth that much.

We reject both premise (1) and premise (2). Regarding premise (1): Comparisons of the monetary compensation of tenure-track faculty with that of adjunct faculty are not straightforward, because tenure-track faculty positions are full-time and adjunct contracts are part-time. The annual income of a part-time worker would therefore be much less than that of a full-time worker, even if their wages were identical on an hourly basis. A significant part of the reason that tenure-track faculty make much more annually than adjunct faculty is that tenure-track faculty are full-time and adjunct faculty generally are not. Brennan and Magness solve this problem by converting a pair of hypothetical

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<sup>2</sup> Presumably, Brennan and Magness intend this discussion of the value of adjunct labor to reflect the contribution this labor makes to the school's achievement of its institutional goals in a way that is relevant to the quantity of resources the institution would be justified in devoting to compensating the people who perform that labor. If adjunct labor makes a proportionally greater contribution to the institution's achievement of its goals, the institution is justified in devoting a proportionally greater portion of its budget to compensating its adjuncts; if their contribution is proportionally less, it is justified in providing less compensation.

compensation packages, one corresponding to a typical tenure-track position, the other corresponding to someone who “works a 4-4 course load, split between two different campuses,” into an equivalent hourly wage, and then comparing the resulting hourly wages.

According to them, a typical entry-level tenure-track contract in the humanities pays \$47,500 per year. If we assume a typical 2,080-hour full-time working year, this results in an effective hourly wage of \$22.84. But if we factor in non-monetary benefits such as employer-provided health insurance, the effective hourly wage plus benefits works out to \$30.37. Brennan and Magness point out, however, that if we assume a more aggressive approach to research, as would be typical of a faculty member hoping to earn tenure, such that our young professor maintains a 53-hour per week schedule throughout the year, this effective hourly wage plus benefits falls to \$24.33. (Brennan and Magness 2019, p. 154)

A typical “full-time adjunct” contract, on the other hand, would involve 40 hours of work per week, but only for two 16-week semesters per year. During the rest of the time, this adjunct is not under contract and is not being paid. Brennan and Magness assume that this person earns \$26,500 per year, devotes 1,280 hours to this work, and does not earn non-monetary benefits. (Brennan and Magness 2019, p. 153) This works out to an effective hourly wage of \$20.70, which Brennan and Magness claim is “only slightly below the hourly rate for our entry level, full-time assistant professor.” (Brennan and Magness 2019, p.154) They acknowledge that the difference is greater when we include the value of the non-monetary parts of the full-time compensation package, but still suggest that the overall effective hourly wages are similar.<sup>3</sup>

The effective hourly wage, including benefits, of the full-time contract is 1.5 times that of the part-time contract. Furthermore, as Brennan and Magness acknowledge, because adjunct contracts are structured semester-to-semester, adjuncts are paid only during the two 16-week semesters, or at most 32 weeks per year. Someone who relies only on adjunct teaching would have no income during the other 20 weeks of the year. This puts the full-time adjunct into the situation of having a full-time job for 16 weeks between August and December, then being unemployed for two to six weeks during December and January, then having a full-time job again for another 16 weeks between January and May or June, and then being unemployed for eight to twelve weeks during June, July, and August. This would represent a significant hardship for someone who was trying to make a living as an adjunct. By contrast, a person with a legitimate full-time contract, even if it were only over the 9-month academic year, would likely have the option of structuring her payment schedule so that she would be paid over 12 months. (One of us has a payment schedule structured in this manner.)

This way of comparing adjunct compensation with full-time compensation is problematic in at least two ways, both of which owe to the fact that academic employment contracts are not structured in terms of an hourly wage. First, the effective hourly wage can be easily manipulated by varying the amount of time the person devotes to her job. Someone who spent no time outside of class preparing for class, grading assignments, or meeting with students and did no research whatsoever would have a very high effective hourly wage; someone who worked twenty hours per day, seven days per week would have a much lower effective hourly wage.

The second problem is caused by the fact that full-time, tenure-track positions carry responsibilities in addition to teaching that part-time, adjunct positions do not. Brennan and Magness

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<sup>3</sup> Additionally, adjuncts generally have little or no control over various aspects of their work that tenured faculty take for granted: adjuncts are not likely to have much influence on which courses they teach, when those courses are scheduled to meet, or even whether they will be scheduled to teach any courses from semester to semester. Since, as contingent faculty, they lack voting rights in their departments or at any other organizational level, they have no say on what policies their departments, colleges, or universities will adopt.

attempt to account for this by guesstimating the number of hours per year a typical tenure-track assistant professor would spend conducting research, but converting a non-hourly compensation structure to an effective hourly wage is no more sensible in this context than in the previous one.

Tenure-track contracts are often explicit about how one's effort should be allocated among one's various responsibilities. An institution whose priorities are centered on research might assign responsibilities for allocation of effort at 60% or 70% research, 20% or 30% teaching, and 10% service, whereas an institution with priorities centered on teaching might assign responsibilities at 60% teaching, 30% research, and 10% service. A "teaching professor" position, with no research responsibilities at all, might stipulate an allocation of effort of 90% teaching and 10% service.

One of us has a tenured position at a medium-sized state university with significant research requirements but a primary focus on teaching. Their contract carries a 3-3 teaching load and assigns allocation of effort at 60% teaching, 30% research, and 10% service. We believe that it is plausible to interpret these subdivisions as applying to one's compensation. It would, after all, be highly odd to claim that, although one is expected to allocate 70% of one's effort toward one's teaching and service-related duties, that one is nevertheless being paid entirely for one's research. Instead, it seems natural that if one's contract stipulates that 60% of one's effort should be allocated to teaching, then 60% of one's compensation package is in compensation for one's teaching.

If we break things down this way, then, given my (the author with a tenured position's) base salary at the time of hire, 60% allocation of effort to teaching, and teaching duties of six courses per year, am paid \$5,500 per three-credit class. Adjunct teaching contracts at the same institution pay only \$3,801 per three-credit class. That means that I get paid 1.4 times per class than adjuncts at my institution.

But, as Brennan and Magness point out, this way of calculating one's effective compensation ignores the value of the non-monetary benefits package that is also part of the compensation package for many full-time jobs. Brennan and Magness suggest that the value of this package is 30% of the base salary. If so, then the value of my compensation package per three-credit class rises to \$7,150, which is 1.88 times what an adjunct would earn to teach the same class. In contrast to Brennan and Magness' estimates, adjuncts actually get much less for the same work.

This same institution has a class of permanent, full-time, non-tenure-track teaching positions. A typical entry level contract of this type has a salary of \$45,000, an allocation of effort of 90% teaching and 10% service, no expectation of any research, and a course-load of 4-4. This workload is highly comparable, though not identical, to the workload of the "full-time adjunct" Brennan and Magness discuss, who is able to put together contracts for two courses per semester each at two different institutions, for a course-load of 4-4, but with no research or service requirement. This Teaching Professor contract yields an effective compensation of \$5,062.50 per three-credit class, which is 1.33 times what an adjunct would be paid to teach the same class. But because this position is full-time, it is also eligible for benefits. If we help ourselves to Brennan and Magness's estimate that the value of such a package would be equivalent to 30% of one's base salary, this works out to an effective compensation value of \$6,733 per three-credit class, which is 1.77 times the compensation of an adjunct for the same class. Again, in contrast to Brennan and Magness' estimates, adjuncts actually get much less for the same work. When one considers that the Teaching Professor position is permanent, and therefore provides much greater job security than is enjoyed by any adjunct, and that the teaching professor can structure her payment schedule to extend over the full 12 months of the year, the terms of the adjunct's employment are even more unfavorable.

The unfairness involved with exploitation can be procedural, in which case the exploiter makes unfair use of a defect in the process by which the transaction is made, or substantive, in which case the unfairness concerns the terms of the agreement, rather than how the agreement was reached. What best explains these types of unfairness is a matter of ongoing dispute, and the correct

account of substantive unfairness is particularly controversial.<sup>4</sup> In light of this, we think it best to remain neutral about the nature of unfairness, and to instead rely on pre-theoretic considerations.

We argue that, if an institution were to make a standard practice of hiring persons to perform a specific set of responsibilities in exchange for a certain level of compensation on a per-unit basis, it would be unfair to simultaneously make a standard practice of hiring other, similarly qualified and credentialed persons to perform this specific set of responsibilities but with significantly lower compensation on a per-unit basis. If an institution is willing to make a practice of providing a full-time teacher with a compensation package of a certain monetary value in exchange for teaching a three-credit introductory-level course, then that is what the institution has judged to be fair compensation, on a per-unit basis, for teaching that course. It would therefore be unfair for the institution to make a practice of providing a compensation package of significantly less value to a similarly qualified and credentialed part-time teacher, on a per-unit basis, for teaching a similar introductory course.

## V. A Better Way to Assess the Value of Adjunct Work

In the previous section, we assumed for the sake of argument that Brennan and Magness' main idea about how to make comparisons about labor is correct. We argued that, by their own lights, Brennan and Magness should think that adjunct labor is very valuable. In this section, we provide a different way of comparing adjunct work with the work of other faculty. We think our way of doing it is better than Brennan and Magness'. And if we are right, then adjunct labor is even more valuable than what we suggested in the previous section.

Brennan and Magness suggest that we should compare different sorts of faculty on the basis of what they do. But they seem to think that what one's contract says is a reliable proxy for what one does. If the contract says they teach four classes and nothing else, we can infer that that is what they do and that is all the institution gets from them. If the contracts say they are to allocate 70% of their time to research, then that indicates how much time they actually spend on research. We think this is mistaken. We think what the contracts say is not at all a reliable proxy for what academics actually do or how they actually allocate their time. We think it is better to consider two alternative points of comparison. First, we should compare faculty in light of what they are *under pressure* to do. Second, we should compare faculty in light of what they *actually* do and look at what they do *directly* rather than by proxy. People under similar pressures and with similar productivity can be meaningfully compared.

Imagine there is a sweatshop. Imagine that the contract explicitly says that workers in the sweatshop only have to work two hours every other day. But imagine that nevertheless sweatshop workers work 20 hour days every day. So they do much more than what is in their contract. This seems compatible with exploitation no matter what the contract explicitly says. Furthermore, employees are sometimes under pressure to do much more work than what their contract specifies. The pressure does not come from what their contract says. But it instead comes from other sources. So if the sweatshop employees are under pressure in various ways to work 20hr days even though their contracts are much more lenient, then that is relevant to exploitation.

Magness spent some time as an adjunct. He describes his experience here<sup>5</sup>:

All of these features considered together mean that even an adjunct on a 4/4 teaching load should have ample additional free time to do other things as long as he or she is an effective time manager when it comes to teaching obligations. That includes everything from publishing (in order to strengthen your chances at attaining a full time teaching position or

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<sup>4</sup> See Wertheimer ch 7 for a rich discussion of these issues.

<sup>5</sup> <https://philmagness.com/2015/04/the-myth-of-the-minimum-wage-adjunct/>

equivalent research position) to seeking out other sources of income. I can also speak to this first hand as it is something I learned to do quickly during my own period as a full-time adjunct ca. 2008-2009. I was not anything close to well off during this period of my career, but with a little basic time management I not only met my teaching obligations but I (1) finished a dissertation, (2) wrote several peer reviewed articles, (3) composed a substantial part of an academic press monograph, and (4) found more permanent employment.

Magness was under pressure to publish even though it was not specified in his contract. He reacted to this pressure by publishing in excellent journals. For this reason, the institution he adjuncted for got a bunch of free research from him. And this is true even though his contract only required that he teach. When we look at what the relevant institution got from Magness while he was an adjunct, we should look at more than what his contract said. We should also include the free research it got from him. When evaluating the CV of an adjunct profiled in an article, Brennan criticizes the adjunct for failing to publish. He says this<sup>6</sup>:

- As far as the article indicates, she's been focusing on perfecting teaching rather than publishing in the best journals.
- She seems to have no research.
- Further, she claims she is getting paid very poorly per hour. As Magness explains, in the "Myth of the Minimum Wage Adjunct", if that's true, then she must be spending a ridiculous amount of time outside the classroom prepping for her classes. Since she's presumably teaching introductory classes, this is even more inexcusable.

We think this is in tension with what Brennan and Magness say when calculating the value of adjunct work. Brennan and Magness tell us that adjunct work isn't that valuable and that adjuncts aren't exploited because all they do is teach four classes a semester and they have the summers off. They have plenty of time to get another job. And with another job they should be fine financially. Their employer won't give them much. But the employer doesn't get much from them either.

Contrast this with what Brennan and Magness say when evaluating adjunct CVs. They criticize adjuncts for not doing research and not publishing in the best journals. We do not see how those two recommendations can be easily harmonized. It is very difficult to follow both pieces of advice. It is not easy to get an outside job and extra work during the summer, on the one hand, but to also publish in the best journals, on the other.

Developing and sustaining the kind of serious research needed to get any chance on the job market and land papers in the best journals is difficult enough by itself. To do so when teaching eight classes a year is even more difficult. And when one adds an outside job during the semester and even more outside work during the summer, we find it difficult to see how anyone could find the time to do research. To this we would add that having a serious chance on the job market will require not just excellent research but also networking and service. Job candidates are expected to demonstrate that they care about teaching with extensive documentation. They are expected to show that they are committed to developing their departments with a bunch of outside of class stuff. All of this goes into one's job market materials. And being on the job market, constantly tailoring one's application is a job in itself that distracts from teaching and research. But if the adjunct forgoes finding outside labor in order to pursue their research, networking, service, and job applications, the fruits of much

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<sup>6</sup><https://bleedingheartlibertarians.com/2015/04/more-on-adjuncts-thanks-kevin-carson-for-further-evidence-on-my-behalf>

of this extra work will go to the institution that employs them. A publication in one of the best journals by an adjunct teaching eight classes a year rather than a research professor teaching very few classes is still a publication in one of the best journals. It is just that in the case of the adjunct, the employer gets the fancy publication for free. And in the case of the research professor, the institution pays top dollar for the fancy publication.

So here is our claim: Adjuncts are under pressure to publish, do service, network, and constantly refine their job market materials. Some do. Some do not. It is meaningful to compare the adjuncts under pressure to publish and do service with others who are under the same or less pressure. And it is meaningful to compare the work adjuncts actually do in response to that pressure with those who do the same level of work in response to the same or less pressure.

Again, we think what the employer *actually* gets and what employees are *actually* under pressure to give the employer is more important to assessing the value of work than just looking at what their contracts say they are expected to give. Consider the lazy professor with tenure who never publishes. It doesn't matter that their contract says 70% of their time is to be allocated to research. The university gets no research from them. And so that cannot be tallied into our calculation of what the university gets from the lazy professor. On the other hand, suppose an adjunct, follow Brennan and Magness' advice, and publishes in the best journals. Then even though that is not in their contract, that should be factored into what the university gets from hiring them. This allows for the following comparisons.

First, consider an adjunct who responds to the relevant pressure by forgoing outside work. Instead, they follow Brennan and Magness' advice and sustain a research program. Suppose they volunteer for service and that they network. They will make (using Brennan and Magness' numbers) \$26,500 a year on average with no health insurance or other benefits. Compare them with a tenure track faculty member under pressure to do the same and who does the same but who also teaches only two or three classes a semester. On average (again using Brennan and Magness' numbers) they will make \$70,791 a year with plenty of health insurance and other benefits. For tenured associate professors they will make \$81,124 on average. And they will not be under any pressure at all to do research. But even if they do such research and publish in the best journals like the adjunct does, the university gets the fancy publications for free from the productive adjunct. That is a good deal.

Second, some adjuncts ignore the relevant pressures and choose to simply fulfill the official terms of their contract. No publishing, networking, or service. No endless tailoring and modifying of their job market materials. Again, they will receive \$26,500 from their institution and receive no benefits. Suppose they end up following Brennan and Magness' advice to take outside work. We can compare them to a lazy tenure track professor who never does anything but teach their two or three classes a semester. Again, the tenure track professor will make \$70,791 with plenty of health insurance and other benefits. It is true that the lazy assistant professor is under the following pressure: If they do not publish and do no service, then they will not get tenure. But as Brennan and Magness take pains to emphasize, the adjunct is under the very same pressure. If the adjunct does not publish, they will not get tenure either. The difference is that in the meantime, while neither is publishing and while the adjunct is teaching many more classes than the lazy tenure track professor, the latter will have six years worth of a high paying salary job with extensive benefits while the adjunct will be stuck with a mere \$26,500 and no benefits. For tenured professors, they will make much more still. And they are under no pressure whatsoever to continue publishing or to do anything beyond the most minimal service. Compared in this way, the university is getting a lot out of the labor of its adjuncts. \$26,500 for four classes a semester and no research or service is a better deal for the institution than \$70,791 or more for only a few classes a semester and no research or service.

Per publication, per class, and per unit of service, adjuncts are much, much cheaper for an institution than professors. They are valuable.

Now, as Brennan and Magness point out, the adjunct can escape their situation. They have a good exit option. They can go work for Geico. But, as we have seen, the same is true of the college students that Brennan and Magness think are exploited by university faculty through gen ed requirements. Just like adjuncts, they can drop out and go work for Geico. If that is a good exit option for people with masters and PhD degrees, then it is a good exit option for people with highschool diplomas.

So we think that looking at what contracts say, as Brennan and Magness do, is not the best way to compare labor. It is better to look at the wages of various faculty in light of what they are under pressure to do and in light of what they actually do in response to that pressure. We should look at what they do directly rather than what they do by proxy. And it is worth comparing such faculty with other faculty that are under the same pressure or less and that do the same work in response to that pressure. When this sort of comparison is included in our picture, we see that employers get a lot out of adjuncts. Adjunct labor is exceedingly valuable to employers.

## **VI. Perverse Incentives**

The higher-education industry is characterized by various features that, taken together, leave some members of the profession in a highly vulnerable position—as Brennan and Magness thoroughly demonstrate in *Cracks in the Ivory Tower*.

As Brennan and Magness point out, the first priority of most prospective academics is to find an academic job of any kind: “what potential faculty want first and foremost is a job.” (p. 23). Concerns about the quality of the position and the favorability of the terms of employment are secondary. (p. 23) These are people who have often spent between three and ten years in post-secondary education, training to be qualified for academic employment. (p.196) But, Brennan and Magness claim, “in most fields, a Ph.D trains you for exactly one thing: to be a professor.” (p. 23) Academic job candidates, then, are people who want very badly to work in higher education, have spent a long time in training to be qualified to work in higher education, and are not qualified by this training to work in any industry other than higher education. These conditions create a powerful incentive to accept an unfavorable offer of employment in higher education than one would if these conditions were not present.

But, as Brennan and Magness point out, most academic fields produce “more Ph.Ds per year than there are jobs for Ph.Ds.” (p. 23 see also chapter 8) Brennan and Magness point out that this happens because Ph.D-granting institutions are subject to perverse incentives to do so. Faculty at such institutions have several incentives to take on Ph.D. students: first, the more Ph.Ds one supervises, the greater one’s influence over the profession is, and the more prestige one has. Second, it is often more fun to teach highly intelligent, informed, and engaged graduate students than it is to teach one’s less informed and disengaged introductory- level undergraduates. Graduate-level courses can also be more fulfilling because they connect more closely with one’s areas of active academic research. Having Ph.D students also means being able to outsource the more unpleasant aspects of academic work: grading, data entry, finding references and assembling literature reviews. (pp. 200 - 3). Administratively, Ph.D- granting programs enhance the prestige of the institution, which makes fundraising easier, among other benefits. (p. 205 – 6)

Brennan and Magness claim that “the fundamental problem is that the total number of new Ph.Ds is growing at a much faster rate than the academic job market can absorb, and these numbers have remained stable or even slightly increased over the past decade.” (p.164) This is due to perverse incentives experienced by Ph.D-granting departments, which are disconnected from the job market and do not track the interests of their students. But, as Brennan and Magness are careful to stress, it is important not to moralize when people and institutions respond to perverse incentives. It is not the case that the reason why there are more new Ph.Ds than jobs is that Ph.D-granting departments

are evil, or that department chairs are sociopaths, or that they have been seduced by the Dark Side. Rather, the reason is that Ph.D-granting departments experience incentives to benefit themselves by enrolling graduate students. It is more pleasant and rewarding to teach graduate students: graduate students are more advanced and engaged than undergraduates, and one's teaching can be more closely connected to one's research specialization in graduate courses. There are fewer graduate students than undergrads, which means that the grading burden is lighter and less unpleasant. Faculty also benefit when graduate students serve as teaching and research assistants, who perform much of the least pleasant tasks associated with teaching and research, including grading exams, setting up experiments, compiling literature reviews, etc. (p. 201 ff) This creates a cost for those graduate students down the road, in the form of an unfavorable job market, but because the benefits of this arrangement are experienced by the departments and the costs are not, the departments themselves experience no disincentives, and the practice continues.<sup>7</sup>

The students are also responding rationally to their incentives. The typical incoming Ph.D student is highly motivated to pursue graduate study. She is an intelligent and engaged student whose desire is to learn more about a field of study in which she is intensely interested, and to acquire a credential that will make her eligible to pursue a career in her field as an academic. She knows that the job market is unfavorable, but humans as a group are adept at overestimating their own abilities and ignoring information that disconfirms their prior beliefs. And, in any case, Brennan and Magness indicate that pursuing a Ph.D is not very risky: "in general, Ph.Ds who fail to obtain long-term faculty jobs land on their feet and instead find good jobs elsewhere." (p. 197)

## VII. Opportunity Costs

Brennan and Magness write that

there are no free lunches. Trade-offs are everywhere. The most basic, important, and frequently-evaded economic idea is that everything you do comes at the expense of everything you didn't do. ...adjunct's rights activists demand that universities pay adjuncts better salaries, provide them with more benefits, and give them more status. In previously published work, ...we calculated how much it would cost universities in the US to give adjuncts what they demand. A low estimate is \$30 billion extra per year, which turns out to be a 30 percent increase in faculty costs. In the past, we pointed out the banal and obvious truth that spending \$30 billion more per year on adjuncts means \$30 billion is not being spent on, say, scholarships for poor, first-generation, or under-represented minority students. (p. 13)

It is true that the additional money to bring adjunct faculty salaries and benefits to a level on a par with their full-time colleagues would have to come from somewhere. But it is not true that this money would have to be acquired by raiding funds for scholarships that benefit vulnerable students. It is important to recognize that adjunct faculty are not in direct competition for funding specifically with poor students, first-generation students, and students from under- represented minority groups.

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<sup>7</sup> Of course, these perverse incentives are not the only relevant motivating factors. The behavior of individual faculty members and administrators, as well as academic departments and other administrative units is influenced by a variety of factors, including their values and goals for their departments, institutions, fields, academia as a whole, and society at large. But the perverse incentives identified by Brennan and Magness are real and powerful, and are what academic hiring units are responding to when they act so as to rely heavily on adjunct labor.

It is also true that every dollar spent increasing the compensation packages of adjunct faculty is a dollar not spent on scholarship funds for vulnerable students, but that is true of literally every dollar spent on anything other than scholarships for vulnerable students. This includes any money spent on salaries for tenure-track faculty, or on raises for well-compensated tenured faculty, or on building maintenance and groundskeeping, or on a new climbing wall in the Student Recreation Center. Note that at this stage, Brennan and Magness have not made any claim about whether the adjuncts' demands are justified. The argument here appears to be simply that doing so creates opportunity costs for scholarships benefitting vulnerable students, and these opportunity costs tell against meeting the adjuncts' demands. (If, on the other hand, this is not the argument Brennan and Magness intend to make, then it is unclear what purpose is served by using adjunct compensation as the central example of an expenditure that generates opportunity costs, or by using scholarship funding for vulnerable students as the central example of an opportunity cost generated by such an expenditure. It would have been just as easy to use raises for tenure-track faculty as an example.) But if the mere existence of such opportunity costs tells against allocating funds to improve the compensation packages of adjunct faculty, independently of whether doing so is independently justifiable, it is hard to see why it wouldn't also tell against a host of other, equally justifiable ways of allocating funds. After all, a dollar spent on raises for tenured faculty is a dollar not spent on scholarships for vulnerable students, no less so than a dollar spent on raises for more vulnerable faculty—the scholarship-related opportunity costs are identical.

### **VIII. Methodological Considerations About Far Fetched Cases**

We have used a number of far fetched examples to make our points. We gave the example about sweatshop workers who are irrational in such a way that they won't look up to find better job opportunities. We gave the example about people debating whether adjuncts are murdered because they got themselves into a position to be vulnerable to murder. Here we would like to say a bit about why we are using such examples and why we think it is apt to do so.

We want to know about the fundamental nature of exploitation. For a theory, claim, or principle to get the fundamental nature of something right, it needs to get it right in all possible circumstances. It can't just get things right in actual circumstances. So if we encounter a claim about exploitation, such as one offered by Brennan and Magness, and that claim has the implication that that something is not a case of exploitation when it clearly is, then that is enough to refute the claim. It does not matter whether the example is actual or merely possible.

On one reading of Brennan and Magness, they employ the following principle:

BM1: If someone has good exit options, they are not exploited.

We argue that this principle gets an actual case wrong and a far fetched case wrong. The actual case is the case Brennan and Magness themselves give: the case of college students. Brennan and Magness think they are exploited by the gen ed requirement. But they have good exit options. So, if Brennan and Magness are right about college students being exploited, then BM1 is false. The far fetched case is the one about sweatshop workers. They have exit options. And yet they are exploited. Since we are interested in the fundamental nature of exploitation, we must get both the actual and merely possible cases right. And that is one reason merely possible far fetched cases are appropriate for our inquiry.

On our other reading of Brennan and Magness, they appeal to the following principle

BM2: If someone has good exit options and the items on the List, then they are not exploited.

And we think BM2 is motivated just by this idea: “Hey, look at all these embarrassing things about adjuncts. And look at all these other bad things that aren’t happening to them. Therefore adjuncts aren’t exploited.” The point of the murder example isn’t that it is a realistic possibility. The point is that it is a parody of what motivates Brennan and Magness’ principle about exploitation. We think Brennan and Magness just point out a bunch of embarrassing things about adjuncts and a bunch of bad things adjuncts do not suffer from<sup>8</sup>. And then, out of the blue, they say that this implies that adjuncts aren’t exploited. Without taking the time to spell out how those things are relevant to exploitation, their argument is incomplete. We think that to argue that adjuncts are not exploited in this way is just as silly as it would be to argue that adjuncts in the relevant far fetched story are not murdered.

Compare with Jonathan Swift’s *A Modest Proposal*. He parodies the sort of reasoning others employ. His parody is far-fetched. He proposes eating children. It is not realistic to suppose that people would consider eating children. But that does not undermine the power of Swift’s proposal. We can present our hypothetical example as a modest proposal as well. We could say, “Suppose you want to kill people without murdering them. Here is how: Find people who have lots of embarrassing things about them such as the items on Brennan and Magness’ List. Use their propensity to get themselves in a bad situation. Stab them to death. Then you will definitely be off the hook. You may have killed them. But it was not murder. So you’re good. No one would adopt this strategy. But we think that, on the present interpretation, Brennan and Magness are reasoning as we do in the parody. Though far-fetched in certain respects, and though no prosecutor or defense attorney would use this reasoning, the reasoning is still bad. Legal reasoning can be bad even if it is legal reasoning that is never actually employed by a lawyer. And since that is essentially the very reasoning we think Brennan and Magness are engaging in, we think that we do not need our parody to be realistic in order for us to make our point about Brennan and Magness.

Compare with what physicists do. They employ far fetched, non actual cases. Consider Schrodinger’s Cat. It is a far fetched example. No one has actually put a cat in such a situation. It is unlikely that anyone ever will. Nevertheless, it is a useful example for making points about physics. Something similar may be said for Einstein’s Grandfather Paradox and thought experiments about frictionless planes. Physicists find farfetched examples to be useful for making points. If it is good enough for physicists to use merely possible examples, it is good enough for us.

## **IX. Conclusion**

We think Brennan and Magness’ work on this topic is valuable and serves to deepen our understanding of exploitation and the nature of adjunct work. Nevertheless, we strongly disagree with them. We think the considerations they raise do not in any way support the view that adjuncts are not exploited. And their arguments in *Cracks in the Ivory Tower* actually support the view that adjuncts are exploited.

## **Acknowledgments**

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<sup>8</sup> To be clear. We think it is worth pointing these things out. And we think Brennan and Magness contribute to our understanding of adjunct work. And it is important to recognize, as Brennan and Magness emphasize, that adjuncts are not in the same plight as sweatshop workers. We just think this doesn’t mean that adjuncts are not exploited.

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