Podcast 492: Academic Integrity with Dr. Steven Hales

Episode Transcript

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Julie Walker: Hello, and welcome to the Arts of Language Podcast with Andrew Pudewa, founder of the Institute for Excellence in Writing or as many like to say, "IEW." My name is Julie Walker, and I'm honored to serve Andrew and IEW as the chief marketing officer. Our goal is to equip teachers and teaching parents with methods and materials, which will aid them in training their students to become confident and competent communicators and thinkers.

Julie Walker: Andrew, you run into the most interesting people, whether through convention or through email, or perhaps even through LinkedIn.

Andrew Pudewa: I think this was a LinkedIn article, someone, obviously that I'm connected with, somehow posted: "Why AI Is Destroying Academic Integrity," which immediately drew me because we've been having a lot of conversations about what's our response to AI and what do we imagine is going to happen in the academic world.

And I just I read this article. And I immediately liked this guy. I didn't know anything about him, but I just want to read the first paragraph because his writing style just gripped me. "The birth of AI has turbocharged student cheating. No, that doesn't say it. It is a massive dose of anabolic steroids straight to the heart. No, that's still underselling it. AI is more like fluorine. Fluorine is the most reactive element, hoovering up electrons from almost everything it gets near. If you add two oxygen atoms to two fluorine atoms, you get dioxygen difluoride. That stuff detonates things at 180 degrees centigrade. It sets ice on fire and blows up if you add water vapor. It's too aggressive to be used as rocket fuel even though rockets are propelled by explosions. Chemists are terrified of it."

I mean, what a metaphor. I read the whole thing and I found, uh, the substack of Hilarious Bookbinder. It's Scriptorium Philosophia and I couldn't figure out his name for a while. I had to actually do a search. I didn't use AI, but I had to do a search to find out who is Hilarious Bookbinder. And now we know it is Dr. Steven Hales. So welcome to our podcast, Dr. Hales. I see that you are a professor of philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania, Bloomsburg. Tell us just a little bit more about yourself, and then I've got some, I hope, interesting questions mostly pertaining to this Substack post and a couple others.

And I'll say right up front, every listener out there should subscribe to your Substack post. It is tops.

Steven Hales: Oh, well thank you so much. I appreciate that. Sure. A little bit about myself, so I got my PhD at Brown, graduated in ‘92. I taught for a couple years at Georgia State, and then I came to Bloomsburg University here in Pennsylvania. And I've been here for the past 31 years. I've had a few visiting positions elsewhere–University of London and Cambridge. Turn. but I've spent my career here at Bloomsburg. My main interests as a philosopher are epistemology and metaphysics, but I kind of get interested in anything philosophical and so you, next thing you know, I'm writing on Nietzsche or aesthetics or whatever, so, but yeah.

Andrew Pudewa: You also have a couple books that people might be interested in knowing of. I love this title, *The Myth of Luck*.

Steven Hales: Right. Yeah. That was my last through written book that wasn't really directed at students, and luck is of interest to philosophers in a lot of different dimensions. One is, I. Epistemic luck where what if you just stumble upon the truth? By luck you have a true belief, but it's just lucky. Well, that doesn't seem like knowledge. So what's knowledge? It turns out to be very, very difficult to eliminate the risk of luck from any analysis of knowledge.

Andrew Pudewa: Hmm.

Steven Hales: People are also interested in moral luck where through what seems to be the luck of. Our genetic luck, either good luck or bad luck, or a kind of social luck, the families that we are born into, the societies that we are born into, and how that affects our development as moral agents. And how should we understand justice given the fact that so much of our circumstances seems to be due to luck. So, I mean, philosopher's interest in this for a lot of different reasons.

Julie Walker: Okay. I have to ask you this because my oldest son did a paper. On the consolation of philosophy in high school with Boethius, you must have referenced that in this book.

Steven Hales: Sure. Yeah. Boethius has a kind of fatalist outlook, which of course is very interesting. But I mean, that's one classic response to the problem of luck. Well, I mean, if there's only one way, the future's going to go down, or God has everything pre-planned for us, then it doesn't look like there's any room for contingency in our lives. But on the other hand, if we're kind of especially theological fatalists, I mean if God has everything planned out, it seems like it's just good luck if God chose me to be one of the favored ones and bad luck if he chose my life to go poorly. So I'm not clear that fatalism really eliminates the problem of luck.

Andrew Pudewa: We could do a whole long talk on this, but we better shift over because our time always goes quickly. You wrote in this article “Why AI is Destroying Academic Integrity” that there have been two main reactions in the professional world of teachers and professors. One is kind of like denial and wishful thinking.

It's not really as bad as it seems, or maybe it's just going to go away. And then the opposite being despair, panic, dread, existential dread.

Steven Hales: Yeah, I think that's about right.

Andrew Pudewa: And I think I'm in the denial and wishful thinking category myself, but a lot of people ask me because our company is Institute for Excellence in Writing, and so we have been publishing very effective curricular materials and video courses and teacher training for teaching English composition and grammar. And I'd say our sweet spot is generally the upper elementary, middle school, that's where most of our teachers are. And so a lot of people are saying, well, how do we deal with this? What shall we do? And, and the extension of this is what's going to happen to you? What's going to happen to IEW if people stop believing that teaching writing even has practical value?

How do you, would you recommend that someone like me or our listeners who are probably stuck somewhere between the denial and the despair? How do we move through this and what strategies have you got for dealing with this in your world?

Steven Hales: Well, this is definitely still something I'm trying to work through on my own as far as how to address it and what to do about it. I think one of the things is that people need to be persuaded and be made to understand that it's not just the end product that matters. Because if you think that's all that matters, well I submit an essay and I got a B, that's all that, I'm just looking for that outcome, then of course they're going to cheat. Of course they're going to use AI to do it as opposed to coming to understand that it is the process. That's where the value is. That's what truly matters, is working through it and the development of your own point of view, the development of your own perspective and your own thoughts. Because I think there, it's easy to engage in the kind of delusion that, “Oh, well, I kind of am against euthanasia, so I'll just have AI write a paper saying why I'm against euthanasia,” and then pretending that they had worked through those ideas themselves when they hadn't. This is actually something I've been thinking about lately, although I've not written anything on this is: I’m worried about confabulation. I don't know if you know much about that this.

Andrew Pudewa: Define the word for us.

Steven Hales: Okay, sure. So confabulation is when someone's brain is automatically making things up that they cannot distinguish from reality. This happens a lot with memory loss patients, people who suffer from Korsakoff Syndrome or something similar. When they have great gaps in their memories, their brains just kind of paper it over by making things up that they very sincerely believe had happened, but never happened at all. And that's what confabulation is. So it's not intentional lying. They really believe it, and it feels real to them, but their brains are filling in the gaps.

Andrew Pudewa: So in this case, it would be people believing that they thought thoughts, which they never really did think.

Steven Hales: That’s exactly right.

So you read an argument that defends a point of view, which you may be kind of, kind of half were in favor of, but now you had to submit this essay defending this point of view, and you think *that is my point of view*. That is, *those are the arguments I would've thought of myself if I had written them down instead of just asking chatGPT to do it*. But of course they're not. You didn't think through it yourself. And these points, this way of reasoning would not have occurred to you. So that's why I think it would lead to confabulation and people thinking they've developed their own point of view on something when they haven't, when they've just outsourced that and pretended that it's their own.

Andrew Pudewa: It's almost like a more sophisticated form of reading an editorial or reading somebody's opinion and then just kind of wholesale saying, “Yep. I totally agree with that. I'll just, I'll just hold that as my opinion.”

Steven Hales: Yeah, I think there's something like that, right? But I think it's even worse because it's not even a lack of critical engagement. I mean, I once had a philosophy professor when I was an undergraduate. I remember him saying, “I used to always be persuaded by the last article I read.”

Andrew Pudewa: It's honest.

Steven Hales: Right? Where you have to develop that talent for looking for weaknesses and really trying to means test it and see whether someone's ideas hold up. But when you're in the position of having to write an argumentative paper, right, that is your challenge. And then you use AI to do it. You are already on the side of whatever AI told you, right? Because that's the task you set before it. So you're already coming into this with, I'm going to believe what it says and then turn that in. And that's why I think it's even worse than reading an editorial that you just reflexively agree with.

Andrew Pudewa: You made an interesting and somewhat disturbing statement–well, there were quite a few interesting and somewhat disturbing statements–-but one that popped out at me was you said “The best test of whether something is written by a student or written by AI is whether the prose shows excellent command of spelling, grammar, structure, and those mysterious syntactical sprinkles known as apostrophes. If it does, it's probably AI.”

I just found that so depressing because that's what we do is we try to help students write with good grammar, good structure, and good punctuation and understanding whether it should have an apostrophe or not, and that's where we work. And so I started to think, well, are we undermining the students who are going to walk in and actually write well as being suspect of writing too well?

Julie Walker: Andrew, we get that. We get people saying, and this is. Pre-AI, but I have a fascinating, really short story to share with you that people were accusing our students who were learning to write so well of cheating. But now, so this I heard from an online instructor.

We do online classes, and one of our high school student online teacher was running it through an AI checker. It was flagged as being written by AI, but it wasn't because it was too correct.

Andrew Pudewa: Do you have any comment on that?

Steven Hales: Yeah. Well, for one thing, AI detectors are notoriously fallible. I would never trust one. People who are so confident that they're going to be rooting out AI cheating with these things, they are wrong, and there are going to be a lot of false positives like you just mentioned. And obviously students need to learn spelling, grammar, structure, all of that kind of thing.

It's just that human beings are prone to error, and I think that it's, at least for the kind of students that I teach, if it's completely perfect, I mean, really you, you didn't mess up the difference between a semicolon and a comma. I'm going to start to either think you're my best in class or something else is going on. And whereas the computer won't make those kinds of errors. I guess that's what I'm trying to get at, is the errors that a human being might make are different from what the computer's going to make so far.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, so it's probably good to be close to perfect.

Steven Hales: Right. Yeah, no, I mean, and I try to get all those things right in my own writing. But before I'll put up a Substack post, let's say, I'll have my wife proofread it for me because she's excellent at that. And she'll find little mistakes that I might have made because I'm a lousy typist. And AI is not a lousy typist.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, so one of the things I have heard that schools are doing, and I work mostly in, in that K-12 zone. But in the high schools, some of the teachers are really now trying to steal time and do in-class writing rather than homework. And that's a big shift because most teachers are kinda like, here's the assignment, here's how you do it. Go home, do it, and turn it in. Have you gone there? I know you, you did post a link to someone who wrote about abandoning out of class essay writing. Have you moved that direction and have you seen any results or benefits or maybe agonies as a result of it?

Steven Hales: I have moved in that direction and I'm not very happy about it. I'll just give you one example. So this semester I am teaching existentialism, and this is generally a sophomore, junior level class. In the past, I've had them write a couple of five-page papers, and then we would have an all essay question midterm, all essay question final. right, well, I've abandoned the papers in favor of more in-class essay tests. So I'm not, it's not realistic to expect them to write a true paper in class, but at least with the essay questions, they can't cheat. I'm watching them write them in blue books, and it gives me a sense of what they're understanding, whether they're able to make the connections.

I'm hoping that they will not be happy about this because I want my students to learn how to write, but this has to be something they want for themselves. And it's the difference between

cheating and athletics and doing it legitimately. In fact, I recently read a very interesting article about this, about people who cheat in marathons where they'll get on a bicycle and they'll ride for part of the marathon. I'm not even joking. And then they'll, then they, yeah. And then they'll come in and they're like, I ran it in two and a half hours or something like this because what they're looking for is that kind of glory and approbation, even though they didn't actually do it. So contrast that with people who run marathons or do other similar kinds of things.

They want to do that. That's the goal is to have achieved this particular thing, whether they came in first or last. I mean, if I came in last in a marathon, I'd still be like, Hey, I ran a marathon.

Julie Walker: Exactly.

Steven Hales: And that's what we need to get the students to see is it's not about the product, it's about the process, and that's where the value is.

Julie Walker: I have to mention two things. Number one, Andrew has written an article called “Process Not (versus) Product” that we’ll link in the show notes, and I have to make sure that you see this because it's so good. But the second thing is, Andrew, you mentioned another article that he wrote that I want to spend some time on as well.

And this is about the average college student. What was the name of that article?

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, “The Average College Student Today: How Things Have Changed. This was March 2025. You got a huge reaction to this. In fact, you had to write another post just reacting to all the reactions to this, and what really stuck out at me was your experience that students are–the words you used– functionally illiterate, meaning unable to read and comprehend adult novels.

And you mentioned a few authors who are Pulitzer Prize winners and such. But then you kind of went on to say it's not only that they can't, it's also that they just won't read. Could you elaborate on your experience there a little bit? And what, what are some potential solutions here? Because I think everyone should be very concerned about this.

Steven Hales: Yeah, I completely agree that people should be concerned about this and I wish I had a pocket solution ready to deliver. But what I mean is students just don't want to read. They find it burdensome. And again, I think this is part of a failure to understand that the benefit that they're here to get is grappling with difficult materials and not asking Claude or Gemini or chatGPT, Hey, gimme a summary of Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*. That is not at all the same experience as wrestling with the primary texts. And they just are so reluctant to do it. And I don't know if it's. It's partly a lack of attention span for sure. And I also think that it's a lack of having done a lot of reading prior to college, and therefore it's difficult. I mean, I was a voracious reader as a kid and didn't have any sense of books written for kids versus books written for adults. It was just whatever was on the bookshelf. So by the

time I got to college, okay, we're reading *Moby Dick*, of course, we are. I mean, we're reading Shakespeare. Okay. That's … I mean, I'm not saying it was speedy reading, but I was ready to do it. We're reading Faulkner. Okay, I'm going to read the Faulkner. And I think many of our students don't have enough as a hobby background to be enthusiastic or willing to tackle the harder material that we are providing them now. And this isn't just me. I've heard this from English faculty, I've heard this from everybody.

Andrew Pudewa: And your students are signing up to read harder stuff. Like if you sign up and take a philosophy course, you should have enough common sense to know what that's going to be like, at least a little bit.

Steven Hales: Yeah, you would think. And what kills me too is some philosophers. Okay. Not all philosophers are good writers. I'll be the first to say this. I think Plato, Nietzsche, these people are a hoot to read and just so–I don't know–brilliant stylists, so interesting. I don't know how you couldn't dig into some of that and like, oh man, this is good.

You know? I mean, if you're reading Aquinas, Wittgenstein, I don't know. You'd be like, all right, I see this is, this is a little slow going, but wanting to root out those ideas. That's the key thing.

Andrew Pudewa: And the sense of ownership that you have when you do successfully extract an idea and understand it and apply it to something in your life. That's the joy of the intellectual life.

Steven Hales: Oh, I couldn't agree more. And it's just like when we were talking about writing a moment ago, for me, if I find just the right way to express something. Oh, I love that. I mean, that's the enjoyable part. I finally, finally put together the right structure for this article, or I have just —-. It makes me sad when students deprive themselves of that experience.

Andrew Pudewa: And you work very hard, I'm sure, to inspire them.

Steven Hales: I try my best.

Andrew Pudewa: I think it was in one of your articles, it was an analogy to a professor, a teacher is kind of like a personal trainer in that they can give you, here's the exercises you should do, here's the range, the reps, here's the schedule you should do to get stronger, but you can't do those reps for them. You can't push the weights for them. And it seems as though there's somehow this idea that you, your job is actually to make everything easy for them. Do you get that feeling like.

Steven Hales: Yeah, definitely. I mean, sometimes there's that attitude of why are you just not making this easy for me? And I'm thinking, I am making it as easy as I know how compatible with you still actually doing something. Because you're right. It really is a kind of going to the gym, and they've got to do the reps, they've got to put in the work. And I think the shift

that needs to happen–and I'm not sure how to bring about this shift, I'll admit–is getting students to see that education is like riding a bicycle. It's not like riding a motorcycle. The motorcycle might get you there quicker, but that is not what you're there for.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh,

Steven Hales: You're here for the bicycle.

Andrew Pudewa: That is a really good, I'm going to steal that and use that.

Julie Walker: And you need to qualify Andrew, not an e-bike.

Steven Hales: Yeah, right, right.

Andrew Pudewa: And it looks like a bicycle,

Julie Walker: looks like a bike. Old. Well, we have E-bikes.

Andrew Pudewa: We probably need to start to wrap it up here, but I'm wondering, Dr. Hills, what advice could you give from your position teaching at the university, teaching in one of the, the truly liberal arts, the liberating art of thinking and philosophy? What advice would you have for the typical middle/high school teacher or homeschooling parent with teenagers from your perspective to just help them navigate the world, help them, help their kids navigate this world that they're coming into where the technology is changing faster than any of us can keep up with?

Steven Hales: I know. Yeah. My advice would be to get them to understand the value of doing things for yourself, and this is one of the things that I like about working with my hands. I'm doing it for myself, and that's where the genuine pleasure is. And to see the value in the process and to see that, look, we're out here riding bicycles, or we're making our own furniture, or whatever it is. We are engaged in an activity that we're not just passive receptacles of whatever the computer has to tell us or whatever technology is saying to us. And we shouldn't just turn ourselves into zombies, feasting upon the brain children of machines

Andrew Pudewa: Ooh.

Steven Hales: That we need to be our own agents in the world. And that's, and that is the exciting thing and the difficult thing, and the valuable thing for us to do.

Julie Walker: Yes. That is the human thing is what, as you're going through the list, I'm thinking that is hard work is immensely satisfying. That's what I raised my boys on that little frame. As I'm looking, Dr. Hales, and we're just going to wrap this up. We do want to have our listeners know where to find you and what they will find on your Substack, which is this really cool thing that I don't really fully understand, is pictures of this artisan work that you are doing.

You are handcrafting furniture, you are binding books and making beautiful things that you can be proud of, and that's what we want this next generation to embrace that idea of: hard work is immensely satisfying. So where can our listeners learn more about you and your work and perhaps subscribe to get some of these great articles into their email box?

Steven Hales: Oh yeah. Well, thank you. Uh, they're welcome to find me at Scriptorium Philosophia, as you said, on Substack. There I've been trying to write a lot of pieces, designed for the lay reader, not a professional audience. I've been writing under the pseudonym of Hilarius Bookbinder, which is one of Kierkegaard's old pseudonyms. I didn't think he was using it any longer. And just as a means of distinguishing this from my official scholarship. It's not that I'm trying to hide in particular, but yeah, they're welcome to find me there and trying to engage with some of these concerns that I, and I think many people have, about AI and about the pursuit of truth and about what kinds of things we find valuable as human beings and the nature of art and stuff like this.

Julie Walker: Thank you, Dr. Hale, so much for joining us today. And listener, please take a moment, subscribe to this substack, and we'll put a link in the show notes.

Andrew Pudewa: And get your teenagers to read it because his prose is just so good. It just is a delight to the tongue and the ear and the mind. And I hope will keep writing and write more. And if I ever get anywhere close to where you are in Pennsylvania, I really would love to come and just sit in one of your classes if I could. Crash the class.

Steven Hales: Please do.

Andrew Pudewa: That would be a delight. Thank you so much for your time.

Steven Hales: It's been my pleasure. Thank you for having me.

Julie Walker: Thanks so much for joining us. If you enjoyed this episode and want to hear more, please subscribe to our podcast in iTunes, Stitcher, or Spotify. Or just visit us each week at IEW.com/podcast. Here you can also find show notes and relevant links from today's broadcast. One last thing: would you mind going to iTunes to rate and review our podcast? This really helps other smart, caring listeners like you find us. Thanks so much.