Philosophy and its Public: Mediating the War Between Philosophers and Everyone Else

By Jack Russell Weinstein
In 2005, the American Philosophical Association, a professional organization of eleven thousand philosophers, created a committee to advance the cause of public philosophy. The committee's mandate was large, to bring philosophical discussion to the general public in as many ways as possible, and its first chairperson was one of the world's most prominent thinkers, someone in the position to make this happen. However, since then, the committee has filed only two annual reports: they hosted speakers at two APA members' conferences and expressed support for awarding some folks out of Stanford a grant “in theory.” In other words, according to their minutes, in five years, the APA committee on public philosophy managed to create two events at which professional philosophers met with other professional philosophers to talk about how nice it would be to talk with people who weren’t professional philosophers, and one meeting in which they liked the idea of some other philosophers getting money that the committee themselves did not control. It seems that for the APA, public philosophy is a bit like going to the gym every morning. It’s a nice idea; maybe they’ll get around to it eventually.

Professional philosophers have always had a difficult relationship with other people. The person most often credited with being the first Western philosopher—the ancient Greek thinker Thales—was ridiculed because he fell into an open well while looking at the stars. He enacted his revenge against those who badmouthed him by figuring out that the olive harvest would come early, renting out all of the olive presses in advance, and using his monopolistic control of the machines to make a significant profit. He just wanted to show that he could make more money than others if he desired, but as a philosopher he was interested in other things.

This story is likely apocryphal, but it shows well the I-wasn’t-popular-in-high-school-and-I’ll-get-you-all mentality of the profession. Philosophers love to complain about their lack of respect as well as the marginalization and anti-intellectualism they deal with every day. It doesn’t help their sense of security that Socrates, the most famous of all philosophers, was killed for doing philosophy publicly, that Aristotle had to leave Athens because he feared for his life when public sentiment turned against his patron, and that other philosophers throughout history were exiled, threatened, arrested, and excommunicated for engaging in philosophical inquiry. Of course, the death of Socrates was in part revenge for teaching students who overthrew Athens during a coup, and Aristotle’s danger came from his tutoring a man who would later conquer most of the known world, including Greece. Philosophers throughout history made professions out of challenging governments, attacking church doctrine, questioning accepted knowledge and morals, and putting their own philosophical beliefs above all other social commitments, but what’s a few details among friends? Philosophers see themselves as the innocent victims of a world that does not understand what is truly important, a world that devalues everything they do. Yet they are guilty of the very same arrogance. Even at the moment Socrates is sentenced to die, Plato has him goad his accusers, claiming superiority at every turn. In asserting that the unexamined life is not worth living, he attacks his jury for living a worthless life, and as a bonus jab, he challenges the validity of watching sports. The Olympic athlete, he says, “Only makes you think you’re happy, whereas I make you actually happy.” Today, Socrates would be killed all over again.

Philosophers’ arrogance does come from a genuine power. Historically, they were attacked because they were dangerous. The challenge that philosophy put forth helped whittle down authoritarian power, inspired
tremendous political and religious change, primed the world for modern science, and altered entrenched worldviews, toppling the rich and powerful along the way. Good has come from these acts: theoretical support for the abolition of slavery, describing history in terms of progress, and the development of liberal education, but each of these achievements still marks the destruction of dominant beliefs. To a certain extent then, Socrates and others were killed out of self defense, and after two and a half millennia, the world has finally figured out how to disarm the discipline. Stop killing the philosophers, our societies have declared, sequester them in universities instead. Threaten their funding when they get uppity, bury them with students who resist their classes because philosophy 101 won’t get them a job, and laugh at them as out of touch. No one will be convinced by their arguments if no one reads their research.

Philosophers responded to these changes by becoming bitter and insulated. Professionals of the field now write for, speak to, and read other philosophers almost exclusively—many universities refuse to give any credit to faculty who do philosophy in the community, rejecting their work as unworthy research—and this has led to a crisis. The power of philosophy is diminishing as are job opportunities and institutional support. University philosophy departments are threatened with closure, retired faculty members are not being replaced, and resources for travel, research, and professional development are scarce. There is a complex interplay of forces here, but on the philosophers’ side it boils down to an unfortunate dynamic: philosophers make no effort to reach out to non-philosophers but then lament that non-philosophers don’t see their value. The solution on this side seems clear: open lines of communication and advocate for the discipline by getting people to see the value of philosophy. Get them to see the value of philosophy by doing it with them because when people do philosophy they learn to appreciate it very quickly.

The crisis in philosophy is not entirely self-made. Philosophers share the blame with forces outside the discipline that have equal or greater power. American culture does not value intellectualism and education is becoming more vocational, concerning itself less with cultivating people’s humanity. Furthermore, when philosophers doubt the possibility of doing philosophy with others, they do so because they have been taught to question the general public’s capability of engaging in true philosophical reflection. Unfortunately, what non-philosophers do just isn’t regarded by the profession as philosophy at all. Philosophy requires background knowledge and skills that come from education, effort, and, often, long periods of study. For example, were someone to ask me what medicines best minimize the risk
of high blood pressure, I would not know the answer but I would know that I did not know. I would consult my doctor or medical Web sites, I would ask those who research such things, and only after serious consideration would I come to a conclusion about such a question and pass it on. But ask a non-philosopher whether a particular law is just or whether animals can reason, and each person not only has an answer, but most believe their position is more correct than others. Those who don’t think their answers are superior tend to argue that such claims are matters of “belief,” not truth. This is itself a philosophical claim, and whether or not answers are relativistic is a matter of great controversy. But we’ll avoid this issue here.

In part, philosophers doubt the general public because of what I call the problem of expertise: it takes knowledge to debate issues meaningfully, and an uninformed public ends up boxing at shadows. Consider last year’s debate about the legitimacy of “death panels” in proposed healthcare legislation. There were no such panels, nothing even close. The law only sought to help fund consultation with a doctor when someone was writing a living will. But the truth was irrelevant, and the media, pundits, and voters spent countless hours debating the morality of a policy that no one had ever proposed and that had no chance of ever being suggested, let alone passed. Philosophers cringe at this kind of thing, dismissing it as politics rather than ethical inquiry.

Let us look at another less controversial example, a blog post from a philosopher that illustrates well the two sides of the debate about expertise. The entry is titled, conveniently enough, “Public Philosophy.”

“[Scene: A smoky dive bar filled with hipsters. A young woman asks the young man next to her for a quarter....]

Young Man (anxiously searching his hipster bag): I know I have a bunch of quarters... I think I have a quarter...

Young Woman (annoyed): C’mon.... Jeez....

Drunk Philosopher (to Young Man): If you know that you have a bunch of quarters, it follows that you have a quarter.

Young Man: Huh?

Young Woman (to Young Man): What did that guy say to you? Whatever. Let’s go.... [The couple leaves together.]

The one thing “public philosophy” is good for: getting other people laid.

This entry is both self-deprecating and insulting to those he describes, but its rhetoric isn’t what concerns me. The relevant piece of information is that one cannot know something that is untrue. In other words, one does not know that 2+2=5. One only believes it because one can only know that 2+2=4, since when you add two to two, you actually get four, not five. This piece of information allows Drunk Philosopher to claim that “if you know that you have a bunch of quarters, it follows that you have a quarter.” Since Young Man knows he has a bunch of quarters then there must, by definition, be a bunch of quarters in his bag. If there is a bunch of quarters in the bag then, also by definition, there must be one single quarter in there. This is a funny story to philosophers, although most will understand that it is a little obnoxious; snark is the currency of the blogosphere. But it is impossible to explain why it’s funny without explaining some epistemology (theory of knowledge) and by the time you explain that, it’s not funny anymore. Jokes require spontaneity and background knowledge.

The claim that one can only know true things is as old is Plato, and without it, a great deal of human understanding falls apart. Thus, philosophers look at the interaction in the bar with annoyance (and disgust) and ask how they can do philosophy with people who don’t know the basics. Certainly, they can teach philosophy—most philosophers are, as we have already seen, teachers—but teaching people to do philosophy and doing it with them are two entirely different projects. Thus, if non-philosophers want to do philosophy, they must take the responsibility to learn the relevant information. But learning takes time, and thus public philosophy is faced with another challenge: the problem of persistence. In other words, both learning and inquiry require tremendous endurance, and those who wish to engage in philosophical argument must understand that not only does an interlocutor need background knowledge, but he or she must also revisit an argument many times before anything can be resolved.

This repetition of argument runs counter to the modern sound-bite mentality. We have a Jeopardy conception of knowledge, knowing something is memorizing a fact (there is a bunch of quarters in the bag, for example, or Bismarck is the capital of North Dakota), but philosophers see knowledge as something more than that. Again, as Plato tells us, to know something one must know a fact or definition, but one must also be able to explain it and successfully defend it against any claim that it is not
true—John Stuart Mill used this need for debate to justify freedom of speech in liberal democracies.

Such learning, such debate, takes many sittings and many hours, and a philosopher must be willing to persist in inquiry. He or she must acknowledge mistakes and go back to the beginning and start anew, to dedicate time and mental resources to a problem while the public tends to have other priorities. I run a monthly film series in downtown Grand Forks during which community members engage in philosophical discussion. Whether they watch Casablanca or The Blues Brothers, the participants do philosophy by continuing to think about the topics in the film after they leave the discussion, going home and discussing it with their family, becoming conscious of the issues enough to see them manifest in everyday life. To do philosophy, one must continually revisit it.

The movie audience does well, I think, yet many of those in my profession would not call it philosophy at all, a position I find odd. If I were to play a pick-up game of basketball, even if I only played for forty-five minutes, and no matter how badly I played, everyone would still call it basketball. If I were to play hockey or sew, no matter how ineptly I did, I would still be playing hockey or sewing. The same thing is true of the movie audience. They are doing philosophy. Yes, they are doing it briefly and some may even be doing it badly, but they are still doing philosophy. They are still doing the same basic thing that the professionals do; they are just doing it to a lesser extent.

Philosophers will object that a certain threshold of quality must be met before the term philosophy can be invoked. I agree. The person who is kicking the ball across the court is not playing basketball, just as someone who is simply poking fabric with a needle is not sewing. Analogously, individuals yelling obscenities or refusing to listen to competing arguments are not doing philosophy. But if this is what philosophy isn’t, only the most obtuse observer would describe the movie audience as not doing it. Professional philosophers must move from understanding public philosophy as non-philosophy because if they don’t, they won’t engage with the public at all. Even if they see the public as doing bad philosophy they have a clear mission: increase the quality of public philosophy. This they can do.

I would suggest that even the term bad philosophy is a misnomer because again, in my experience the audience does philosophy quite well. Instead, like my basketball playing, this activity should be considered amateur philosophy, not bad. The public dabbles in philosophy and enthusiasts do it as a hobby. The amateur and the hobbyist will always do things worse than the professional; this is just a fact of life. This is true of mechanics, athletes, cooks, writers, pilots, you name it—professionals do all of these better because they have more time to practice their craft. I therefore propose a compromise between philosophers and their non-professional brethren: the general public should get past their sense of pride and acknowledge that professional philosophers usually do philosophy better than them, while professional philosophers should get past their sense of entitlement and recognize the amateur philosophizing as philosophy, as imperfect as it may be.Only then can we have détente.

We have reached a new plateau. Philosophers have agreed that the general public is doing philosophy and the general public has recognized that they could do it better than they already do. If this is as far as we get, we have done a great service to the public humanities. But how do we advance from here? Making philosophy better brings up a whole new problem: the problem of arguing. Non-philosophers unschooled in logic make everyday mistakes called fallacies. (Actually, professional philosophers make them quite often as well.) C.S. Peirce commented once that the odd thing about logic is that everyone thinks they can do it from birth, but that, like all other areas of life, the skill of logical thinking takes learning and practice. Fallacies show us just how faulty our reasoning can be. Take the fallacy called affirming the consequent which asserts that just because one thing leads to another, doesn’t mean that the second thing leads to the first. While it is true that if your head is cut off then you are dead, it is not the case that if you are dead then your head is necessarily cut off. You might have been hit by a truck.

As obvious as this sounds, this fallacy is an indication of a persistent error in belief and in public argument. Most obviously, it offers a metaphor for how racist thinking works. I was once mugged by a Hispanic man, but it does not follow that if someone is a mugger then he or she is Hispanic. I also know a liberal who is a communist but it does not follow that a communist is necessarily a liberal. To assume otherwise would be to commit the fallacy known as affirming the consequent. Incidentally, although this is only slightly different, it does not follow from these experiences that all Hispanics are muggers, that all liberals are communists, or...
to use a timelier example, that just because some terrorists happen to be Muslim, it is not the case that all Muslims are terrorists. To assume a universal truth from one or a few instances is a fallacy called generalizing from a particular (or hasty generalization).

There are many psychological reasons why we make these errors, including our very human tendency to preserve our own beliefs in the face of opposition. And most of us understand that the vast majority of Hispanics are law-abiding citizens, that most liberals are patriots, and that only a miniscule percentage of the more than one billion Muslims embrace violence. However, the fact that we know this now while reading quietly doesn’t mean that that we will remember it when we argue or get into a heated debate. (John Locke argues that one cannot claim to know something if he or she does not remember it.)

Philosophers, by profession, are tasked with pointing out fallacies when they spot them—and there are dozens more than I have listed here—yet members of the general public take it personally when someone points out an error in their reasoning. It is hard to argue with someone who takes inquiry as an insult, and philosophers are particularly good at not taking professional disagreement to heart. In this sense, they’re like the mafia—what they do isn’t personal, it’s just business. However, the problem of arguing relates to the next in my taxonomy of concerns, the problem of consequences. If someone comes to a conclusion, then certain things must necessarily follow. If someone spends all of their money on a new television, for example, they don’t have it to spend on food. If someone is at work, they cannot be at the ballgame (unless they work at the ballgame).

Again, these are simple examples, but let’s consider a more complicated one: the connection between excluding non-American workers from American manufacturing jobs and the necessary loss of value to the American paycheck that results. If the

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government expels all illegal immigrants from the United States, food prices will necessarily go up because employing them has been a major cost-cutting measure for the food industry. Also, if one stops outsourcing jobs to foreign countries, the cost of products will also rise because, again, labor costs increase. Therefore, those who support such policies must be willing to pay significantly more for goods and services. If they don’t, they are not recognizing the consequences of their positions.

Even so, people want cheaper goods, so what should the government do to lower prices? It can’t lower wages because neither outsourcing nor illegal migrant labor are permitted, so either American workers themselves have to take pay cuts or the government has to subsidize prices. If the government does either, the amount of take-home pay for the American worker is less, either because paychecks are smaller or taxes are higher. Thus, by necessity, someone must be willing to have less money if he or she aims to protect American jobs or borders.

How much this will cost average Americans is a matter of debate, and whether the rising costs is a price worth paying is itself a matter of contention. My point is that philosophers understand that claims have consequences that cannot be ignored, whereas the numerous people who want both to expel immigrants and limit outsourcing while also lowering taxes do not. This group might respond that one can further lower taxes by getting rid of welfare or stopping public funding for education, but still, even when all that is done, restricting immigration and limiting outsourcing lowers wages and raises taxes. There is no way around it.

Philosophers also understand that most of the time, claims and conclusions are uncertain. This is the problem of not knowing and the legacy of what has come to be called Socratic Ignorance. In Plato’s dialogue Apology, Socrates famously claimed that he was the wisest man in all of Athens because he was the only one who knew that he knew nothing. Philosophers, like
Socrates, are comfortable with theoretical uncertainty, while the general public tends not to be. Thus, if a group of people leave a conversation knowing less than when they started, perhaps even doubting deeply held beliefs, philosophers consider the conversation to be a success while non-philosophers tend to think of it as a failure. Most people do not like the feeling of not knowing things, it makes them anxious. Philosophers revel in it, at least while they are working.

Naturally, most philosophers do not live up to the Socratic ideal of self-doubt. Most I know think that they are right and everyone else is wrong—they share the general public’s tendency to prefer their own answers to others’. While they acknowledge their fallibility in principle, they believe in practice that what they have committed to is in fact true. Years ago, I called the practice of espousing ignorance while not actually believing it as Socra-teasing. It is a game philosophers play. We pretend we think we are ignorant and everyone in the profession lets us pretend.

Thomas Kuhn has argued well that unwavering commitment to a theory actually drives the search for truth, and this may be true, but I would also argue that Socra-teasing, even if it is just posturing, is tremendously important because no inquiry can proceed without at least the theoretical presumption of fallibility. One must understand that there is always, again, at least in theory, the possibility of being wrong, even in the face of personal conviction. Fundamentalists of every stripe refuse this principle, they believe in practice that what they have committed to is in fact true. Years ago, I called the practice of espousing ignorance while not actually believing it as Socra-teasing. It is a game philosophers play. We pretend we think we are ignorant and everyone in the profession lets us pretend.

Philosophy is not the product, it is the process. It is not the excellence itself, but the attempt to achieve such excellence. If the general public wants to do philosophy they must try to meet the standards of the discipline no matter how they might fall short, but if philosophers themselves want to be taken seriously they must recognize that others are just as capable and entitled to engage in philosophy as they are. Like any other hobbyist, the amateur philosopher has less-refined skills than the professional, but with a genuine interest in the discipline, they too have things to teach.

I have outlined what problems come with doing public philosophy, specifically those related to expertise, persistence, arguing, consequences, and not knowing. This should not be taken as criticism of non-philosophers; doing philosophy with the general public has become one of the most enjoyable parts of my job. However, if the general public wants to be taken seriously as interlocutors, they ought to acknowledge how difficult it is to do philosophy and recognize what standards of debate they will be held to. Here we can return to the question of threshold: how disciplined must philosophy be? I would suggest that anyone who acts in good faith to address the five problems I outline here, anyone who uses their intellect to seek expertise, to be persistent, to argue well, to recognize the consequences of their conclusion, and to acknowledge their fallibility is doing philosophy even if they fail miserably in the process.

The philosopher has much to learn from the general public—Aristotle knew this; Plato did not—but the professional philosopher must also publicly model good philosophical thinking. He or she must go out and engage in conversation with those who are willing to participate while also giving credit where credit is due. Professional philosophy is in crisis because the general public doesn’t understand what the philosopher does, but the general public doesn’t understand what the philosopher does because the philosopher doesn’t do it with them. This must change. The only cure for the pervasive anti-intellectualism that surrounds us all is to celebrate the intelligence of everyday life. Roughly twenty-five hundred years ago, Plato described the general public as trapped in a subterranean world created by their ignorance, waiting, en masse for the enlightened thinker to lead them despite the darkness. This model is no longer feasible. Contemporary philosophy must be a joint project, a shared discourse between academe and the world that houses it. The general public has much to offer and professional philosophers must recognize everyday intelligence to survive. In this day and age, it is the philosopher who has to come out of the cave.