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ARTICLE

Three Problems for Public Political Philosophy

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Abstract

This is a paper about three problems that public political philosophers are likely to encounter and how some underrecognized forms of public philosophy might help overcome them. After clarifying what I take public political philosophy to be, I present the three problems—the problem of academic overrepresentation, the problem of the critical intellectual, and the problem of novel values. These problems are especially acute for a particular form of public philosophy—namely, writing for a general audience. I describe four alternative models of public political philosophy—the organizing model, the participatory model, the policy model, and the bureaucratic model—and give examples of each. For each model, I describe some of its pros and cons, and in particular how it handles (or does not) the three problems. I conclude with some suggestions about the significance of the discussion for philosophical education.

Keywords: deliberative democracy; philosophical activism; public philosophy

This is a paper about three problems that public political philosophers are likely to encounter, and how some underrecognized forms of public philosophy might help overcome them. After clarifying what I take public political philosophy to be, I present the three problems—the problem of academic overrepresentation, the problem of the critical intellectual, and the problem of novel values. These problems are especially acute for a particular form of public philosophy—namely, writing for a general audience. I describe four alternative models of public political philosophy and give examples of each. For each model, I describe some of its pros and cons, and in particular how it handles (or does not) the three problems. I conclude with some suggestions about the significance of the discussion for philosophical education.

1. Public political philosophy

Different people use the phrase "public philosophy" in different ways. I take public philosophy to be activity that uses or inculcates characteristically philosophical knowledge and skills in work with communities outside of academic philosophy departments. This will include writing and speaking for a general audience, teaching nontraditional students,

advisory work with policymakers, philosophical contributions to research that is not primarily philosophical in nature, collaborations with community groups, medical ethics consulting, consulting for private industry, multimedia projects, philosophical public art, philosophical counseling, and organizing spaces for philosophical reflection and interaction, perhaps to inform some practical decision-making.[1] Characteristically philosophical knowledge and skills include not only knowledge of the history of philosophy, but also skills in argument reconstruction, tracking a dialectic, conceptual analysis, explicating the values at stake in some decision, and translating between different vocabularies or ontologies.[2] Note "uses" *or* "inculcates"—public philosophy includes activity conducted by people who have these characteristically philosophical knowledge or skills (academics or otherwise), but also work aimed at making room for people to cultivate their own philosophical thinking.

I will not attempt to say what makes any given public philosophy project political, in general. A public philosophy project is political if, but not only if, it is aimed at solving or raising consciousness about conflicts regarding the distribution or exercise of state or workplace power.

For many of the projects I discuss below, someone (not you, of course!) will invariably ask: but why is this philosophy? Here is an indirect answer: this is a question about how to use the term of art "philosophy." When people get worked up about whether some term of art applies to some object, it is generally because they take some (more or less vague) range of practical or theoretical questions to hinge on whether the term applies to the object. The practical question that supposedly hinges on whether "philosophy" applies here is, roughly, whether this is the sort of thing that people in academic philosophy departments should be doing in a professional capacity. I cannot hope to offer any kind of conclusive answer to the question as to what these people should do, all things considered. We can, however, try to describe what sort of comparative advantage (if any) people with philosophical training can bring to bear on any given project. That is, at least given that some project is worth doing, we can describe how a philosophical background enables someone to do it especially well in some respect. For each of the projects I discuss below, I will sketch what I take to be some of these comparative advantages. This is as close as we can realistically get to addressing the practical concern animating the question "why is this philosophy" here, short of an account of what, in general, people in academic philosophy departments should do.

2. Three problems

What should public political philosophy consist of? A natural answer is that philosophers should just write and speak for a general audience in support of their views.

I think lots of this work is perfectly salutary.[3] I have done some of it myself. But there are three problems that it tends to butt up against. I will call them the problem of academic overrepresentation, the problem of the critical intellectual, and the problem of novel

[1] Adamson 2022, Allen 2022, Birch 2024, Brent and Blackman 2022, Briggle 2015, Broome 2020, Christelle 2022, Diaz-Waian 2021, Felder 2024, Fuller and Navin 2022, Gunay et al. 2023, Johnson 2013, Lam 2019, Lanphier and Anani 2021, Lone 2022, Marinoff 2022, Menser 2018a, Olasov 2022, Ray 2022, Spinicci et al. 2019, Szifris 2021, Tuana 2020, Wartenberg 2014.

[2] Brister 2022.

[3] See Bruenig 2018, Burgis 2024, Chomsky 1968, Davis 2003, French 2023, Hogan et al. 2021, Táíwò 2022, and Venkatesh 2023, among many others.

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values.[4] (To be clear, writing and speaking for a general audience does not *necessarily* exacerbate these problems, and plenty of this work avoids one or all of these problems altogether. But it is liable to in a way that, one might hope and I will argue below, other forms of public engagement are not.)

The problem of academic overrepresentation is that academics and other knowledge workers are often overrepresented in the political movements to which they want to contribute, and this tends to have cultural and substantive consequences that undermine the goals of those movements. Culturally, this leads to a general presumption that you will fit into these movements only if you have a certain amount of theoretical background knowledge or otherwise adopt the linguistic and aesthetic habits of academics. As most people do not have this knowledge or these habits, this creates a needless obstacle for people trying to recruit participants into these movements. Substantively, it leads to the overrepresentation of academics' interests in these movements. This is partly because the movements will rely excessively on tactics that academics are well suited to carry out—reading groups, open letters, and so on. It is also partly because the relatively narrow class interests of academics will take up more airtime than they need to—for example, agitation over two-tier academic employment or the automation of knowledge work.

The problem of the critical intellectual is that, for reasons that are not entirely clear to me, philosophical writing for a general audience is largely critical in content. That is, this writing is largely about why various things that are the case should not be. But given the saturation of critical writing (and the saturation of negative affect that this work fosters), the greater marginal utility, at least, is in arguments for positive conclusions about why various things that are or are not the case should be—that is, arguments for a vision of the world to work toward.

Lastly, *the problem of novel values* is a problem about how philosophers often (although not always) see the role they play in public life—namely, that they are sensitive to sources of value that are not appropriately taken into account in public discourse and decision-making. Philosophers might be sensitive to types of values that are not captured by standard quantitative measures of economic impact or population health, or violations of rights that decision-makers or the wider public are not generally aware of, or mistreatment of entities that others do not take seriously as possible objects of mistreatment.[5] Of course, sometimes philosophers *are* sensitive to sources of values that are not appropriately taken into account in public discourse and decision-making. But writing for a general audience that appeals to these sources of value is at least liable to raise a few problems. First, this sort of appeal is generally not as persuasive as appeals to values to which the audience *is* sensitive. Second, the sources of value that really are at stake in a number of (what I, at least, regard as) pressing political problems are, to a significant extent, not novel. Many people do not need

[4] It is unclear to me what the exact scope of each of these tendencies is. An earlier version of this paper framed the problems as tending to affect, roughly, the contemporary socialist or materialist left in the United States. It seems clear to me that academics are overrepresented in contemporary materialist left discourse and organizing in the United States, that their writing in support of left materialist positions tends to be critical, and that they think of themselves as sensitive to sources of value (or fine-grained distinctions between sources of value) that others are not. Each of these tendencies crops up elsewhere, for other ideological positions and in other times and places, though of course academics are not overrepresented in every social movement. Perhaps it is enough to say that if some problem does not tend to arise for a social movement of interest to the reader, they are free to ignore it.

[5] Bruenig 2018, Campbell & Stramondo 2017, Schroeder 2017, Sebo 2023, Singer 1989, Stone 1972, Vredenburgh 2021.

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to be convinced of the value of greater wealth equality, freedom from physical violence, control over their own working lives, and protection from climate catastrophe. Suppose that attention to novel sources of value is attention to issues in which those values really are at stake. If those sources of value are not really at stake in the issues to which we should (by the philosopher's own lights), be attending, then we should not, by the philosopher's own lights, be attending to those sources of value. Third, in at least some conceptions of democratic decision-making, decision-making is, other things being equal, less democratic if it is based on values that are not recognized by the people who are affected by the decision.

Again, it is perfectly possible to skirt these problems in writing for a general audience, if the author takes enough care. They just need to be judicious about their self-presentation, careful not to overestimate the importance of their own interests or tactics they are well suited to carry out, positive and constructive in orientation, and attentive to the persuasive powers and (perhaps) democratic merits of widely held values (Maybe easier said than done!). But we might wonder whether there are other forms of public political philosophy that can avoid these problems more handily, without requiring special care.

I will consider four models of public political philosophy: the organizing model, the participatory model, the policy model, and the bureaucratic model.[6] (The models overlap somewhat. Some public philosophy projects are exemplars of multiple models.) Some models avoid all three of the problems described above, while others avoid only some of them. They are ordered, but only roughly, from the most to least participatory.

The discussion of three of the models draws on my interviews with philosophers who exemplify them in their own work—Marianne Garneau, Matt Bruenig, and Margaret Betz. The examples that I discuss in any detail are drawn from the contemporary US left, broadly speaking—partly because of my own political priorities, partly because these are the examples with which I am most familiar. But the conclusions that emerge from the discussion are, I hope, useful to readers located elsewhere, geographically and ideologically.

For each model, I will ask:

- What does the work consist of? What are some examples of people and organizations actually doing this work?
- What is philosophical about it? That is, what role do the knowledge and skill characteristics of philosophers play in the work?
- What are the model's pros and cons? In particular, how does it fare with respect to the three problems described above?

3. The organizing model

3.1. What it is and who does it

In the organizing model, a philosopher tries to recruit people into joining, becoming more active in, or forming organizations that pursue certain political goals. In order to understand the philosophical dimensions of this work better, I interviewed the philosopher Marianne

[6] For a helpful alternative taxonomy of the roles that political philosophers can play in public and scholarly life, see Stewart 2022.

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Garneau.[7] Garneau works as an organizer with the International Workers of the World (IWW), and earlier organized a tenants union in her apartment building. She describes it as "a matter of getting people together who have leverage—you know, workers in a workplace or tenants in a building or whatever—and walking them through the steps of applying that leverage, developing their power in order to get their demands met." This is, for Garneau, not primarily a matter of logical persuasion or rational argument, but confidence-building and agitation.

> People who try to organize workers through rational argument, they don't get very far. And likewise, you know, when you're at the bargaining table or whatever with an employer... that's not a rational exchange of ideas either. And workers think it is. They think you have to find the right moral argument to make or you have to find the right legal argument to make or even rational argument with respect to the company's, like, operations or finances, and then they're kind of stymied when the company just says, 'No, no, no, no, no,' to all of your demands. And it takes them a long time to realize that this alleged discussion at a bargaining table is a façade. It's, you know, an epiphenomenon or outgrowth of what they the workers are doing away from the bargaining table, which is applying their leverage, messing with the flow of production, scaring the employer about their willingness to take action... A lot of leftists think that step one is: let's persuade people of, you know, the truth of the Marxist sort of framework or analysis or let's give people a socialist inspiration or outlook first, and then we'll have—you name it, right? The right political parties, the right policies in government, we'll have an explosion of worker organizing, we'll have class activity. And the reality is it does not work that way.

3.2. What makes it philosophical?

This might suggest that a background in philosophy does not give an organizer any kind of advantage in this work—indeed, that insofar as philosophers are predisposed to overestimate the strategic importance of their characteristic skills in any given conversation, and philosophers' characteristic skills in conversation are the sort of rational argument that Garneau discusses here, then, as she says, they will not get very far. But, Garneau describes a few ways that a background in philosophy might help.

One is in providing theoretical resources to describe the work.[8] Throughout the interview, she characterized the power relationship between workers and bosses in terms of Hegel's master–slave dialectic, her approach to worker education in terms of Freire's distinction between the banking model and popular education, the gap between the worker's theoretical appreciation of their situation and mobilization in terms of Kierkegaard on accepting a truth for oneself, and the open-endedness and improvisational nature of organizing conversations in terms of Dimitri Nikulin's work on boredom. It is an open empirical question as to what sort of practical consequences this sort of theoretical reflection has. But if we can

[7] In quotes from the interviews below, ellipses indicate where I've skipped over substantive material. I have also for readability occasionally omitted, without indication, continuers, repetitions, false starts, and conjunctions.

[8] It is worth noting that public philosophers often have recognizably philosophical reasons for doing what they do; they are motivated to pursue certain political goals or engage in certain aspects of the democratic process on the basis of arguments they have encountered in their philosophical reading and teaching. Bruenig and Betz both describe these sorts of reasons in the interviews I will discuss below. But having a philosophical argument in favor of doing something does not straightforwardly give one any comparative advantage at doing it, so I have largely omitted the discussion of these arguments here and below.

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help ourselves to the general principle that learning novel and interesting truths about some sphere of activity helps us do it better, there is reason for optimism here.

A philosophical background might also help less by way of classroom experience than as a result of relationships of philosophical mentorship. In Garneau's experiences of mentorship:

> [I]nstead of it being a classroom setting—say the smartest thing, write the smartest paper, get a grade—it was more woven into, "What is your life trajectory? How can you develop and flourish and grow stronger and more interesting as a scholar? Here's something to read or here's something to write or here's a person to talk to." And I find there are a lot of resonances between how I basically mentor and develop workers... Is philosophy a liability or an asset? It depends on how you were trained and brought up in philosophy.

She elaborates further that, at least when mentoring relationships go well, they create warmth, collegiality, and possibilities for fruitful interaction and give mentees a sense that their own ideas are worth taking seriously.

A third comparative advantage that philosophy might develop is that it prepares you for work in which you have to be tolerant of the kinds of uncertainties that are involved in organizing—not knowing what other people mean and not knowing where inquiry will conclude or whether it will bear any fruit once it is underway.

> This is very much like a Gadamerian bridging of horizons. You can't engage in that until you know where the other horizon is. And it's the same thing with organizing. Like, you need someone to start describing how they view, you know, their work, what their complaints are on the job, how they view their relationship with their employer, so that you can start guiding them towards the reflections or the ideas that they're going to need to have in order to take action.

3.3. Pros and cons

The organizing model has a number of plausible virtues. Many people on the left think that this kind of on-the-ground organizing—consciousness-raising, building capacity, and militancy—is the most important left political work there is to do, and for good reason. (Matt Bruenig, for example, who does *not* do this work, volunteered a version of this opinion in another interview I will discuss below.) It straightforwardly avoids the problem of the critical intellectual. The work is about mobilizing people to produce a positive, concrete redistribution of power, not (just) critiquing the status quo. The problem of academic overrepresentation might still undermine people with philosophical training doing the work—they might overestimate the strategic value of argument and give the sense that labor militants are all culturally academic. But Garneau, at least, has this sort of philosophical training and does not overestimate the strategic value of argument. And unlike writing for a general audience, the organizing model often provides face-to-face, real-time feedback from a non-self-selected audience, which might keep academic cultural tendencies at bay. As for the problem of novel values, again, it is possible that philosophers might rely excessively on recherché, proprietary values in organizing conversations; but again, they receive some real-time feedback about what sort of rhetorical strategies work, which will tend to check those excesses.

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On the other hand, philosophical training prepares you for this work only to a limited extent. What we might think of as the primary skill of philosophers, argument, is largely besides the point. Also, while a certain sort of experience of philosophical mentorship might provide a helpful model for agitating workers, this experience is, unfortunately, not universal among trained philosophers.

4. The participatory model

4.1. What it is and who does it

On the participatory model, a philosopher creates spaces for philosophical and political interaction and decision-making, typically along deliberative or participatory democratic lines.[9]

There are, I suspect, more examples of the participatory model than of the organizing model. Michael Menser, in his work with the Participatory Budgeting Project, helped transfer a portion of the New York City budget over to direct control by a participatory democratic process, among many other things. Sharyn Clough and Christian Matheis' work at the Peace Literacy Institute brings people together to reason with one another about how to bring about a more peaceful world, partly psychologically and individually, but also materially and at a structural or systemic scale.[10] Thomas Hirschhorn's Gramsci Monument transformed an outdoor space in a New York City public housing development into a lecture series/library/publisher/radio station/craft workshop/cookout, themed around the work of Antonio Gramsci. The Irish citizens' assemblies of the 2010s led to the republic's constitutional amendment on abortion.[11] (These projects have a broad sort of concern with decision-making processes in common, but of course, the people who carry them out can have very different substantive commitments and aims—say, a certain conception of peace or state power or democratic legitimacy, or a desire to get better solutions to some policy problem.)

In each of these cases, the philosophers and the organizations they work with structure the discussion in some way—by offering a prompt or a problem, figuring out which participants to bring in, providing some guidance about how to keep the conversation productive or focused, intervening in the discussion when necessary, and so on. They might also work to guarantee that the conversations will receive some sort of political uptake—for example, by securing funding for the proposals that the deliberative bodies arrive at or delivering their conclusions to some decision-makers or state actors.

4.2. What makes it philosophical

Much of this work is very obviously philosophical—it takes philosophical skill to frame a question usefully, to know when to intervene when a conversation is going off the rails, to manage the floor, to keep track of a dialectic, and to translate the results of a complicated discussion into the appropriate sort of (say, broadly intelligible, technical, or administrative) language.[12]

[9] McAfee 2004, Menser 2018a, Guerrero 2024.
[10] Matheis & Clough 2022; Montfort, Betts, & Clough 2025.
[11] Farrell et al. 2021, Johnson 2013.
[12] Brister 2022.

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Somewhat less obviously, it takes philosophical knowledge and skill to convince people with different sorts of normative outlooks that the deliberation is worth participating in or attending to or that some institution should actually spend money on doing the things the deliberative body wants to do. There is a kind of "logical geography" here, keeping track of regions of overlapping consensus and where it gives out.[13]

4.3. *Pros and cons*

Again, the participatory model has a lot going for it. It largely or entirely avoids the problem of academic overrepresentation. The organizers of these spaces have some say in the central questions to be addressed and the norms they encourage participants to follow, but the participants determine everything else about the style and substance of the conversation.[14] For the same reason, it largely or entirely avoids the problem of novel values. It also entirely avoids the problem of the critical intellectual, at least insofar as the agendas in these spaces are to produce positive policy proposals. Most importantly, at least some of these projects are astonishingly politically successful. The Participatory Budgeting Project, for example, has helped put hundreds of millions of dollars of government budgets to participatory use.[15]

On the other hand, it can be hard to get people who do not already have some cultural capital or are not somewhat wealthy to participate. In that way, this can contribute to a sort of inequality.[16] While some instances of the participatory model, as I noted, have led to dramatic political change, many have not. Deliberative bodies can make good policy recommendations, but if there is no commitment from people in power to follow those recommendations, or no mechanism for holding them accountable for following the recommendations, the benefits of the process are less material—encouraging ordinary people to take their own thoughts or agency seriously, say, but perhaps little else.

5. The policy model

5.1. *What it is and who does it*

On the policy model, a philosopher formulates specific policy recommendations and tries to get them taken up by politicians and political parties. The Democracy in Europe Movement 2025, cofounded by the philosopher Srećko Horvat, promotes a range of policies to do with the redistribution of power in the EU, debt cancellation, climate justice, and peace. In the United States, the People's Policy Project, a small think tank largely the work of Matt Bruenig, has defended a sovereign wealth fund, housing redistribution, and the expansion of the social welfare state, and successfully gotten some of his policy proposals on the platforms of federal candidates for public office. In an interview for this piece, Bruenig described PPP's niche as issues that have either a social ownership or a social welfare state angle.

5.2. *What makes it philosophical*

Much of that interview was about how Bruenig's background in philosophy—getting into economic and political philosophy as part of his high school education, then majoring in

[13] Menser 2018a.
[14] Olasov 2022.
[15] See the map at the PBP website here: https://www.participatorybudgeting.org/about-pb/#what-is-pb.
[16] Farrell et al. 2021, Menser 2018b.

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philosophy as an undergraduate before going on to law school, working with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), and finally his current position—informed his public writing and think-tank work.

Bruenig had largely worked out his general philosophical views as an undergraduate, which he describes as a "broad-based egalitarian commitment" along the lines of G.A. Cohen. After that, he says, "I kind of move on and say, 'Okay, well, so how do we do this? If I want an equal society, what does that look like?' And that has been like the last 10 years, just focusing on implementation, implementation, implementation." This could reasonably be interpreted as saying that the philosophical thinking that informs his current public-facing work is all in the past. But we discussed a few ways that his philosophical background shapes his approach to the work in an on-going way.

One is that, somewhat distinctively among policy writers, Bruenig defends his views about certain policy questions on the basis of more or less fundamental theories of some aspect of the state or economy. For example, he objects to "modern monetary theory" on the basis of a general account of money as a share in decision-making over the productive apparatus in the markets you participate in, or argues for views of the social welfare state in terms of fundamental limits of using the labor market as the sole means of providing people income.[17]

> Maybe it's more apt to call it a philosophical style of thinking as opposed to philosophy itself, right? Where you're saying, well, let's take a step back and kind of get a broader... overarching theory of what we're doing here and use that then to expound upon particular cases... I think in the policy world people get very mired in the details and the minutiae and whatever, and they can develop very strong commitments to... their particular view on [those minutiae]. And they can even talk themselves almost sophistically into positions that basically are related to word choices, you know? Semantics, how you represent this or that or what kind of rhetoric is involved. And you know, analytical philosophy at least, it seems to want to take a step back and say, like, let's neutralize all that. Try to neutralize that as best we can and figure out what's actually going on here, what are the important stakes, what is a tax really, different from a phase out, you know, or something like that.

Advocates for left positions sometimes mix up different sorts of rhetorical functions performed by different sorts of speech—altering outsiders' perceptions, motivating insiders, pressuring the opposition, and so on. This is contrary to the demands of policy work. But philosophical training, at least when it is working best, helps keep these sorts of rhetorical functions distinct.[18]

Similarly, a certain sort of skill analytic philosophy, at least, can inculcate is trying to find the minimally committal argument you need for some conclusion. A "philosophical style of thinking" manifests in sensitivity to the sorts of argumentative strategies that need to be pursued in defending or critiquing a policy for some audience. Bruenig notes how this sensitivity helps navigate the debate between "wages for housework" feminists and feminists who think a key goal of family policy is to get women working more outside of the house.

[17] See the 9/12/21 episode of The Bruenigs podcast, "Matt Solo Ep on the Welfare State & MMT."
[18] Stewart 1980.

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> You learn this very quickly, obviously, in debate, but if you know what kinds of things other people like to reach for, then you can obviously figure out, is there a way to present this that actually shows that, you know, under their own logic or whatever, that this should be okay… Where is the framework where this is really a problem, and do I need to attack that framework and show that that's bogus and leads to all sorts of goofy conclusions, or is there a way to say… we're actually satisfying your commitment in this case… It's that real extreme fight that people have between, you know, women's labor force participation as feminist liberation and labor force participation as capitalist immiseration. And the home childcare benefit is perfectly set to just blow that up. And I know people don't know what to do with it… I look at the research on it and I'm like it doesn't even affect that decision. Like, they do studies to see is this causing people to not work and it doesn't.

Bruenig also describes a type of policy judgment he was tasked with making earlier in his career, as a lawyer in the NLRB's division of advice, making philosophical arguments about how novel cases should be handled, loosely constrained by the existing law.

> The way that would work is whenever a new case would come into the agency someone would file a case and there was no precedent for the case or [it was] just really questionable., like a novel case. What do we do with this issue? We've never seen it before. It comes to the division of advice and they give it out to one of the attorneys. The attorneys essentially make a very philosophical-type judgment about—you know, I mean, ultimately, it's all citations back to the National Labor Relations Act, but that's a vague statute. So it's kind of like make your own adventure to figure out what conclusion you want to reach and what kind of analogies to other cases you want to do, but you could go any way with it, really. I thought that was perfect. Like, it uses the kind of philosophical mind you've got to make the argument and you're actually in a decisive position because these cases could go either way just because they've never been dealt with before.

5.3. Pros and cons

Some examples of the policy model have been politically effective on at least some occasions. DiEM25 and PPP have both shaped the platforms of politicians and political parties. The work entirely avoids the problem of the critical intellectual, as it consists in the development of positive policy proposals. It does not necessarily avoid the problem of novel values or the problem of academic overrepresentation, as sometimes academics do this work, and they will experience the normal pressures to appeal to their own distinctive values and emphasize the importance of problems that concern them directly and strategies that they are well suited to carry out. But they also face useful contravening pressures in addressing policymakers and party workers—namely, that excesses will tend to undermine successful uptake of their proposals, and that the need to write actionable policy proposals forces a change in style from most philosophical writing, which is not actionable in this way.

On the other hand, philosophy trains you for work along the policy model *somewhat*, but a lot of the skill it requires is not especially philosophical—networking, the rhetorical style of the political backstage, knowing lots of empirical details about the range of policy proposals out there and their consequences. This work is also not, in general, very participatory. It does not directly involve the cultivation of agency, class consciousness, or movement capacity. For readers for whom this sort of participatoriness is a priority, this is a key weakness.

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6. The bureaucratic model

6.1. What it is and who does it

The nature of the work varies from one instance to the next, but on the bureaucratic model, philosophers work or volunteer in government at some level—as an elected official, an unelected employee of a government agency, or a consultant or advisor.[19] Some philosophers are employed full time by some government agency (such as recipients of the recently abolished Presidential Management Fellowship), while others split their time between academic positions and government positions (such as people employed under the Intergovernmental Personnel Act). Philosophical heads of state such as Cicero, Lenin, Mao, Kwame Nkrumah, Léopold Senghor, and Julius Nyerere are some very prominent examples (for better or for worse!). Of course, most readers of this journal are not politicians of world-historical significance. Some more actionable examples might include Kyle Whyte's work with the U.S. National Climate Assessment and the White House Environmental Justice Advisory Council and Margaret Betz's work on the Swarthmore Environmental Advisory Council.

Betz described her work in greater detail in my interview with her. In Betz's Pennsylvania town, the borough council is responsible for many local governmental decisions, but they are advised by a range of other councils, including one devoted to environmental issues. They met monthly to prepare and vote on recommendations to the borough council. Some of the agenda was set by the advisory council itself, as when Betz spearheaded an initiative to have the town recognized by the Audubon Society as a "bird town;" some of the agenda was set by the borough council, as when they requested the advisory council's assistance in interpreting a county-level environmental initiative. The advisory council did not have any power to enforce its recommendations to the borough, but the borough council was generally accountable to them, at least in the sense that if they did not adopt the regulations, they explained why.

> Now they could disregard what we advised, but the implication is, with having all of these advisory councils, that, you know, these are people, these are fellow citizens taking time out of their busy lives to research, to look into these different issues that impact the borough and, you know, at least to hear us out.

6.2. What makes it philosophical

Betz described a few cases in which she drew directly on her background as someone who teaches ethics in general, and environmental ethics and the philosophy of food, in particular. Sometimes this is a matter of naming or explicating the values that are at stake in some discussion or mapping out directions a dialectic has taken or could take.

> I teach environmental ethics... Not that all of these people are amoral people but that I could maybe, like, give it a name. Like, yeah, you're right, this is supposedly one of the important moral principles all people should live by—[that] kind of direction. And I did do that a couple times just in the meetings where I would just pipe in and say, 'Remember I teach philosophy. I teach a lot of applied ethics. So I'm familiar with some of the larger arguments you could be making here.'

[19] "Bureaucratic" has a negative connotation. I do not mean anything negative by it here; as will, I hope, become clear, I think this work is very much worth doing.

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It is worth noting that Betz describes the use of her philosophical background knowledge here in terms of naming or explicating moral concerns that others on the council had already brought into the discussion. As an environmental ethicist, Betz could bring moral or aesthetic concerns to bear that others had not already taken into account (and of course it is perfectly possible that she did).[20] But this would at least risk introducing the problem of novel values.

Sometimes, Betz's background gave her more domain-specific tools to argue for a particular position. She was not a fan of the county's environmental guidance about food and community gardens, which she was responsible for interpreting for the borough council.

> I really felt like that might have been one of my greatest contributions... You know, we use our philosopher brains to analyze these positions and it's like, this is awful advice. It's just not practical. It's not doable. There's all sorts of hidden assumptions about it. So I really think I pointed out to my own borough that the county had an awful view or vision of what they were going to be able to do with the question of food and food security.

Though Betz did not say this explicitly, I suspect, as with Bruenig above, that philosophers on the bureaucratic model are especially likely to pay attention to big picture questions, which might otherwise get lost in the weeds. Betz noted that part of the motivation for the effort to have the municipality recognized as a bird town is that it is "kind of like a stand-in... for the rest of the environment—if birds are thriving in an area, that means a lot of things are thriving. It's a healthy ecosystem." It is at least plausible to me that philosophers might be more likely than average to attend to things like total ecosystem health, or the sorts of manageable ("quaint," as Betz says) problems that are diagnostic of the more fundamental values that are at stake in the council's work.

Betz also notes that a lot of the distinctive benefits are not so much what she provides to the council's work as how working on the council informs her teaching.

> The more important thing I think that I came out of it with is that it made me a better professor in the environmental ethics course, because I was able to give them an inside view... I teach at Rutgers, so it's like the suburbs of Camden and Jersey. Like, what's going on in your county? What's happening in your individual town? ... I think one of the things I see in environmental ethics courses is students will say to me, 'Well, if we know what's the problem and we know there are certain solutions... like, what's going on? Why aren't we doing it?' And I'm like well I can give you the microcosm view of why.

6.3. Pros and cons

I asked Betz how the problem of academic overrepresentation manifested in her work, if at all. She answered that it did not, largely because even though many people on the council were academics (since she lives in a college town), they were deferential enough to prevent their parochial habits or concerns from overwhelming the council's mission.

> I never had that problem... [S]ometimes we would turn to those people [i.e. lawyers] and be like, "This is that legalese kind of language. Can you explain what it is?" ... [I]n my

[20] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

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> own experience, as somebody that was highly educated and now as an academic in these conversations, I think I just kind of implicitly had this recognition that with this topic there was plenty I didn't know... Like, what is the policy? What is the law here? What are the expectations within the law right now? ... [I]n other words, I knew my lane... [I]t never felt like anybody was overriding anybody else's voice.

(She added that the council did not defer only to relevant credentialed experts, but also to activists who had done their homework and lived directly with some environmental problem, such as the chief organizer of the opposition to a trash incineration operation in a nearby predominantly black and brown town.) We did not discuss the problem of novel values explicitly, but again, getting real-time feedback from other council members in meetings will tend to limit excessive attention to novel concerns.

As for the problem of the critical intellectual, Betz notes that the tenor of the council's conversations was generally positive and constructive.

> The tone of this advisory committee was always... almost hopeful, in the sense of like, oh, we just learned of this new initiative on the state level that the state is willing to fund smaller municipalities to put solar panels on the fire station or something like that, and... we have to fill out a grant to get this money and we have to ask the borough if they will approve it. So... it wasn't a message of doom and gloom in most of the meetings. It was more like, what can we do? Like, with this vision of, how do we make our small borough just a better place? ... The one area where the conversations amongst us were more somber was when an initiative failed, you know, or the local government wasn't interested in it.

Betz is modest about the council's victories, but they are real. She was, for example, (after more work than she had initially expected) able to get the town designated as a bird town. The council's recommendations concerning waste disposal have met with mixed success.[21] The county has not yet (per the council's guidance) terminated its contract with the trash incinerator firm, but it has adopted the council's commitment to Zero Waste.[22]

I will note: it is reasonable to worry that the philosophers will be corrupted by the bureaucracies they get involved with. But I find little evidence of this, in the examples I am aware of. Betz and Whyte are, for example, quite aware of the limits of the bureaucracies they work with.[23]

On the other hand, this is, at least arguably, the least participatory of the four models I have discussed here. It requires the philosopher themselves to participate in government decision-making, but not, as a matter of course, to share that decision-making more broadly or encourage others' philosophical reflection to inform it. It will not tend to cultivate any kind of mass movement, class consciousness, or sense of agency or power in the broader public, except (and perhaps this is a big except!) as an exemplar for other philosophers to follow.

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[21] Betz 2021.

[22] See the Delaware County Office of Sustainability's "Delaware County's Path Towards Zero Waste," accessible online at https://www.delcopa.gov/sustainability/commission/otherpdfs/2024/DelCoZeroWastePlan_03-28-24.pdf

[23] See Whyte's contribution to a panel discussion as part of a 2022 virtual conference on "Looking Back, Moving Forward," a transcript of which is accessible online at https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/moving_forward/. Whyte is openly critical of (partial) elite capture of a government initiative he helped implement.

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7. Conclusion

To recap: I have offered a general description of public philosophy. I noted that the most obvious form that public political philosophy can take is writing for a general audience in favor of some political goals, and posed three problems that this sort of writing is liable (although not necessarily bound) to run up against—the problem of academic overrepresentation, the problem of the critical intellectual, and the problem of novel values. I considered four alternative models of public philosophy—the organizing model, the participatory policy, the policy model, and the bureaucratic model. Drawing on my interviews with practitioners of some of these models, I described the comparative advantages that philosophers have in pursuing each of them. All four of the models avoid the problem of the critical intellectual more or less completely, because they consist almost entirely in making positive policy proposals or building positive organizational capacity. They avoid the problem of novel values and academic overrepresentation to a greater or lesser extent, depending on (among other things) the extent to which academics working on these models set the agenda and the extent to which they receive real-time feedback which corrects against these two problems. They have all yielded observable, material political victories, although none are guaranteed to.

One recurring theme in the discussion of the four models is that philosophical training prepares people for this work, but only in some respects and only unevenly. To some extent, this is inevitable—philosophy graduate education programs just are not in a position to train people in the nuts and bolts of, say, forming a labor union. And there are good reasons not to want these programs to take a stand on tendentious political goals. But still, we might ask whether philosophy education should better prepare philosophers for work with communities outside of academia—by teaching students what forms public philosophy can take, and (when broadly within philosophers' wheelhouse) by cultivating the specific skills and knowledge that it takes to do these different forms of public philosophy well. Some programs already offer courses in public philosophy, or in particular varieties of public philosophy, but these are still very much the exception. To that end, the Public Philosophy Network has put together a Public Philosophy Syllabus and Assignment Archive and a series of introductory Guides to Public Philosophy, but it is just a start. I hope that the contributions to this volume are a sign of more to come.[24]

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Author contribution. Conceptualization: I.O.

[24] Accessible online at https://www.publicphilosophynetwork.net/syllabusassignmentarchive and https://www.publicphilosophynetwork.net/guides, respectively.

[25] Bright 2021.

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