

Philosophy for Characters

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ABSTRACT: Public philosophers have tended to think of their audience as the public, or perhaps *a* public or counterpublic. In my work on the Ask a Philosopher booth, however, it's been helpful to think of our audience as made up of a handful of characters—types defined by the way in which they engage (or decline to engage) with the booth. I describe the characters I've encountered at the booth: orbiters, appreciators, readers, monologists, freethinkers, scholars, and peers. By reflecting on these characters and their needs, we can both imagine other forms of public philosophy that might better serve them, and better articulate the values that inhere in public philosophy projects like the Ask a Philosopher booth. I conclude with a brief case for the philosophy of public philosophy.

KEYWORDS: public philosophy, Ask a Philosopher, metaphilosophy, outreach, publics

YOU ENCOUNTER SOME UNCANNY, puzzling, creepy, or awesome new phenomenon. You think that there must be *something* philosophically interesting to say about it. But you can't find the in. What traditional philosophical questions can this phenomenon be brought to bear on? What new philosophical questions does the phenomenon itself raise? You feel curious, but you don't know where to direct your curiosity.

This is a common enough experience among philosophers, I think. But it's perhaps especially common among public philosophers.¹ You get the sense that reflecting on the practice of public philosophy should help you solve some philosophical problem, or that the existence of some novel variety of public philosophy is itself philosophically significant. But you don't know what questions or methods will reveal that philosophical significance.

I don't have a general theory about what public philosophers ought to do in these situations. Instead, I have what I hope is a suggestive example.

In the spring of 2016, I began organizing a series of Ask a Philosopher booths around New York City.² In each installment of the booth, a few local philosophers set up a table in a public place—markets, street fairs, transit hubs, parks, and so on. We set out a bowl containing philosophical questions printed on little slips of paper (e.g., “What was the happiest day of your life?”, “If you play the lottery, do you know that you're going to lose?”, “Can consciousness be explained scientifically?”, “Should there be prisons?”), a bowl containing brief descriptions of thought experiments (e.g., Avicenna's floating man, Nozick's experience machine, Sen's flute problem), and a bowl of candy. I greet people by saying something like, “We're here talking with people about their philosophical questions and ideas. What have you been thinking about lately?” We try to solicit questions or subjects from the visitors themselves, but if nothing occurs to them, we use the question and thought experiment bowls to try to get conversations started. Over the years, we have discussed an enormous range of subjects—the meaning of life, scientific realism, our current political situation, what philosophy is, why there is something rather than nothing, mathematical reality, particular figures from the history of philosophy, and visitors' moral problems, among many other things. The visitors to the booth are equally diverse, with respect to age, ethnicity, religion, social class, ability, and philosophical background.

The booth has been educational for me in a number of ways. It has taught me about New Yorkers' philosophical interests (varied), about how to give philosophy a human face (warmth, humor, patience, showing up), about where and when people are prepared to do philosophy (when they are comfortable, at lunch, on vacation, on their commutes). The question I would like to focus on here, however, is about who public philosophy is for. How should we think of the audience for any given public philosophy project? When we do public philosophy, we might imagine our intended audience as *the* public—that is, as people outside of academic philosophy, in general. Or we might think of our audience as *a* public (Dewey 1927), or perhaps a counterpublic (Fraser 1990)—that is, as a group defined by the ramifying consequences of its coordinated behavior, or its opposition to some more dominant oppressive group. And we are sometimes correct to do so. However, thinking about our audiences as publics can distract us from other sorts of audiences that public philosophers might try to reach. This has become especially clear to me from the Ask a Philosopher booth. I have found that the booth has several audiences, none of which is helpfully thought of as a public. Each of these audiences is likely to get something different out of the booth, and so reveals a different type of value that a project like the booth could have. At the same time, each audience could also be served in other, perhaps more productive ways by other sorts of public philosophy projects. I sketch some of these projects below.

I have found it natural to think of each of these audiences as a character. In calling these ways of interacting with the booth characters, I do not want to imply that we are talking about enduring character traits; if someone is disposed to interact with the booth in a certain way today, they might be differently disposed tomorrow. Rather, I mean that these ways of approaching the booth are repeatable and recognizable, they reflect the visitors' (perhaps passing) needs and interests, and the philosophers working at the booth have to comport themselves differently to each of them. Let us consider each character in turn.

Types of Characters

Orbiters

Orbiters slow down as they walk past the booth, or perhaps pace around it, but don't engage beyond that. They are interested but wary.

Of all the characters, orbiters are least well-served by the booth. They clearly want to connect, but something prevents them from doing so. It is unclear what that is, but there are a few possibilities—introversion, fear of saying something foolish, uncertainty about what will happen if they approach the booth, or maybe just not having the time to stop. If they do not participate because they are generally introverted, or prefer to do philosophy alone or with friends, perhaps they already have (access to) all the public philosophy they need in the form of writing and other media for a general audience. But if the orbiters do not stop for one of the other reasons, they might not be well-served by the public philosophy resources currently on offer. This raises some fruitful questions for public philosophers. How can we create spaces where people are comfortable expressing their philosophical attitudes? (Warmth and humor go a long way at the Ask a Philosopher booth, but evidently, they do not go far enough.) How can we create spaces where people interact philosophically, but what is expected of them is relatively clear in advance? (We can start by thinking of multiplayer philosophical games.) How can we encourage people to do philosophy interstitially in the spaces between their other obligations? (We can start by thinking of all the places our interstitial attention might go—public art, graffiti, billboards, posts on public transportation, internet memes.)

Appreciators

Appreciators might take a picture of the booth, chuckle at it, congratulate us for our work, or take a piece of candy. Like orbiters, though, appreciators do not actually do any philosophy (at least outwardly) in the course of their interaction with the booth. They do, however, throw into relief a particular type of value that might inhere in a public philosophy project. They appreciate what we are doing, and perhaps they come to appreciate philosophy just a bit more for it. If philosophy is valuable, it is good for people to value it.

If the booth raises some people's opinions of philosophy, though, it does so incidentally and on a small scale. How might we improve people's opinions of philosophy more effectively? This is less a question for a philosopher than for a public relations specialist, but the answer will likely involve more public philosophy. Philosophy in our time can be helpfully compared with genetics during the heyday of Lysenkoism, the pseudoscientific alternative to mainstream genetics promoted by Stalin. In her history of American geneticists' attempts to wrestle with the popularity of Lysenkoism, Wolfe (2010) describes the series of strategies that the geneticists undertook—first translating and publishing Lysenko's works in English and carefully stating the evidence against his views in scholarly publications; then inveighing against Lysenko (and the ideological support he received from the Soviet government) in the popular press; and finally going on a sort of public relations campaign touting the accomplishments of mainstream genetics, which addressed Lysenkoism only obliquely, if at all. (Wolfe argues that only the final strategy ultimately worked.)

Of course, the analogy is not perfect—philosophy is not a strictly academic discipline, let alone a science, its competition is not pseudoscience, and the Cold War is over. However, we find today that social space that we might want philosophers to occupy has been ceded to technologists and capitalists like Elon Musk, on the one hand, and right-wing extremists like Stefan Molyneux, on the other (McKinney, 2017). This is troubling for a few reasons. One is that, just as Lysenko misinformed his followers about his techniques for vernalizing crops, Musk and Molyneux misinform their followers about philosophy. (Molyneux's book on logic, for example, seems to betray a misunderstanding of some basic logical concepts—validity, soundness, deduction, and others. Musk has claimed that he is a true socialist, while Karl Marx was a capitalist.) Another is that, like Lysenko, Musk and Molyneux set a bad methodological example. (Their philosophical speech and writing tend towards the glib, oracular, or trollish; these are not the sorts of philosophical habits most public philosophers want to promote.) A third is that, like Lysenko, Musk and Molyneux will use their position to promote dangerous or anti-social views that are convenient to the dangerous, anti-social formations that subtend them. For Lysenko, that formation was Stalinism. For Musk and Molyneux, it is technological capital and revanchist white supremacy, respectively. So we find Molyneux spreading the view that black people are innately unintelligent and criminal, and that racial diversity is incompatible with a free-market economy, and Musk spreading the view that all of our problems, no matter how thorny or systemic, can be solved by this or that little piece of marketized technology or social engineering.³

There is no simple solution to the problem of the Musks and Molyneuxs, but we can start by trying to get ordinary people to value mainstream philosophy (inside and outside of academia), rather than what they are selling.

Readers

Readers file through the questions and thought experiments and any other philosophical print material that we have out. They might listen to conversations taking place around them, but they do not speak up themselves.

Readers are stimulated to philosophical reflection by the booth, but like orbiters and appreciators, they are not interested in or prepared for a philosophical interaction with the people at the booth. Still, other things being equal, if philosophical reflection is valuable, then readers have gotten something of value out of the booth. There is already a wealth of long-form philosophical writing for a general audience, although readers might not be aware of it. As I mentioned above, though, we might think about new ways to open up interstitial opportunities for solitary philosophical reflection.

Monologuists

Monologuists want to share some theory, advice, or personal story, but are not interested in a conversation. Some of their monologues are not especially philosophical; one visitor to a booth outside the Brooklyn Museum stopped to tell us that this was her first time visiting the museum, even though she had lived in the neighborhood for decades. I do not see much distinctively philosophical value to these sorts of encounters, but if someone has something to say, it is nice if the booth offers them the opportunity to do so. Other monologues are quite philosophical, however. One visitor to the booth told us that, when she realized she could not do anything about climate change on her own, she learned to stop worrying and enjoy her life. Another visitor shared a kind of stoic practical philosophy that he was trying to turn into a book. Another visitor: “You know what Schopenhauer says? Life is a pendulum that swings between boredom and pain.” And off she went.

As I’ve suggested elsewhere (Olasov 2019), when people use the booth in this way, it becomes, essentially, a philosophy open mic, and it has all of the value that poetry and musical open mics have. Some of the poetry or music at an open mic will be good; some of it will not be. But whether the performance is good is largely beside the point. People care about the poems and songs they create, they want to share them with other people, and open mics provide them that opportunity. People care about their philosophical thoughts in much the same way. Of course, people can always share their philosophical thoughts with anyone willing to listen or read, but many have trouble finding an audience, or a situation where it is relevant or appropriate to go on at length philosophically. Public philosophers might think about creating other spaces for people to share their thoughts in this way. Holding a literal philosophy open mic is one possibility. Another possibility is suggested by the People’s Pad (<http://graysonearle.com/projects/pad/>), an installation that allows people to project their drawings onto a

visible surface in an urban environment. It would be relatively straightforward to set up a People's Pad expressly dedicated to users' philosophical thoughts.

Connectors

Lastly, there are three characters who each want to have some sort of substantive conversation: freethinkers, scholars, and peers. Peers want to discuss questions that professional philosophers widely recognize as philosophical. When I first imagined what the conversations at the Ask a Philosopher booth might look like, these were the people I had in mind—people with their own philosophical thoughts and concerns, who could benefit from discussion with professional philosophers, or who could use some guidance in discovering philosophical resources that might help them think more clearly or critically about the things they care about. (I also imagined, correctly, that visitors to the booth would teach the philosophers in the process.) The booth fits peers' needs pretty well.

Freethinkers and scholars present their own challenges and opportunities, though. Freethinkers want to discuss supernatural, conspiratorial, or otherwise intellectually disreputable views that they hold or entertain. In these conversations, the main task of the philosopher is to turn questions about, say, astrology or dream interpretation into questions that they regard as philosophical. (For example: what does the popularity of astrology tell us about the role of storytelling in our lives? What would make a dream interpretation correct?) One value here is more or less selfish; the skill they require us to exercise, finding the philosophical angle, is useful across a range of contexts in philosophy. But by redirecting the freethinkers' attention, we can also gently correct their misunderstandings about what philosophers actually do. This is its own value—giving people accurate information about what philosophers do, or what sorts of questions professional philosophers regard as philosophical. And again, we might ask how we could pursue this value more directly. One solution would be to get more philosophers in the mass media talking about a wide range of philosophical problems. Another solution would be to expand precollege philosophy instruction.

Scholars, on the other hand, want to discuss recognizably philosophical material, but they direct the discussion to questions about particular philosophers, texts, or theories. Unlike the freethinkers, they might share the academic philosopher's sense of what counts as philosophical. But they approach this material, so to speak, from the outside. One anecdote might give a sense of what I have in mind. Some families with a handful of children stopped by the booth one day, and one of the moms asked her daughter if she had any philosophical questions. She asked, "Who's better, Freud or Jung?" It turned out, in the ensuing conversation, that she knew a remarkable amount about the two philosopher-psychologists, and had plenty of interesting things to say for herself about how well we know our own dreams and what dreams do for us. Still, it is unfortunate that somehow, even at that age, she had already gotten the sense that asking about

philosophy meant asking about some great philosophers. The Ask a Philosopher booth is one place where we can try to counteract this—or, more broadly, where we can encourage people to take their own philosophical thoughts seriously.

For the Philosophy of Public Philosophy

It is one thing to do public philosophy, and quite another to think philosophically about public philosophy. I hope I have shown above that one particular public philosophy project, the Ask a Philosopher booth, has been worthwhile. But what good is it to think philosophically about the project itself? More generally, what good is the philosophy of public philosophy to the public philosopher? If we think philosophers should be doing more public philosophy, rather than just talking with each other about their own problems, is the philosophy of public philosophy not a distraction?

A cynical answer would be to say that as long as the profession of philosophy continues to recognize and reward scholarly writing for a professional audience, to the exclusion of public philosophy, the philosophy of public philosophy might just be what public philosophers have to do to support their public work.

This is true as far as it goes, but it is also incomplete. First, the philosophy of public philosophy is useful for public philosophy advocacy in a few ways. Making explicit what we mean by “public philosophy” can prevent us from talking past one another when we use the phrase. It will also tend to undermine criticisms of public philosophy. Callard (2019) charges public philosophers with simply giving people the answers to philosophical questions without providing them with the underlying reasoning, overselling philosophers’ political expertise, and with offering a kind of pleasant diversion that is not wrenching or dangerous enough to be regarded as valuable in any distinctively philosophical way. Aikin and Talisse (2019) criticize public philosophers for prematurely theorizing about ongoing social and political problems, confirming their audiences’ biases, and for developing conceptual tools that empower bosses and conservatives. Smith (2019) claims that “the recent rise of public philosophy [is] an attempt by the neoliberal academy to claim for itself everything we do, to leave us no space for autonomy except perhaps within the privacy of our families.” But if we consider the rich variety of forms that public philosophy can take, the range of subjects it can address, and even the different sources of institutional support that can sustain it, we see that these criticisms are, at best, criticisms of particular *types* of public philosophy, and, at worst, straightforwardly unsound.

To be clear, reflecting on our practice will not just help us respond to criticism; it will also help us build a positive case for public philosophy. In the discussion of characters at the Ask a Philosopher booth above, we were able to bring into focus a number of potentially otherwise indistinct values that attach to public philosophy projects—improving public regard for philosophy, prompting philosophical reflection, creating opportunities for philosophical self-expression,

clarifying and refining people's spontaneous philosophical thoughts and concerns, connecting people to useful philosophical resources, changing public perception of what philosophers do, encouraging people to think for themselves, improving our ability to bring philosophy to bear meaningfully on a wide range of subjects. The clearer we can be about the importance of what we do, the more effectively we can convince the discipline and the world.

Lastly, the philosophy of public philosophy can inform the practice of public philosophy itself. This is evident from, for example, Lam's (2019) work on narrative in public philosophy; if we can recognize, say, that some set of philosophical narratives share a certain shape, it might be productive or inspiring to imagine other possible shapes. I've shown something similar above—when we get clear about the values in a public philosophy project, we can think more clearly about other possible projects that pursue those values more efficiently or directly. Perhaps Aristotle was mistaken when he wrote, of the good in general, "Surely, then, knowledge of the good must be very important for our lives? And if, like archers, we have a target, are we not more likely to hit the right mark?" (2000, 4) But we have reason to believe that something like this is true of public philosophy.

Notes

1. An earlier draft of this paper contained an extensive discussion of what public philosophy is. I'd like to thank an anonymous reviewer for helping me realize that this discussion was pretty tedious. Still, it might be helpful to say something about how I understand public philosophy. To a first (circular) approximation, public philosophy is whatever we ought to be advocating for when we do public philosophy advocacy—that is, when we try to incentivize and legitimize public philosophy and build solidarity between the people who do public philosophy. Philosophers are involved in a wide variety of projects that are appropriate targets of this sort of advocacy: collaborations with policymakers, collaborations with activists, NGOs, and community groups, collaborative research with scholars in other disciplines, applied research on matters of concern to people other than professional philosophers, professional consulting, philosophical counseling, teaching disadvantaged groups, precollege philosophy instruction, philosophical meetups, lectures, and other events for a general audience, appearances in mass media and the popular press, and philosophical multimedia projects.

It's not obvious that these projects have anything in common. Still, I think the following definition of public philosophy is extensionally adequate, if a bit unwieldy. Public philosophy is work that (a) brings philosophers' characteristic knowledge or skills to bear on a matter of concern to a non-professional audience, and is either (i) applied philosophy produced for an audience of professional philosophers, or

(ii) collaborative with or produced for a non-professional audience other than traditional university students; or (b) is intended, primarily or in large part, to cultivate the acquisition of such knowledge or skills in a non-professional audience other than traditional university students.

The definition is as cumbersome as it is in part because public philosophy is a heterogeneous affair, and in part because, as Collins (2020) suggests, public philosophy is difficult to distinguish from, for example, university teaching and highly theoretical scholarly work on matters of public concern. Trying to say what public philosophy is, in a sense, a merely terminological exercise, but it's one that can yield real insights for public philosophy advocates.

2. The idea for the booth came from some remarks by Tirrell (2016) about a somewhat similar project started by Lawrence Blum. The booth has been supported by the Brooklyn Public Library, the Public Philosophy Network, and the American Philosophical Association.

3. Perhaps it's worth noting that the distinction I'm trying to draw here is a fraught one for public philosophers. After all, philosophers have long distinguished between the rightful occupants of some distinctively philosophical social space and the mere pretenders—between the real philosophers and the sophists. When they have, they've often excluded people who have a more expansive conception of legitimate philosophical activity, or just philosophical interests or beliefs that are unusual for their time and place. But that is *us*; the distinction between philosophers and sophists is likely to be used to undermine public philosophers. Still, I do not think we should abandon this distinction altogether. Even if public philosophy is a big tent, we need to be able to keep the Musks and Molyneuxs out, for the reasons I explain above.

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