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A Companion to Public Philosophy

Edited by

LEE McINTYRE, NANCY McHUGH, AND IAN OLASOV

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A Companion to Public Philosophy

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Foreword

JASON STANLEY

It is a daunting task to introduce a volume of this range and importance, even more so when the audience at which it is directed are one's professional colleagues. To professional philosophers, "public philosophy" resonates very differently than to those outside the academic discipline. The task of this volume is directed at professional philosophers rather than to a public that will decide for itself what is important and not important. Whether the public will be interested in something and interested in it because they regard it as philosophical will not ever be determined by what professional philosophers tell them they should be interested in. That is a false theory of the public. Some of what a public may regard as important philosophy might rightly be regarded by professional philosophers as something else, perhaps self-help. Other times, professional philosophers might just be wrong about the scope of philosophy.

Insofar as someone needs to be *convinced* of the importance of public philosophy and learn it as a distinctive kind of writing and thinking, or a set of ways of writing and thinking, distinct from academic writing, that person is a professional philosopher. How does one who is used to engaging only an academic audience, engage a public? What are the different ways in which one can, as a professional philosopher, interact with publics, writing or otherwise, e.g. via working with activists or teaching in prisons? Should the label of "public philosophy" be reserved as a name for the task of explaining familiar philosophical problems, such as the Sorites Paradox, to a lay public? Or is it a label for the public work that philosophers have always done, as intellectuals in the public sphere contributing to ongoing debate on topics from social change to existential peril? This volume addresses and speaks to all of these questions and more.

These essays, more than anything, are a wide and variegated field report from philosophers who have successfully engaged various publics. Many essays are philosophers' reflections on the publics they have engaged, the methods they have used to engage them, and the lessons and morals from these engagements. It emerges from these essays, for example, that there are very different publics who are responding to philosophy. There is an avid public for philosophy in American prisons, where the teaching of philosophy has attracted a dedicated cadre of professors and students. There is a public among activist groups across the political spectrum, a public in government policy. There is also, as it turns out, an avid public for philosophy in banks, private equity, and the tech oligarchy.

There is a sub-theme to this volume that is indicative of its audience of professional philosophers. As they always have, philosophers are playing roles in public political debate. You will find philosophers, including in this volume, divided upon whether this role – of, say, the public engagements of a Jürgen Habermas in Germany, or an Angela Davis or Cornell West in the United States – "count as" public philosophy. Are these philosophers who have become activists and hence left a pure domain of thought that is the philosophical? Or are they bringing lengthy philosophical engagement to political debate upon which it rightly bears? Is their role philosophical only when they directly bring a central philosophical concept to bear on public debate? More controversially, can the topics of public debate, the decision points of action and logic, and how they weigh into evaluating a position themselves, change and inform the work and thinking of philosophy?

My own view here is as follows. The concept of freedom is at the heart of philosophical inquiry. It is also a concept shared and revered and fought over by many publics. If, like me, you entered the field of philosophy not because of a desire to be a professional philosopher, but because your interest lay in a concept like freedom, you will find yourself drawn into debates about it outside philosophy. When those debates are political, when things, lives, policies, and decisions hang on it, the position you take is not merely academic. This does not mean that it is no longer philosophy. Indeed, anyone who has dedicated their life to philosophy should reject the view that philosophy is merely of academic importance. It may also be that philosophical plausibility is a function not just of its internal logic but also of its consequences with regard to action.

In boundary debates about public philosophy, the notion of a central philosophical concept is sometimes held fixed, determined by professional philosophers. But what is considered to be a central philosophical concept is a highly contextual matter and differs across time and traditions. All political philosophers regard the concept of democracy as philosophically central. Colonialism, by contrast, is utterly central to multiple philosophical traditions in social and political philosophy but has been less central in analytic political philosophy. In 427 BCE, Cleon's contribution to the Mytilenian debate begins with the declaration that "a democracy is incapable of governing others," thereby theorizing democracy and colonialism together as competitors (Thucydides III.36). Professional philosophers in their academic debates are as hostage to faddish thinking and trendiness of topic as any other group. What is currently thought of as central by professional philosophy is a rough guide, at best, to centrality. Professional philosophers should be open to correction by reality of their preconceptions about centrality.

How does one address a public? What is the recent history of these attempts? Should we strictly delineate the boundaries of what public philosophy is, and if so, who should do the delineating, and how? What is so vexed about the attachment of the adjective "public" to the noun "philosophy"? As the essays in this volume show, reflection on the topic of public philosophy raises thorny philosophical issues about what it is to practice philosophy, and hence questions about what is constitutive of being a philosopher.

Part I

Public Philosophy and Its Problems

1

What Is Public Philosophy?

LEE MCINTYRE

After years of misgivings, false starts, and concerns about "what are my colleagues going to think?" – usually followed by furious clandestine activity – I am elated to think that public philosophy has finally arrived. This is more than just the philosophical profession "having a moment" over an enlarged view of what issues count as philosophical and who counts as a philosophical audience, but a full-fledged acknowledgment that public engagement is now returning to the rightful place it had at the time that philosophy was founded.

When Socrates began to engage people in the streets of Athens 2400 years ago, philosophy was very much a public enterprise. The idea was that through philosophical discussion, we could learn more about not only the important questions of knowledge, reality, morality, and justice but also how to make ourselves better people in the process. At its inception, philosophy was practiced by and with ordinary people, and it was responsive to their questions and concerns. Somewhere along the way, philosophy got taken over by scholars, but it was not always thus. Indeed, for most of its history, philosophy's most celebrated practitioners often did something else for a living: Confucius was a governor, Maimonides was a physician, Descartes was a soldier, Hume was an administrator, Hildegard of Bingen was an abbess, Locke was a government official, Bishop Berkley was a religious cleric, Sri Harsa was a court poet, Anselm was a cleric, Spinoza was a lens grinder, Leibniz was a mathematician, Anna Julia Cooper was a school teacher and organizer, and so on.

The standard history tells us that all this changed with Kant, who became the first famous philosophy professor[1] – which means that in about 1780, over two millennia after it got its start, the professionalization of philosophy had begun. Over time, as philosophers began to respond more and more to one another (and philosophical issues got more difficult for even the educated public to understand), there came a growing sense that philosophy was not very applicable to real-world problems and that those who were interested in philosophical work were most likely to be other philosophers. In the ensuing years, as the analytic and continental traditions began their split (and the former became much more dominant in the English-speaking world), this problem was exacerbated. More and more, philosophy abandoned its concern with the "meaning of life" and focused most of its attention on the "meaning of words."

A Companion to Public Philosophy, First Edition. Edited by Lee McIntyre, Nancy McHugh, and Ian Olasov.

Of course, even in its recent history, there have been those who sought engagement with a general audience or wanted to make their work more relevant to human concerns. Not far behind, though, were the nay-sayers, who celebrated Bertrand Russell's work in logic but decried his popular essays and small paperbacks, or those who failed to acknowledge that Karl Marx was a philosopher at all. But in recent years, there has been a revival of interest in the idea that philosophy should matter more, not just to the public but to the lives of the professional philosophers who do it, and that philosophy can and should be written in a more accessible way. More importantly, there has been less apology and embarrassment over the desire to do public philosophy, even while there are still organizations like "Against Professional Philosophy" that keep their membership secret and identify themselves only by code names for fear of retaliation.

In the twenty-first century, we have numerous examples of prominent members of the profession who write for a general audience (Harry Frankfurt, Peter Godfrey-Smith, Kate Manne, Jason Stanley, and George Yancy come to mind) but also philosophical radio shows, podcasts, a dedicated philosophy column (until recently) in the *New York Times* called *The Stone*, and a new column in *The New Statesman* called *Agora*.[2] We have public events like "Ask a Philosopher" and "Night of Philosophy" in many cities,[3] and philosophers who give TED talks, write op-eds, and give speeches to industry, government, and corporations all around the world.[4] Some these days even work as consultants on popular television shows that take up philosophical issues, like *The Good Place*.[5] Also worth mentioning here are some of the efforts to capture philosophical issues on film, such as *The Imitation Game*, *Memento*, and *The Matrix*, not to mention documentary films like Astra Taylor's *Examined Life* and *What Is Democracy?* and Raoul Peck's biographical drama *The Young Karl Marx*.[6] For those who wish to do public philosophy, the venues these days are abundant.

There is even recognition now by the American Philosophical Association (APA) itself of the value of public philosophy: it started the Public Philosophy Network (before it grew into its own entity) and the APA Committee on Public Philosophy. Other institutions that promote the worth of public philosophy include the Marc Sanders Foundation, the Kegley Institute, the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy at George Mason, The Society of Philosophers in America (SOPHIA), Philosophy Learning and Teaching Organization (PLATO), the Parr Center for Ethics, the Prindle Institute for Ethics, The Kettering Foundation, and the National High School Ethics Bowl.

It is important to remember, too, that in other countries, philosophy never really left public life in the way it did in the United States. Even at the height of the linguistic turn in philosophy in the 1960s, Oxbridge philosophers were on British radio and TV all the time, and there are still philosophical radio and TV programs in France and Germany. While there are surely still some philosophers who look down their noses at anything perceived as "popular," we have also seen an avalanche of academics who are trying to get their own titles published in the popular philosophy series at Blackwell, Oxford, and Open Court.[7] It is no longer absurd to think that "public philosophy" is a respectable enterprise within philosophy itself.

The appearance of so many works in the last decade that fall under the banner of "public philosophy" has done much to enhance the idea that one can engage in public philosophy and still be a first-class scholar, and even to broaden our understanding of scholarship to include public engagement. One hopes that those who are coming out of graduate school in the next few decades will not remember a world that was any different. The challenge here, of course, is to do work that (1) does not give short shrift to the philosophical issues but (2) engages people beyond the academy in important matters that philosophers are thinking about. The balance is tricky. One must strive simultaneously not to "water down" the issues

but also not to lose the non-specialist reader. It's hard enough to do philosophy with people who share your professional training; try making it comprehensible to a general audience.

Some of the best examples of public philosophy so far seem to come from those who strive to make most of their work accessible so that it exists only in one (clear) form, rather than having a "scholarly" book, followed by a "popular" book, on the same issue. Of course, that is only one way of doing public philosophy. Another model might be where philosophers take on important matters of public concern in their scholarship, with less thought for who their reading audience might be than for the idea that public philosophy means doing work that serves the public good. This can lead to tension. Is public philosophy more about bringing the public into the world of philosophers or getting philosophers to reach out to a larger set of issues in the world? Maybe it's both. An emerging third modality is when philosophers work collaboratively with outside communities, decision-makers, and others about issues that they would like to bring to the table.[8]

These considerations can lead to a fair amount of criticism and controversy – and confusion – and perhaps for that reason, they are doubly important to contemplate in a volume such as this, which is the first general anthology devoted to public philosophy in the English language. And after waiting all these years, there's a lot to consider! What is public philosophy? Is it the same as "popular" or "applied" philosophy? Who counts as a public philosopher? Does one need a PhD? An academic appointment? If we work with collaborators, are they public philosophers as well? What counts as public engagement? Is it merely making our work more accessible to a general audience? Or is it taking on some of the burning issues of our day like fascism or inequality that are of particular moment at present within our society – and taking a stand? What is the line between activism and public philosophy? Is there a distinct set of "public" philosophical issues that carve out a separate subdiscipline? Or does every subdiscipline and specialty area within philosophy have the potential to become a source of public engagement? Should public philosophy be thought of more as an approach to doing philosophy than its own subdiscipline? How should we provide institutional recognition and credit for public philosophical work? And finally, why is it important to do this kind of work at all?

One can find a lot of good work in public philosophy these days that provides different answers to these questions. Indeed, given the amount of work that can credibly call itself "public philosophy," it is remarkable that until now there has not been a general anthology of readings on this topic.[9] In this volume, my colleagues and I have sought to remedy this by featuring work from some of the most outstanding public philosophers of our time, who represent a diversity of approaches to the discipline.

What about the critics and the set of open critical issues that face public philosophy's relationship to philosophy as a profession? As stated, public philosophy has been the subject of a great deal of criticism, which we've made an effort to feature here as well. This book is organized to consider both general issues in how to approach and think about public philosophy – what it means, what may be its limits – and examples of outstanding work in various specific areas of concern. Some of the historically neglected topics on race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, class, disability, and weight are all featured here. We also include chapters on the diverse "modalities" of public philosophy to answer the question, "where does public philosophy take place?" And with whom? In Ancient Greece, they had the marketplace. Today we have the classroom, but also radio, film, television, podcasting, Zoom calls. . . a veritable electronic reimagining of the public square.

Finally, there are questions about the institutional and societal challenges that face public philosophy. Recognizing that most of the people – at least so far – who do public philosophy

are academics, it is an important question how much public philosophy should count toward getting a job, tenure, or promotion within the profession of philosophy. To date, many institutions have been wary of "counting" this sort of work, but there are now guidelines from the Public Philosophy Network, as well as mentor and review panels, that can help with this. Another thing that might help is better public relations for philosophy or simply seeing more people identify that this is what they do so outsiders can recognize public philosophers and public philosophy when they see it. Outreach efforts like "Ask a Philosopher" and "Night of Philosophy" are a delightful way to bring the public face to face with what philosophers do, in a not-so-subtle return to the Athens marketplace. Philosophy can be meaningful to people in ways that one might never have imagined.

Is it reasonable to expect, though, that if public philosophy is worth doing, we should have some way of measuring its impact? Yes, but this should not presume that the only type of public philosophy worth doing is that which is "measurable" in pages or clicks; since there are so many different varieties of public philosophy, it would be hard to have a shared way of measuring its impact across all approaches. In times of crisis, perhaps the greatest measure of public philosophy is how much of a difference it can make to society as a whole – as in Locke's influence on the founding of the American government or Marx in socialist countries, right down to today's concerns about "post-truth" or protests in the interest of social justice – and this is all notoriously difficult to measure in quantitative terms. In terms of influence, however, there is no question that one can always find a few philosophers at the forefront of social and cultural change. So why, until now, have there been so few people doing it – or seeking credit for the idea that this is what they are doing?

This lament is probably as old as philosophy itself, framed most eloquently by Henry David Thoreau in the middle of the nineteenth century, when he observed that "there are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers." Can one imagine saying the same about other professions, like medicine or law? What would it mean to have professors of surgery but no surgeons or professors of law but no lawyers? If the only employment of philosophers is to train other philosophers, what then is our most basic "work"? There is an element of "practice" in philosophy that has been missing for quite some time now, as the academy has ceded more and more philosophical territory to others who fall outside it. These days it is not unusual to have an ethics board at a major metropolitan hospital that includes a theologian, a lawyer, a physician, and perhaps an MBA, but no one with any formal training in ethics. How many panels on CNN and MSNBC did we watch during the Trump era that were concerned with lying, facts, and truth but did not even consider the idea of including a philosopher? In a parallel universe, how often have we seen futurist tech capitalists (like Steven Jobs and Elon Musk) and right-wing extremists (like Ben Shapiro and Richard Spencer) speculating about matters that public philosophers might be weighing in on, instead?

If more of a secondary employment market existed outside colleges and universities, that would be another way to do public philosophy. And in this volume, we've included chapters by people who have found a way to do just this.[10] But surely the campaign for public philosophy is about more than just a jobs program for philosophy (although, even if only that, it would be welcome). The "public intellectual" role in American life has all but disappeared (and probably never paid that well to begin with) irrespective of the jobs crisis in philosophy, yet we still find a different orientation in Europe, where the opinions of philosophers and others are sought on societal, governmental, and cultural affairs. And who can say that doesn't sound pretty good?

But that is not really what the debate over public philosophy is all about. In the eyes of the general public – and even in our own – when we think of a philosopher, we think of an

academic, a teacher, who trains students and does their own work (usually consisting of articles written only for other philosophers) in spare moments between student conferences and committee meetings, or over the summer. But I am prepared here to argue that by abandoning the practice of philosophy – and retreating more and more into the academic model of the philosophy professor – philosophy has diminished its scope and importance not just in the eyes of the public but even for the people who are doing it. To be engaged with matters of public importance – where our analytical skills might be used to make the world a better place and our own lives more meaningful – is to see philosophy at its best. It is to stretch to the full extent of our powers. Not just to seek influence or fame for personal reasons, but to restore philosophy to its rightful place as the means to seek a better life for both the individual and society. That is what public philosophy can do.

It may have been a long time, but you can't tell me that even among most academics, we don't feel the loss every time we teach Intro to Philosophy and start with Socrates. The students regard us curiously as we smile at the audacity of the central place that philosophy held in Athenian culture. Plato holds us rapt as we hear Socrates hold forth on the important issues of the day, all while reminding us how little we actually know. This reinforces in our mind the proud place that philosophy comes from, and I always feel its presence like a phantom limb. Yet it is still there in the voices that ring out through the dialogues across the ages. Before philosophy was about writing, it was about doing. It was about becoming something more than what we are – or knowing something we had failed to see – by using the powers of reason and disputation to engage with one another on the most important matters of the day.

To read the dialogues is to remind ourselves of what philosophy looked like at the height of its powers. When philosophers were respected and consulted. When we were free and independent, to pursue a question wherever the argument might lead, without fear of authority, censure, or – these days – a bad teaching evaluation, the reduction of a tenure track position to adjunct status, or the threat of layoffs by administrators if our enrollments do not increase.

"And what is good, Phaedrus? And what is not good? – Need we ask anyone to tell us these things?"

Notes

1 See Chapter 2 of this volume, by Adam Briggle.
2 *The Stone* ran for a little over 10 years and was recently eliminated in a reorganization of op-ed columns at the *New York Times* (https://dailynous.com/2021/05/25/the-new-york-times-eliminates-dedicated-philosophy-column). *Agora*, the philosophy column in *The New Statesman*, is at https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2021/05/agora-a-marketplace-of-ideas.
3 See Chapter 27 of this volume, by Ian Olasov.
4 See Chapters 3, 23, and 40 of this volume, by Tom Morris, Ruth Chang, and Patrick Lin, respectively.
5 See Chapter 20 of this volume, by Tom May.
6 See Chapter 22 of this volume, by Steven Schoonover.
7 See Chapter 24 of this volume, by William Irwin.
8 See Chapters 33, 34, and 35 of this volume, by Michael Ray, Andrea Pitts, and Anita Allen, respectively.
9 Although there have of course been kindred efforts over the years: a 2014 special issue of *Essays in Philosophy* devoted to public philosophy, Brister and Frodeman's *A Guide to Field Philosophy* and Fulford, Lockrobin, and Smith's *Philosophy and Community*, Miller's *Intentional Disruption*

(a collection of papers about public philosophy), various essays in the journal *Precollege Philosophy and Public Practice*, as well as a number of books and essay collections devoted to particular figures in public philosophy and particular domains of public philosophy practice (E.T. Weber's *America's Public Philosopher*, Briggle and Frodeman's *Socrates Tenured*, and countless books about the theory and practice of philosophy for children, healthcare ethics, philosophical counseling, etc., over the years). One should also note that there are references to earlier discussions of public philosophy by Chomsky, Nussbaum, Tully, Laden, and others scattered throughout the volume.

10 See Chapter 37 of this volume, by Michael Brent and Reid Blackman, and also Chapter 38 by John Altmann and Bryan van Norden. Further opportunities to do public philosophy outside the academy can be found in the chapters by Tom Morris, Lou Marinoff, and many others in this volume.