

Back to the Cave

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For far too long we have busied ourselves with thinking about ways to change the city. It is about time we let the city change the ways that we think.

(Kishik 2015: 95)

Descent

In early January, 2014, I met with the Vice-Provost of Felician College to inform her that the upcoming Spring semester would be my last. Unexpectedly, my voice waivered and my eyes grew moist as I said my piece. To be sure, intentionally leaving my full-time position in philosophy, even at a school that did not grant tenure, was frightening, especially without gainful employment waiting in the wings. But the real driver of my decision, and what I realized was rendering it so dramatic, was not dissatisfaction with a particular appointment but disenchantment with my chosen profession. I no longer wanted to be an ‘academic philosopher.’ The moment was emotionally fraught because I was severing a significant facet of my identity: I was walking away from a world that I had immersed myself over the previous 24 years – more than half my life at the time. I was leaving The Academy behind.

Walking away from a career as a philosophy professor is not the same as walking away from being a philosopher. *That* aspect of my identity was – and remains – non-negotiable, for though

very much changed by choice and chance, I continue to become the person I set out to be when deciding to major in philosophy thirty years ago. The new challenge I gave myself in the summer of 2014 was how to maintain my identity outside of academia. Living in New York City and raising three young boys (ages 7 and under at the time; now all three attending New York City public schools), I thought it fitting that I attempt to be a *city* philosopher – in particular, a New York City philosopher – and so I created the Gotham Philosophical Society, a non-profit corporation with the mission of using “the critical rigor and creative imagination of philosophical thought to transform the civil, political, and educational institutions of New York City.”

The need to justify this enterprise beyond satisfying my imperative to continue doing what I loved to do was easy enough. New York is continuously evolving, but the social and political discourse (such that it is) concerned with that evolution is almost wholly devoid of philosophical clarity and insight. Hence my city’s trajectory is, perhaps unsurprisingly, determined by those with the greatest appetites for money, power, and prestige, rather than by those inclined toward reasoned deliberation concerning the conditions necessary for New Yorkers to flourish. Yet this is not *because* those running the city have rebuffed the philosophers (though no doubt they probably would); the situation, from my perspective, is more disturbing than that: most of the city’s philosophers appear unwilling to enter the public arena. While New York can boast of an exceedingly high concentration of philosophical talent as per a frequently-sited metric such as the Philosophical Gourmet Report, with students traveling from all over the globe to study with them, their names remain unknown to the city at large. Too few of the city’s thinkers show much interest in crossing the notional divide separating the classroom from the city streets.¹

Hence too many of New York's philosophers are at once here and not here. They live and work *in* the city, but their work is neither *of* nor *for* the city.

These twin difficulties – and they are indeed related – provide the Gotham Philosophical Society with its reason for being.² The city suffers from the lack of the critical perspective philosophers can provide and as a result the conversations that shape its present and conceive its future are primarily characterized by near-sighted self-interest, conceptual shallowness, and fatalistic cynicism. The reputation of philosophy, and so the community of philosophers, suffers when a bloodlessly abstract conception of philosophical activity is permitted to prevail in the public consciousness. To maintain (if not in word then certainly in deed) that philosophy is a discipline requiring careful study under the guidance of a credentialed professional within a suitably circumscribed space perpetuates its widespread reputation as irrelevant. Whether this reputation is deserved is somewhat beside the point, but philosophers have, I believe, considerable incentive to counter it. As colleges and universities continue their transformation to a business model that engages students as consumers, the number of philosophy departments facing retrenchment is bound to grow unless a compelling case can be made for their value. Any such case, I shall argue here, should be staked to the very cities where philosophers earn their bread. Philosophical activity without regard for the needs of people in our urban communities is an intellectual activity without practical relevance, and fittingly described as ‘academic.’

The Philosophical Significance of the City

When Socrates quipped that “I am a lover of knowledge, and the men who dwell in the city are my teachers, and not the trees or the country” (Plato 2006: 230d), he was doing more than telling off Phaedrus for poking fun at his reluctance to travel beyond Athens’s walls. Socrates was

expressing a central tenet of his personal worldview, one that he fatefully maintained to the end when he found neither a life in the city without philosophy, nor a philosophical life in exile, as worth living. This stance is generally held up as a testament to the value of philosophy, an activity so vital and important that this man of impeachable integrity chose to die rather than live without it. To keep the focus here, however, risks missing the urban forest for the philosophical trees. Socrates certainly held philosophy up as the most profound human activity, and so the most essential, yet to be banished from the city was to be cut off from the *source* of its significance, that is from the very conditions that make philosophy worth doing.

The importance of the city to questions of justice is obvious and familiar (see Nicol, this volume on how Plato used the role of the city-soul analogy in the *Republic* to make the case that well-ordered cities and well-ordered souls are mutually dependent). But it is philosophy itself, and not merely certain philosophical issues, that the very nature of urban life inspires. This is because “the city defines man.” (Fell 1997: 26). Looking back at the beginnings of the European tradition, George S. Fell finds that for the ancients,

“[t]he polis is the beginning of man both as to history and as artifice. Because in the city man first becomes conscious of himself, for it is the community which gives him his problems: his language and its myriad confusions; the images on the wall – appearance and reality, the one and the many, autonomy and heteronomy. The city awakens philosophy from slumber. Whatever man *qua* man is, mere exemplification of homo sapiens was looked upon by the Greeks as philosophically uninteresting. It is man under *nomos*, not *physis*, who is the proper concern of thought.” (Fell 1997: 26)

Man under *nomos* is man under laws, customs, habits, and norms, and it is in the city that the regulation of thought and action becomes – because there it is both pressing and difficult – a *philosophical* issue. In homogenous communities shared practices and perspectives that are rooted in a common history provide necessary order and inform group identity and membership. Critical meta-analysis of the *fittingness* or *correctness* of such practices and perspectives tends,

therefore, to be muted. But given that “the soul of a city lies in its heterogeneity,” (Conlon 1999/Meagher 2008: 200) the normative status of normative practices is there an open and often asked question.

Philosophy is the critical reflection on inherently human practices, undertaken in the hope of understanding why they exist, how they work, and how they might be improved or superseded; the city is philosophically fertile ground because in it the greatest diversity of such practices is to be found. As Paul Tillich observed, “[b]y its nature, the metropolis proves what otherwise could be given only by traveling; namely, the strange. Since the strange leads to questions and undermines familiar tradition, it serves to elevate reason to ultimate significance.” (Quoted in Jacobs 1961: 238) The city incites us to philosophize because the city is where we can expect our assumptions about how to live to be countered. The city challenges us by presenting us with lives lived differently than our own. In the city we are routinely confronted by choices we have not made, beliefs we do not believe, and goals we have not set. We are, in other words, in “continuous propinquity” with the ‘Other,’ and we come to a better understanding of ourselves – as individuals and as a species – through that opposition. (Mendietta 2000/Meagher 2008: 222)

To commit to living in the city is to embrace “the being together of strangers,” (Young 1990: 237), and so to accept a form of social life that often seems defined by deep disagreement about how the problems of living in community can be effectively and efficiently alleviated (they seem rarely, if ever, resolved). Philosophy, therefore, would appear to be an invaluable tool for navigating the urban experience, both for the individual citizen and for our civic institutions. Yet as I noted at the outset, professional philosophers rarely figure in the daily life of my city (nor, I gather, in the lives of most others). Yes, things are changing, and as this volume attests there is a growing appreciation among philosophers for the importance of applying their skills in the

service of the issues of urban life and in a decidedly more publicly engaged manner. It is also the case that ‘public philosophy’ has taken off, with organizations promoting philosophical talks in public spaces and online media outlets (for example, *Aeon*, *The Boston Review*, *The New York Times*’ ‘Stone’ column, *The Point Magazine*) publishing general audience pieces. The demand, however, still far outpaces the supply. But more to the point, what is too often missing in these public efforts is what I would call an appreciation for the provincial. What I am advocating, and what I started GPS to facilitate, is for philosophers to become social-political actors in the affairs of their cities, to conceive and carry out their work as a valuable contribution of the local intellectual economy. I want us to consider philosophy as the activity by which we go about the business of reconceiving *how* we live, *where* we live.

Resistance to this conception is institutionally entrenched and driven, I suspect, by the influence of a certain sort of culture that pervades the professional philosophical community. This culture can be seen in (and is prolonged by) the lack of institutional incentives to prioritize civic engagement, incentives that might counterbalance the career-dependent demands to publish within the closed-readership of professional journals and presses. Hence most philosophers remain – whether they want to or not – cloistered in the academy. Lacking a clear sense of what an urban-oriented, publicly-directed philosophy might look like, they unsurprisingly prefer the comfortable familiarity of the classroom to what they consider the unsettling unpredictability of the public square. In the final section of this chapter I will briefly discuss some of forms engaged philosophy might take. Before doing that, I first want to address the more problematic consequence of academic insularity: skepticism about whether such engagement should count as ‘serious’ philosophy at all. This attitude results from a particular meta-philosophical view rooted in the very beginnings of the Western philosophical tradition, but a view that I will argue we

have compelling reason to reject. We live in a time of considerable political and economic turmoil, and it is in the interest of both professional philosophers and the public at large to rethink what philosophy is for and what it can do.

The Academy and the Cave

“Hostility to philosophy is the natural condition of man and the city.” That remark, made by Allan Bloom at the outset of his close reading of Plato’s *Republic*, (which he recommends we study because “it is the first book which brings philosophy “down into the cities”; and we watch in it the foundation of political science, the only discipline which can bring the blessings of reason to the city.” (Bloom 1991: 310), is worth attention. Clearly, given the context, Socrates’s fate is in the foreground, yet Bloom’s point is ahistorical: to philosophize as Socrates did, as a form of political action that invariably calls into question elements of a community’s moral identity, is necessarily to court danger. Our contemporaries George Yancy, Jason Stanley, and Kate Mann demonstrate the point. Having ventured into public space to discuss such matters as our attitudes and behaviors with respect to race, gender, and political speech, each has faced terrible verbal abuse, including threats to their lives and those of their loved ones. Not every engagement goes this way, of course; these cases are, fortunately, extreme. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the philosopher entering the public realm risks harms and reactions that the norms of academia are designed to prevent.³ Whereas to be ‘public’ is to be an open forum for citizens to jointly plot (and contest) their future course, the space of ‘academia’ – the classroom, the colloquium, the conference, and the college itself – exists to engage colleagues and instruct students, and functions as a relatively safe space, at a figurative distance from the hostility of the city.⁴

With our insistence on the putative protections of free inquiry and policies such as tenure, the point of which is to shield our thinkers from the intellectual violence that might result from feeling bound by the whims of ‘the mob’ and the demands of the marketplace, our contemporary ‘academy’ retains much of the fundamental significance of its namesake. The original *Akademia* was a sacred site containing the grove of olive trees to which Plato invited the promising thinkers of his day to discuss philosophical ideas. Located outside the city walls of Athens, it was intended as a desensitized space, one at a literal remove from the incessant distractions of life in the city. And from its dangers. Plato and his fellow thinkers had direct knowledge of the mortal risks of philosophizing in the *agora*, the center of civic life in the Greek city-state, and the locus of its social, political, and economic activity. To retreat from the fray, and create a private and protected domain, likely struck them as an eminently reasonable thing to do.

Yet when we consider the significance of this separation of academy and agora, especially as represented in the foundational metaphor that informs the western philosophical tradition, we might wonder whether hostility to the city isn’t a natural condition of philosophy. For on this telling, it is the philosopher who first gets wise to the fact that we unreflectively dwell in a region of shadow and illusion. This cave – the city – is a settlement overrun by self-deceit, a place where the pursuits of material gain and sensual satisfaction are paramount, and popular opinion – too often a product of lazy mental habits and suspect motivations – reigns supreme. Under these conditions, the philosopher distinguishes herself first by her self-awareness and then by her irrepressible need to ascend to the sunlit uplands to see things as they truly are. There she enters a world unspoiled by political machinations and the warping concerns for profit; in this idyllic academy, the collegiality of sympathetic truth-seekers fosters the unfettered love of learning. And it is at this point, when her victory over confusion is complete, that she is asked to make a

hero's sacrifice: rather than remain in this paradise, she must nobly assume her civic-obligation and return to the cave to dispel the ethical and intellectual smog of city life.

That the contemporary academic experience falls somewhat short of the Platonic ideal is perhaps the least disturbing feature of this self-aggrandizing myth. The vices of the city – the greed, the frequent elevation of personal ambition over civic-minded sacrifice, the gross inequality and exploitation – are the vices of humanity, and so it is unsurprising, even if still disappointing, that they follow us into the academy. But it is the picture of philosophical activity that I take issue with here, and in particular its application to city-life. The classical conception of these was ably expressed by Bloom's teacher, Leo Strauss:

"Philosophizing means to ascend from the cave to the light of the sun, that is, to the truth. The cave is the world of opinion as opposed to knowledge. Opinion is essentially variable. Men cannot live, that is, they cannot live together, if opinions are not stabilized by social fiat. Opinion thus becomes authoritative opinion or public dogma or Weltanschauung. Philosophizing means, then, to ascend from public dogma to essentially private knowledge. The public dogma is originally an inadequate attempt to answer the question of the all-comprehensive truth of the eternal order." (Strauss, 1953, pp.11-12)

According to this hyper-realist version of philosophy, it is a method – likely the *only reliable* method – for achieving normative clarity amidst the confusions induced by an imperfect reason. Without the private illumination that philosophy provides we are doomed to the darkness of public dogma. Nor should the corrupting power of that dogma (and the mechanisms of distortion that produce it) be underestimated. As Bas van der Vossen has recently argued, political philosophers should avoid the seductions of political activism (broadly construed to include any political activity from actively campaigning during an election to slapping a bumper sticker on your car, to "generally rooting for one side or another") because being politically active "involves seriously exacerbating the risk of becoming biased about political issues." Given that "task of the political philosopher is to seek the truth about politics," (van der Vossen 2015:

1048), “activist philosophers violate their professional duties. They make seeking the truth about political issues needlessly difficult.” (1053) The title of van der Vossen’s paper, “In Defense of the Ivory Tower,” isn’t a justification of the academy so much as an attempt to inoculate it from the fevers of the great unwashed who huddle just beyond the university gates.

While I have no intention of underestimating the number of professional philosophers who would find this position untenable, to feature it here is not to take aim at a strawman. Its significance goes beyond the philosophers who hold it. What we also need to reckon with is the extent to which *the public* takes this to be the received view. This portrait of the philosopher, that is, poses both a philosophical and a public-relations problem. The former concerns the role of truth in philosophy, an interminable debate about which here I will only baldly state that I take it to have none: philosophy doesn’t seek the truth about politics or any of the other normative domains it concerns itself with because there are no such truths to find. Normative thinking isn’t about finding the truth, it’s about finding one’s way. A political position (or an ethical one, or about what is rational, etc.) involves an orientation towards certain choices and a disposition toward certain attitudes. Some positions might make a particular person’s life go better or worse at a particular time, but there’s little sense to assessing them as true or false (see Biehl 2004, Biehl 2005). Truth and falsity (as well as right and wrong, rational and irrational) are not independent arbiters of our normative frameworks but are their by-products. To paraphrase Donald Davidson, nothing counts as a reason for (or against) a normative judgment except another normative judgment.⁵

More pressing for present purposes than confronting the vacuity of this brand of inflationary meta-philosophy is stressing how bad it is for business. Recommending that philosophers limit their involvement in an irrational public discourse until they are ready to save

it with new-found truths about how to live is a poorly conceived marketing strategy, one that shows that excessive exposure to sunlight can confuse a mind as effectively as any shadow on the wall. Such a proposal will likely garner all the ridicule it invites (much of it amusing, no doubt) but more's the pity. In a climate where funding streams to STEM fields are squeezing the life out of the humanities, this isn't the research program that philosophers should want grant makers or legislators to believe they are pursuing. To those holding the purse strings, this hyper-realist picture is of a pseudo-scientific discipline that doesn't deliver. And that is an assessment that is rather hard to argue with; we'd do better to deny the picture that generates it. To effectively counter it, we must encourage a very different conception of philosophy, one that is sober-minded about its strengths and sensitive to the actual needs of actual people. Philosophers need to join the fray, not remain aloof from it.

Central to establishing a more public-facing and urban-aware philosophy is repudiating the condescending myth of the cave. The corollary to rejecting the image of the academy as a veridical paradise is to acknowledge that our neighbors in our cities (and the non-academic public more generally, even those on social media) are not trapped in a dystopian delusion. They, no more so than college professors, are simply living under the constraints of the human condition. Joseph Grange, who has written a book about philosophically understanding the city, offers a more sensible perspective when he suggests that “[i]n a city, how things appear to us is almost as important as what they are in reality. In fact, urban experience ties appearance and reality so tightly together that often it is impossible and unwise to separate them in any final way.” (Grange 1999: xiii) This is better, but I would argue that we can go further still; rather than viewing it as a realm where definite reality is being distorted (to whatever degree), we can approach our cities as living crucibles from which new human realities are to be forged. Cities

have long been beacons to those intent on reinvention and those hoping to be more than they have been. They are the centers of becoming, concentrated hot-spots of potential bursting into actuality. Humanity is an ongoing, open-ended project whose status at any given time is usually most perspicuous in its current urban output. Philosophers who hope to participate in that project must therefore embrace the city, not ignore or flee it.

In rethinking the philosophical significance of the city, philosophers must also rethink their role in it, which must be importantly different from that which currently prevails in academia. Shane Epting's discussion of transportation justice (TJ) found in this volume, makes the difference between them plain:

"Philosophers of the city could entertain each other through discussing the best-suited philosopher in history whose work could benefit how we understand issues in TJ—or we could examine patterns of injustice as they emerge on city streets and suburban cul-de-sacs. There is room for both. The difference here is that the former is the content that fills volumes of journals that make nary an impact on the problems that they cover. However, addressing the latter holds the possibility of reaching audiences that might benefit from a thorough investigation into a TJ issue." (Epting 2018: this volume 7 of his paper)

The notion of the philosopher as an expert on a certain literature, including the various debates and moves within a particular ongoing-historical discussion has legitimate currency in scholarly circles. Beyond them, however, being such an expert matters less than having developed expertise in the skills and capacities that are required to fulfill philosophy's core function, which is to explore possible frameworks of thought and action, critically comparing and contrasting them for purpose of remaking the human world. From the perspective of an urban-oriented philosophy then, what makes the academy worthy of public investment is that it is a space to hone those skills that philosophers can then use to encourage, foster, and facilitate those explorations with their fellow citizens. This is not to claim that 'philosophy for philosophy's sake' is without value; the exercise of intellectual curiosity is intrinsically satisfying; indeed, so

much so that we have incentive to expose as many people as possible to it. Moreover, pursuing philosophical leads out of the motivation to know rather than their potential impact people's lives can have the unexpected consequence of having such an impact. But to think of philosophy as an exclusively 'theoretical' discipline is to possess a needlessly impoverished conception.⁶ Consciously or unconsciously, the sorts of questions that philosophy asks frame our options, for the answers that we take them to have serve as the fixed points by which we navigate our lives. The actual activity of philosophy, the *intentional* asking of those questions and the interrogation of their possible answers, is therefore not an idle luxury but a political imperative.

That world as we currently find it – and this is especially apparent in our cities (certainly so in my own) – squanders great quantities of its (human) capital. The majority of people possess neither the advantages of inherited economic privilege nor (fortunately, I prefer to think) the sort of character that posits the relentless pursuit of material gain and social influence as a virtue. Their lives, therefore, are too often marked by struggle – for adequate education, employment, and shelter, to name only three – that takes place in the shadow of extreme wealth and prosperity. Most of these people live in cities because of the opportunities (especially, though not exclusively economic) they promise, yet that promise is routinely broken. If we hope to heed the anthropologist and urban theorist David Harvey's call "to chart a path from an urbanism based on exploitation to an urbanism appropriate for the human species" (Harvey 1973: 314 [quoted in Kishik 2015: 93]), then it must be philosophy, through its investigation of our current and possible normative commitments, that lights the way.

To help urban communities to rethink their route to flourishing is to become what Grange calls a 'master of heartfelt contrast.' (Grange 1999: 224) Rejecting the Platonic caricature of the "divine being handing down universal edicts," Grange notes that

“what the philosopher can offer the civic process is width of vision that encourages alternative ways of looking at problems. And what is more, because the philosopher is also expected (at least in the tradition of speculative philosophy) to provide intellectually coherent and applicable ideas, the community can expect testable hypotheses, not empty generalities. Thus, the philosopher is part of the experimental process of developing better ways to live together... The intellectual contribution that the philosopher can make to contemporary city lies in the direction of providing a wider understanding of what is possible within the real constraints of the urban environment. In short, the philosopher ought to become a master of contrast as a way of providing effective modes of thinking about divisive issues.” (Grange 1999: 225)

To do this effectively, it helps to exchange thinking universally for thinking locally. Iris Marion Young’s insight that an “ideal can inspire action for social change only if it arises from possibilities suggested by actual experience,” (Young 1990: 241) is especially pertinent here: philosophers must meet their neighbors in the city where they are, addressing the concerns of particular people under particular conditions. Different communities often face similar problems, but the ways forward, those that they can be expected to be invested in, must be recognizably their own. To facilitate the generation of organic proposals, to be mid-wives to the birth of home-grown understandings, we must become embedded in the urban sphere, contributing to the public discourse rather than remain condescendingly critical of it. In the next, and final section, I discuss some of the forms those contributions might take.

Modes of Engagement

Throughout this chapter I have insisted on a conception of philosophy as the means by which we come to know ourselves, who we are and who we might still become; as an activity that belongs to each of us because through it our humanity is continually re-determined. This is why I believe that bringing it outside of the classroom and into the open space of the city is urgent and it is this conception that has informed my efforts with the Gotham Philosophical Society. And the people I have met in this work share this conception as well, for they are eager to for the opportunity to

participate in discussions of some of life's profoundest questions or be invited to think through conceptual conundrums that have preoccupied philosophers for decades, centuries, and even millennia. "Thank you so much for doing this!" is a comment that I have routinely heard during the four years I have been hosting events through GPS, and the sincere enthusiasm and appreciation it expresses is deeply rewarding. These exchanges, unlike the wild swings between poles of apathy and entitlement that I frequently encountered from students, reinforce the conviction that this sort of philosophical work is vital and necessary. So, how to do it?

The most obvious and natural way for philosophers to participate in the lives of their cities is to speak and write for the various communities that comprise them. Learn who they are and what matters to them. Communicate to their concerns. Broadly speaking, the topics of these efforts needn't vary greatly from those that philosophers discuss amongst themselves; non-academics are also interested in ethical, epistemological, metaphysical, aesthetic, political, logical matters, sometimes for their own sake and at others for how they figure in the issues that pertain to the social and political disputes that so often mark urban living. Different audiences look to philosophy for different things, some wanting real solutions to real problems while others prefer to be enriched and learn new things (and very many look for both). For some, philosophical engagements can be revelatory and therapeutic (for both audience and philosopher), as in the case of the groups of currently incarcerated, court-involved youth, and victims of domestic abuse that 'ReThink,' the philosophical community outreach program of Columbia University. For others, it can echo the classic conception of a symposium and function as form of entertainment where discussions of the ethical costs of upward mobility, of whether the Buddhist denial of the self is compatible with claim that meditation increases mental

freedom, or about what tattoos say about personal identity can – especially when had with a glass or two of wine – be very stimulating nights on the town.⁷

In navigating prospective audiences in the city, the significant challenge for philosophers is less about what the content of their contributions are to be than in finding the right tone and the appropriate language. That virtually none of the target audiences have spent years immersed in the minutia that defines philosophical specialization can make some philosophers new to public engagement uncomfortable, but it is their interest to see it as an opportunity. Philosophers in the academy have frequently defended themselves from the charge of irrelevance with the claim that they are discussing the very same issues that have preoccupied philosophers for millennia, even if the levels of technical sophistication in their debates tend to obscure that. (Stanley: 2010) Translating their insights back into the vernacular will not only lend support to this defense of professional practice but will also render their wisdom publicly useful.

For those looking to make a transformative impact in the actual course of their cities by influencing policy debates and inspiring activism that could ultimately reach into the lives of all citizens, they will need to enter the city's political discourse. The most direct way to do this will be by running for elected office, joining community boards, and becoming actively involved in school or commercial associations. Philosophers in such positions can hopefully use their skills to facilitate more effective conversations and deliberations about which initiatives and policies to pursue and which considerations should be seen as significant to the decision. Needless to say, this degree of engagement is not for everyone. For many, political participation of an overtly philosophical sort will involve writing pieces offering analysis of the implicit assumptions underlying various proposals and positions, as well as offering proposals of their own. The obvious venue for these efforts will be the local newspapers and other publications that cater to

the city's politically active and policy-minded audiences. But I believe that these voices can be amplified if philosophers collaborate in the construction of a public-directed philosophical infrastructure of their own, one that would encourage and sustain their efforts. For example, the philosophers working with GPS are trying to do this by launching a magazine, *Φ on New York*, that focuses on the philosophical consideration of the issues of living in New York City.⁸ By providing a venue for localized philosophical output, we hope to create a (virtual) space where engaged New Yorkers will find sophisticated and thought-provoking treatment of some of the perils and possibilities facing the city. We further hope that all concerned will come to see the local professional philosophical community as vital participants in the day-to-day life of the city.

Important as all these forms of engagement are, both to the city and to the philosophers living in it, I want to suggest that the most profound and consequential endeavor we can undertake is to encourage the introduction of philosophy into the pre-college classroom. The fundamental nature of philosophy lends it a generality that permits its application to every other human undertaking. ‘The Philosophy of X’ could be (and often is) the title of a course for any X, where X is another academic discipline. It is therefore understandable that so many – philosophers and non-philosophers both – are dismayed at the growing trend of folding philosophy departments. Yet it is hard to resist the thought that this is somehow related to the even more troubling fact that philosophy is among the only major academic disciplines that is not regularly introduced to school-age children. Perhaps it is an echo of Plato’s skepticism that children possess sufficient experience to benefit from philosophy (Plato 1991: 536e-540b); in any case it is deeply misguided.

The “wonder” that Socrates claimed is the origin of philosophy comes naturally to children, as anyone who spends time around them knows. They are full of “big questions” when they

arrive at school but enter a system where there is rarely any forum to indulge them. The adults in the room, constrained by a curriculum that needs to be followed, and under pressure by benchmarks that need to be met, have neither the time nor patience to address their boundless curiosity. The all too obvious result is that many children move through elementary and secondary education asking philosophical questions less and less frequently, until most stop bothering to ask them at all. We should not be surprised, then, when a considerable number of students walk into an introductory philosophy college course with little understanding of what philosophy is nor with much interest in finding out. Learning their early school lessons well, they have grown impatient with wonder, and the questions that now concern them have shrunk to the small and the “practical.”

This situation is lamentable for all involved. Reserving philosophy for sufficiently mature eighteen year olds, and retaining an air of mystery about the subject, does little for the discipline’s reputation, in or out of the academy. Many students resent having to take a course to satisfy requirements when they cannot see how it will make them more marketable when they graduate, and growing numbers of administrators are taking their side.⁹ In our age of economic and political uncertainty, students and funders alike want to invest their time and money in those things that they believe will pay off for them, and they’ve convinced themselves that philosophy doesn’t fit the bill.

Philosophers, of course, think otherwise, and many others do as well. What all those who think so share is the belief that what is most salient to living a good life or to building a flourishing community is not the amount of money one earns but about the choices we make concerning our families, friends, about the ethical positions we live by, about the sorts of ideals that we allow to inform our public policies and frame our community relations, about how we –

as individuals and as a society – deal with our failures and face our deaths. These are matters of meaning and identity and they are the stuff that figures most prominently in our happiness and our misery, and on which the justness and well-being of our communities depend. Their momentous nature, however, is compounded by there being no recipe for getting them right: as normative phenomena, they are necessarily open-ended endeavors where the way forward is illuminated by our ever-varying perspectives and presumptions. This is why the work of making a meaningful life and a thriving society is ongoing. It is also why it is so hard.

And this is also why our neglect of the philosophical inclinations of our youth is so unfortunate and, indeed, costly. Our missed opportunity is not to have taught 4th graders the categorical imperative, or 7th graders Rawls’ ‘difference principle.’ The method of those working in the growing field of pre-college philosophy (though conspicuously lagging in the U.S.), and that which GPS employs in its ‘Young Philosophers of New York’ program, is to allow young people to explore philosophical ideas of their own initiative and from their own perspective. The role of the philosopher in this setting is to facilitate this process, not to teach or instruct them on what great thinkers of the past or present have to say. In a collaborative, organic atmosphere that places the students at the center, they are given the space to learn *how* to think through the very sorts of open-ended questions mentioned above, a process that allows them to develop the critical acuity and intellectual humility that as future leaders and future parents we will wish them to have. And by introducing them to philosophy at an early age and in a welcoming and un-pressurized way, they are more likely to view its academic incarnation in favorable light.

The academic version of our discipline has its place. Those drawn to keep alive the history of thought, as well as those eager to engage others in its current and future development are

performing a significant service for our species. And yet a full justification of the protected space of the academy – essentially the ‘free lunch’ Socrates proposed the Athenian assembly provide for his services – should depend on the inclusion of a public-oriented dimension to a philosophy department’s mission. Providing incentives and support for philosophical engagements in the cities their members work in should become standard practice for departments, especially those in public institutions. Cities are our most vital social settlements as the urban environment is the most productive of the invention and reinvention of the human condition. Through philosophy we become self-conscious of this process and aim to understand and direct it. Philosophy was born in the city and belongs there. It’s time for philosophers to come home again.

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Notes

¹ Which is not to say none. Some philosophers whom I mention below, and in the introduction on methodological practice, are doing very important and impactful work in New York.

² So too, to varying degrees, other public-oriented organizations and enterprises, such as Brooklyn Public Philosophers, The Columbia University ‘Rethink’ Program, and the Philosophical Café hosted by the New York Society for Ethical Culture.

³ In terms of my own experience, the worst I have faced has been a very contentious and uncomfortable ‘conversation’ during an event on the nature of money (in particular, on the propositions that we think of it as a public good and that we prohibit private financial institutions from profiting from its ‘creation’).

⁴ Changes are afoot, however, as attempts to bring the classroom out into the street are increasing. See, for example, (Oxley & Ilea 2016).

⁵ “[N]othing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief.” (Davidson 2001: 141, 155) Davidson was, in turn, paraphrasing Richard Rorty (and no doubt many others). (See Rorty 1979: 178)

⁶ (Case 2018) offers an especially crimped portrait of the discipline.

⁷ See GPS website (www.philosophy.nyc). I discuss these and other efforts in the methodology intro

⁸ We refer to it as a magazine rather than journal since we insist that the writing be free of technical jargon as well as many of the features and practices associated with scholarly journals such as extensive notes and citations.

⁹ Statistics demonstrating the relatively high average/median salary of philosophy majors, or the claims of certain employers that they seek employees that are able to *think*, appear to have limited effect, either on students or administrators. I know first-hand that neither such ‘evidence,’ nor the fact that a number of the recent valedictorians and salutatorians were philosophy majors, could ultimately save the Felician University (née College) philosophy department from being stripped of majors and being restructured as a joint study program with ‘Religious Studies.’