

***Philosophy Hitherto: A Reply to Frodeman and Briggie*¹**
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I am grateful to Robert Frodeman and Adam Briggie for raising the issue of philosophy's institutionalization as an academic discipline.² This institutional reality is central to many of the challenges facing contemporary philosophers: employment problems for philosophy PhDs; the role of the liberal arts in the future of education; the place of academic journals in a world of internet archives and social networks; etc. Unfortunately, Frodeman and Briggie's analysis rests on an inaccurate interpretation of both historical and contemporary philosophy. In particular, they are wrong to suggest that practical engagement with matters of public concern was a defining feature of philosophy prior to its institutional transformation, and they are wrong to claim that contemporary philosophy has abandoned such engagement.

In addition, Frodeman and Briggie operate with an unstable and at times inconsistent concept of "philosophy." First the line they draw between philosophy before and after its "purification," makes it difficult to identify the earlier "philosophy" whose way has been lost with the contemporary "philosophy" which is supposed to have lost that way. Second, insofar as they are right that philosophy has become a sterile, isolated discipline, we have no reason to think philosophers can bring anything of value to the practical affairs Frodeman and Briggie would have us address.³

In section one I show that reluctance to engage with practical affairs was a feature of philosophy long before the advent of the modern university. In section two I provide numerous examples of contemporary philosophers focused on questions of virtue, addressing matters of public concern, and engaging in interdisciplinary collaboration. Finally, in section three I show that Frodeman and Briggie's description of contemporary philosophy makes it unsuitable both as the subject of their title ("When Philosophy Lost Its Way") and as the object of their call to action (in "Socrates Untenured").

I. Ambivalence about Practical Engagement in Socrates and Plato

Frodeman and Briggie suggest that, prior to philosophy's purification as a distinct discipline, it was characterized not only by an engagement with an unbounded range of subject matter, but it was engaged with the practical world, and it saw its quest for knowledge as going hand in hand with a quest for virtue. It was only when philosophy demarcated its domain as a distinct science in the modern university that it lost this association with virtue and practical engagement. While this account is rhetorically useful, it paints over a deep ambivalence about the relationship between philosophy and practical engagement that has been with us since at least the time of Socrates.

¹ Thanks to Thomas Fisher, Robert Joynt, Paul Klumpe, Daniel Layman, Timothy Syme and Michael Young for invaluable discussion and comment on earlier drafts.

² See Frodeman and Briggie 2014, 2015, and 2016.

³ In Frodeman and Briggie 2015

Frodeman and Briggie use Socrates as the paradigmatic case of an engaged, virtue-oriented thinker unconstrained by disciplinary boundaries.⁴ It's certainly true that Socrates would have been unconcerned with modern disciplinary boundaries that didn't even exist yet.⁵ It is also true that Socrates practiced his particular form of philosophical inquiry—mercilessly questioning anyone who claimed knowledge of virtue—in the *agora*, the public square. And it's true that Socrates was interested in pursuing virtue above all else.⁶ This might make Socrates seem like a paradigmatic public philosopher. But in fact he did not see himself that way, and neither did many of his contemporaries. Consider the ridiculous picture of Socrates painted by Aristophanes in *The Clouds*⁷ - a caricature so influential Socrates felt the need to address it at his trial.⁸ In the course of his defense, Socrates offers an account of his philosophical activity to explain his neglect of his own practical affairs and those of the city.

He thought he was doing the city of Athens a service to be sure, but it was not a service they particularly welcomed. In a famous passage, alluded to by Frodeman and Briggie, he compares himself to a gadfly waking a powerful, noble horse from its lazy slumber by delivering painful and annoying bites.⁹ As Socrates tells us, he purposefully avoided politics because he thought that the rulers of an unjust city would not suffer the interference of such a gadfly with their day-to-day political operations.¹⁰ It is one thing to stand in the *agora*, conversing with whoever will listen; it is quite another to actually interfere with the practical business of the city. Socrates did the former, but he argued that his philosophical practice was incompatible with the sort of activity his fellow citizens would have recognized as engagement with matters of public concern.

His student Plato would continue this ambivalence about the role of the philosopher in public life. Before crowning philosophers as the kings of his “city in thought,” the fictionalized Socrates of the *Republic* says that philosophers born into an unjust society will live a quiet contemplative life and count themselves lucky if they remain uncorrupted by the injustice around them.¹¹ Even the philosophers in Plato's ideal city

⁴ Frodeman and Briggie 2014, 2015, and 2016.

⁵ Additional support for the non-disciplinary of Socrates might be drawn from the digression in Plato's *Theaetetus*, where philosophers are described as being free to follow the conversation wherever it might lead (172d-e), as well the contrast between knowledge itself and specific forms of knowledge in the *Republic* (438c-e). However, one might argue the contrary case by focusing on Socrates's insistence in the *Apology* that he does not study “the things in the sky and below the earth.” (19b) For online editions of the *Theaetetus*, see <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=plat.+theaet.+142a> or <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/theatu.html>. For links to online editions of the *Apology* and *Republic*, see notes 6 and 11 below.

⁶ See for example *Apology* 28b and 38a. For online editions of the text see <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0170%3Atext%3DApol>. or <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/13726/13726-h/13726-h.htm>.

⁷ See for example the exchange in *The Clouds* lines 389-401, where Socrates identifies the Clouds, “the great goddesses of lazy men,” as the source of the philosopher's power, to which his interlocutor replies “Ah, that must be why, as I heard their voice, my soul took wing, and now I'm really keen to babble on of trivialities...”

⁸ *Apology* 18c-d and 19c-d.

⁹ *Apology* 30e.

¹⁰ *Apology* 31e-33a.

¹¹ *Republic* 496d-e. For online editions of the text, see <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0168> or <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.html>.

agree to rule only because they owe it to the city that educated them. They spend as long as they can in private philosophical reflection, until they are forced to fill that debt.¹²

Finally, although Socrates was concerned with virtue, he was not comfortable presenting himself as something “greater and better than another man.”¹³ He was clear that true knowledge of virtue was not human but divine.¹⁴ He discussed virtue, but he was insistent that he never called himself a teacher, precisely because of the uncertainty about leading people astray about the most important matters of human concern.¹⁵ We see this same ambivalence with Plato’s Socrates in the *Republic*, when he expresses the fear that his friends will believe him and thereby be led astray about the nature of justice if he is wrong.¹⁶

Such ambivalence or even hostility toward practical engagement is a recurring theme throughout the history of philosophy. The Roman Stoic philosopher Seneca declared business to be the enemy of philosophy¹⁷ and insisted he was doing more good by withdrawing “not only from men, but from affairs, especially from my own affairs” to write philosophy than he could by continuing his political life.¹⁸ A thousand years later the Medieval Scholastic philosopher Peter Abelard would cite Seneca’s letters as a justification for his own inability to be a husband to his wife and a father to his son without abandoning his commitment to philosophy.¹⁹ Nor is this a phenomenon peculiar to Western thinkers. For example, the focus on rejection of the senses and of self in the *Upanishads* has led many Hindu seekers of enlightenment to strive toward an ascetic withdrawal from the world. Whether or not we share the views of these thinkers, the roots of the tension between philosophy and ordinary life are older and run deeper than the institutional imperatives of the modern university.

II. Virtue, Practical Engagement, and Interdisciplinarity in Contemporary Philosophy

So we’ve seen that philosophers’ ambivalence about practical engagement long predates the history of disciplinary specialization Frodean and Briggie trace. In this section I want to argue that however accurate their account of disciplinary isolation in 19th century philosophy may be, it is anachronistic when applied to contemporary philosophers.

Since at least the 1950s there has been a revival of philosophical interest in questions of virtue. The standard account of this revival traces it back to Elizabeth Anscombe’s critique of the dominant utilitarianism of her day. Philosophers in this tradition include Phillipa Foot, Martha Nussbaum, Rosalind Hursthouse, Julia Annas, Alasdair Macintyre, and Michael Slote among others. Even those who have not embraced virtue ethics as a

¹² *Republic* 540b-c.

¹³ This line appears in a quote from Joseph Priestly in Frodean and Briggie 2016.

¹⁴ *Apology* 23a-b.

¹⁵ *Apology* 19d-20c.

¹⁶ *Republic* 450d-451b.

¹⁷ Seneca 1917-25, letter 72.

¹⁸ Seneca 1917, letter 8.

¹⁹ Abelard 2003, p. 14-15.

separate theoretical paradigm have made room for virtue in their consequentialist and deontological moral theories.²⁰

There are also numerous journals, books, articles and whole subdisciplines of philosophy devoted to practical engagement with matters of public concern. *Philosophy and Public Affairs* is one of the top journals in Anglophone political philosophy, and journals of applied philosophy have proliferated in the last half-century. The most obvious examples of publically active philosophers are found in biomedical ethics, where they collaborate with doctors and other medical professionals in matters of research, physician education, and clinical practice. For nearly half a century organizations like the Hastings Center and the Kennedy Institute for Ethics have been home to such collaboration.²¹ And every year young philosophers apply for competitive postdocs in clinical bioethics at places like the Cleveland Clinic and the National Institutes of Health.²²

Recent decades have also seen growing forms of public educational outreach by philosophers. These include the Philosophy for Children movement, as well as programs to bring philosophy education to nonacademic spaces like prisons and women's shelters. Like Socrates, these philosophers bring their discourse to whoever will listen, and they believe that the education they offer can directly improve the lives of those they reach.²³

Nor is contemporary philosophy locked into narrowly defined disciplinary boundaries. Researchers working on the philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, and moral psychology regularly collaborate with empirical researchers working in departments of psychology and cognitive science. Philosophers of science—as well as many contemporary metaphysicians—engage with contemporary work in physics, chemistry, biology, and other natural sciences. Feminist philosophers and philosophers of race regularly engage with relevant work by psychologists, biologists, and social scientists, and many are cross appointed in interdisciplinary areas.

The list could go on, and no doubt many readers will be able to identify equally prominent examples that I've neglected. Contemporary philosophy is far from the isolated, practically inert, "purified" discipline Frodeman and Briggle describe.

III. The Meanings of "Philosophy"

So far I have taken issue with Frodeman and Briggle's account of both the pre-19th century history of philosophy, and of the state of contemporary philosophy. Philosophy's ambivalence about practical engagement predates its attempted purification in the 19th

²⁰ For a good (if somewhat partisan) summary of these developments, see Hursthouse 2013.

²¹ For a brief account of the early development of Bioethics, especially in the U.S., see Pellegrino 1993. See also the websites of the individual organizations: <http://www.thehastingscenter.org/> and <https://kenedyinstitute.georgetown.edu/>.

²² See the websites for these programs: <http://www.bioethics.nih.gov/education/> and <http://my.clevelandclinic.org/about-cleveland-clinic/ethics-humanities-care/bioethics/Fellowships>.

²³ See Akeret 2014, Prichard 2014, Wartenberg 2014, Weinberg 2014, and Goldman 2013. See also the websites of some of these individuals and organizations, including <http://www.teachingchildrenphilosophy.org/> and <http://p4c.com/>.

century, and that project of purification was not successful—contemporary philosophy is not characterized by such disciplinary isolation. I now turn to a conceptual difficulty in their account that is independent of these interpretive matters. The problem is that their key term of analysis—“philosophy”—has no consistent referent.

Frodeman and Briggle argue that prior to its purification “philosophy” was a capacious concept that also included the natural and social sciences. This purification, however, “gave birth to the concept of philosophy most of us know today,” which is characterized precisely by its distinctness from those other sciences.²⁴ But if it is the earlier, pre-disciplinary “philosophy” whose way has been lost, there is no reason to single out “philosophy” in the contemporary disciplinary sense as the one who has lost that way. We could just as well say that “physics,” or “psychology” has lost its way. Indeed, it would seem more accurate to title their essay “When Science Lost Its Way” or “When the Pursuit of Human Knowledge Lost Its Way.” But perhaps this terminological problem can be answered by the self-identification of contemporary “philosophers.” Insofar as we claim the legacy of earlier philosophical traditions, we, unlike the natural scientists, identify ourselves with the earlier pre-disciplinary practice whose “way” has been lost.

A deeper inconsistency remains, however. According to Frodeman and Briggle, contemporary philosophy has made itself into an isolated discipline with no concern for virtue or for engagement with matters of public concern. Their proposed solution to this problem is for philosophy to give up on its misguided attempt at purification and return to its legacy of pursuit of virtue, engagement with practical affairs, and interdisciplinary inquiry. But if their analysis is correct, it is hard to see how the specialized philosophy of the modern university has anything left to offer the world and the disciplines it has abandoned. Why think that philosophers—here understood as recipients of degrees in this isolated, specialized discipline—have anything to offer that thoughtful, educated people without such specialized training do not? Not only do Frodeman and Briggle fail to give an account of what value is left in philosophy, their description of a discipline that has lost its way casts doubt on the possibility that it has anything to offer at all.

Conclusion

In 1845 Karl Marx complained that “Philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.”²⁵ Marx’s complaint against his predecessors captures the spirit of Frodeman and Briggle’s critique of their contemporaries. And yet if their critique is correct, it is hard to see how the purified discipline of academic philosophy ever could change the world. If they are right, we should look elsewhere for wisdom and virtue.

But, as I have argued, they are wrong. Philosophy hitherto has always been characterized both by a concern with practical engagement *and* by serious misgivings about such engagement. Nonetheless, we still face important questions about the institutionalization of philosophy in the modern academy. What are the lasting effects of the

²⁴ Frodeman and Briggle 2016.

²⁵ Marx 2002.

institutionalization of philosophy and of the more recent transformations of those institutions? How, if at all, can any problematic effects be improved, resisted, or mitigated? What *can* philosophers and other intellectuals contribute, and how valuable is the academy as a home for philosophy and other intellectual pursuits? To answer these questions we need to take seriously the deep and longstanding tension between philosophical inquiry and practical engagement. And we need to think seriously, and in detail, about the unique challenges and opportunities faced by philosophers in the academy of the 21st century. It is my hope that Frodeman and Briggles' work will, like the bites of a gadfly, wake philosophers to the necessity of addressing these pressing questions.

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