

What is philosophy and why does it matter? A situated, pluralist, social, caring - and perhaps rebellious response

By Maria Brincker

1) Introduction

What is philosophy? And is it worth our while? Or as many in our current environment of neo-liberal austerity might frame it: is it worth individual and societal investment?

Many things have been said about the nature and value of philosophy, and what I have to add here will not be exhaustive. As a matter of fact, I think that it is crucial to the value and nature of philosophy that it always stays open-ended and not too neatly defined. But, when posed the question about how to characterize the myriads of different kinds of philosophy that the world has seen, this is what I propose:

- Philosophy is a situated social practice of trying to conceptualize aspects of our worlds, predicaments, possibilities and responsibilities as living agents.
- Why does it matter? Because of what it produces: Theories, concepts – and critical re-conceptualizations - of the nature and purposes of our socially shared worlds, which have consequences for both individual and collective destinies.
- Given these two points: the situatedness and the effect of ideas, I add that responsible philosophy should allow for pluralistic voices and open-ended methodologies. And most importantly it should know its own position in society and care about its consequences.

I feel this rough description should not be too controversial. Nor should the additional guidelines. But it certainly has been and probably still is. So, I shall try to make my case.

2) Philosophy produces ideas and re-conceptualize our frames of understanding

I suggested that what philosophy produces are theories and ideas, or “conceptualizations”. It is certainly a fact that new ways of understanding ourselves, our worlds and our values have been heralded by philosophers. One might go further and say that this is simply what philosophy does - it brings about new understandings and bring old meanings into language in a new way.

But doesn't that make all novel expressions philosophical then? I wouldn't mind saying that there is some truth to that. I am thinking of a child creating a new joke, or a poet at work, and it often does have a philosophical tinge. Again, if philosophy is about innovation of ideas then it must not too neatly circumscribed.

That being said, if we want a slightly less broad and permissive story, or something like “prototype” philosophy, like a robin might be a good prototype bird, then a good candidate could be: The explicit conceptualization of implicit knowledges, and re-conceptualization of existing frames of interpretation and understanding.

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Toy example: You might ask me “What day is it today?” and I might answer “Sunday” then hesitate and say “Actually that depends on where you are. It’s already Monday if you are in Indonesia. And if you are on Mars, I actually don’t really know...”

Now if this progression of thought is suggested as an analogy to what philosophy does, then some might respond that this only shows the utter uselessness and foolishness of philosophy. In a sense knowledge is *lost* rather than won in this exchange. But isn’t it just that the conversation gave rise to an insight that was about the question, rather than one that simply answered it? What we have learned is that calendar time is relative to location, and further that it is a human measure not something that can readily be found on Mars.

But what if we just want to get on with it - or worse, if we might miss something important to us – then we will be anxious and annoyed by the frame-questioning response. Just tell me what day it is already! Now this friction points to two additional things that can be learned from the exchange. 1) In our *practical* doings, we rely on assumed and unquestioned frames of knowledge *all the time* and therefore 2) when these assumptions are challenged it can be quite emotional - distressing even, if we in one way or the other have built our lives around this conceptual frame.

In short, I suggest that philosophy asks about and beyond the frames within which our questions can be given precise and easily accepted answers. This is why we often say that philosophy is a field without right answers. Many take that to mean that philosophy is useless or that anything goes. But my point is that this is what makes it important and politically fraught and controversial. It is a highly contentious practice to ask about frames that matter to someone’s practices because it compromises their frictionless capabilities to get on with it – at least in the short term. The key is to see that capabilities are power, and that social capabilities depend on shared assumptions, and as we all know threatening someone’s power standing is fraught territory.

Now, philosophers constantly tell each other the story of Socrates who lost his life for philosophy and the pursuit of truth, who was literally given the death sentence for “corrupting the youth”, for upsetting the powers that be through his words and questions. Socrates’ trial was notably during a period of democracy in ancient Athens. But it is well known that authoritarian regimes typically start by prosecuting or disappearing the intellectuals when they come to power. Many philosophical ideas have been treated as political threats and implied in that treatment is of course the acknowledgement that philosophy has powerful consequences.

Yet surprisingly, philosophy is thought by many to be if not useless then at least harmless. This view is even sometimes expressed by philosophers themselves. Is it that past aristocracies, tyrants and people in general have mis-understood the powers of philosophy then? The typical answer is: No! Some are afraid of philosophy simply because they are afraid of the truth, but the truth is never bad in itself, only for bad people who have “something to hide” so to speak. Like tyrants and other selfish, bad or irrational people.

In this way, both philosophers - and natural scientists for that matter - often attempt to duck questions about responsibility by saying that they are simply looking for the truth. But what if there is not only one truth to tell? If we think of truth as plural and as dependent on one’s perspective - then things instantly become trickier. Now some local truths might not just be

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inconvenient given one’s purposes, but they might actually be misleading and even a barrier for other kinds of knowledge.

In 1933 the Polish scholar Alfred Korzybski captured many of these tensions when he wrote: “The map is not the territory, the word is not the thing it describes. Whenever the map is confused with the territory, a 'semantic disturbance' is set up in the organism. The disturbance continues until the limitation of the map is recognized.”

If “the map is not the territory” then we know that there is no such thing as “the” perfect map. Rather each map leaves out truths about the territory, and there can be many good and useful maps that each represent different aspects and serve distinct purposes. We also have to understand not only the value of maps, but also their distorting and potentially harmful powers, the “semantic disturbances” that they can create if their biases and limitations are not known.

Thus, we must acknowledge the value-laden choices and responsibilities that come with being a mapmaker. In the case of philosophy, this means that there are real questions about which truths one sees as valuable enough to pursue. And, about which ground to shake and when, and how much attention we should pay the damages. How much attention should one pay to one’s own blind-spots and interpretive biases.

3) Philosophy as situated

I claim that philosophy is a situated practice. What does that even mean? The point is to some extent a reminder of the obvious: That philosophy is a series of actions produced by actual human organisms in social and historical contexts. As practices do in general, philosophy depends on the lived perspective of people and lots of existing cultural products and historically invented technologies.

In an essay on black women’s voices in philosophy, and their value and detrimental historical absence, George Yancy, a philosophy professor at Emory University encapsulates a lot of what I want to elaborate on in this essay. He writes:

“*Doing* philosophy is an activity. Like all activities, philosophy is situated. As a situated activity, philosophy is shaped according to various norms, assumptions, intuitions, and ways of thinking and feeling about the world. Fundamentally, philosophy is a form of engagement; it is always already a process in *medias res*. Despite their pretensions to the contrary, philosophers are unable to brush off the dust of history and begin doing philosophy *ex nihilo*. Hence, to do philosophy is to be ensconced in history. More specifically, philosophizing is an embodied activity that begins within and grows out of diverse *lived* contexts; philosophizing takes place within the fray of the everyday. On this score, philosophizing is a plural and diverse form of activity.”

I shall return to Yancy again. But first a few words to expand on this situatedness and how it links to the first point that what philosophy produces is ideas and conceptualizations.

Philosophy also depends intimately on the languages in which it expressed. Linguistic expressions are always social and historically dependent as their meanings are products of both

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speakers and listeners. They depend on a shared repertoire of meanings. Therefore, we must know something about how the rest of the society uses and interprets a language to have agility and capacity to express ourselves. Even the grammatical structures themselves convey slightly different world representations. Languages constrain our possibilities but in ways that allow for creativity and innovation. This possibility for innovation is crucial to philosophy.

We can think of languages as culturally shared bodies, as “social motor systems” if you will. Each language allows certain actions and not others. The differences typically become obvious if you try to translate a joke from one language to another. Even for bilinguals the humor easily can get lost or become nearly inexpressible due to subtle both cultural and grammatical differences. But even with all that, language is only one aspect of philosophy’s situatedness. More important are our lived needs and desires, and how our judgements, our values and our imaginations are situated.

The question is why this embodied, social and historical situatedness of philosophy matters? Well mostly because it is so often ignored or perhaps even actively denied. The quote by Yancy above continues:

“In their attempt to escape the social, to defy history, and to reject the body, many philosophers have pretensions of being godlike. They attempt to defy the confluent social forces that shape their historicity and particularity. They see themselves as detached from the often inchoate, existential traffic of life and the background assumptions that are constitutive of a particular horizon of understanding. It is then that philosophy becomes a site of bad faith, presuming to reside in the realm of the static and the disembodied. Having "departed" from life, having rejected the force of "effective history," philosophy is just as well dead, devoid of relevance, devoid of particularity, and escapist.”

There are many insights to highlight in this passage. But let me start with the question of escapism. I think that philosophy must acknowledge its dependence and responsible interconnectedness with the society it inhabits and thus must be relevant and valuable to either our present or future world - and yet I see a purpose in relative divisions of labor, and of philosophers being situated at some distance from certain pressures.

The little “what day is it?” sequence was meant to illustrate not only the frameshifting knowledge that can come from philosophy, but also that it often gives rise to tensions as frame shifting typically slows us down and might be costly.

A sports analogy: If we are to learn to make a move in a new way - soccer, dance you name it - then we typically first experience a decline or deterioration and then only after a significant period of practice, do we see overall improvement. Imagine the outrage if the change is imposed and we do not see or trust the possibility of eventual improvement. Now philosophy is of course not exactly like athletic skill. Philosophical ideas do not all catch on nor do they influence different corners of society equally – and the consequences are certainly not immediate. But I would like to use the analogy to make a couple of suggestions.

Perhaps we could see aspects of the situated context of academic philosophers, e.g., tenure protections, as providing a buffer from coercive pressures, which again eases freedom of thought. However, the ultimate purpose and justification for these thoughts, and therefore for

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their protections should be found in the effects on the broader society. Yet the ability to carry on with a bit of distance to e.g. some of the politics of the present – would be a beneficial condition if one is to experiment with our frames of understanding.

Much like we need to find a calm place to focus inwards, or to sleep to maintain our bodies and sanity for the purpose of facing daytime challenges and turmoil of the social world, philosophy can benefit from the calm of the “ivory tower”. However, if philosophy forgets that the purpose – and the cost-bearer - of the tower is outside of it, then we have a problem. Or, worse if one enjoys this privileged protected and supported situatedness, and then proceeds to use it to deny that philosophy and knowledge in general is situated, then philosophy become as Yancy writes, “a site of bad faith”.

Many philosophers - particularly within disabilities studies, science & technology studies, queer, feminist and critical race theory – have, like Yancy, been vocal about the situatedness of knowledge for many decades. But these exact voices have been largely ignored or even excluded from philosophy proper. One of the tools of this exclusion process has been a narrow definition of what philosophy is and an enforcement mechanism of policing of who can get hired or even thought of as a philosopher. The refrain being something like: “Whatever these thinkers were doing it is not actual philosophy”.

A detour will be necessary to explain the particularly malignant nature of this exclusion maneuver. It will begin with my experience studying the “Western canon” of philosophy.

4) The genesis myth of philosophy

From my first high school encounter with philosophy, I was told that the word ‘philosophia’ means “love of wisdom” in Greek. Now so far so good. If philosophy is about the appreciation and drive towards knowledge and understanding, then that fits quite well with the idea of philosophy as practice done by a plurality of people with culturally diverging tools and concerns. After all it seems that the basic drive toward understanding is as old as humanity. But those early introductions to the Greek term came with another core pillar, what we could call: “The genesis myth of philosophy”.

The story goes very roughly like this: Before the beginning of philosophy people would ask questions about their lives and world, their origins and purposes. But these questions would not be answered philosophically (or scientifically) rather they would be answered with myths, and irrational stories of gods and fantasy creatures. The problem was that these anthropomorphic explainers were arbitrary and that they themselves were left unexplained by the “pre-philosophical” stories. Then with the arrival of pre-Socratic philosophers and eventually with Socrates himself this all changed. Now the old questions were met with new more empirical and/or systematized and rationally founded answers.

Thales, writing around 600-550 BC is seen as an example of the early natural science variety, as he was looking for naturalistic explanations. His famous claim that “all is k” might be false but it is heralded for its ambition to hypothesize about universal principles and give unifying explanations of the world we experience.

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Or take the grand idea of Parmenides a few hundred years later, that “what is is.” The radical logical conclusion he drew from this simple claim, was that change must be impossible. The reasoning went like this: For something to exist, it could not also not exist. It would be logically incoherent to say of the same thing that it both exists and does not exist, thus what exists must necessarily exist. Parmenides then concluded that change was not just hard to understand but actually was *logically impossible*. For now, the key is that this style of reasoning exemplifies the new use of rationality to answer perennial questions.

My mission is not to take cheap shots at the pre-Socratics or early Greek philosophy, as a matter of fact I am a bit of a fan. But I have like many grown unsatisfied – both empirically and rationally if you will – with this genesis story, which surrounds these philosophers, and all the histories and alternative perspectives and possibilities that it refuses to include.

Most of us would probably agree that Thales and Parmenides and the other early Greek philosophers did not quite get it right, and that a lot of things were left unquestioned. But such limitations are to be expected from any philosophy, after all “the map is not the territory”. What is problematic in my view, is that there were a lot of things that their heralded methodologies of universal categories and language-based logic systematically excluded from questioning.

One example is the assumption that the ultimate truth about the world must be intelligible to the human mind. Parmenides is a spectacularly notorious - but certainly not isolated - example. His either/or logic lead him to deny the possibility of any change at all. Whereas many reasonable people would have concluded instead, that timeless logic is not always the right tool to use (particularly if the topic is change). However, such a frame shifting move was unacceptable to Parmenides, and Plato and many others, who concluded instead that the change we experience is illusionary in one way or the other. The driving article of faith being that the world must be logical, neatly categorizable and understandable. Even at the cost of our ordinary experience.

Now the question we face is this: How can a strand of inquiry like philosophy on the one hand claim to have broken up with myth, arbitrary assumptions, and “unexplained explainers” if you will, and at the same time use such unexplained assumptions to tell others that what they are doing is not philosophy?

If someone has other insights and methodologies to explain the world that we are faced with, how could it be in the spirit of post-mythological “love of wisdom” to exclude these new ideas as non-philosophical simply because they do not conform to one’s own traditions and presuppositions?

5) Human knowledge as limited yet productive: Lao-Tzu and the Tao te Ching

The irony gets even thicker, when we notice which thoughts were excluded from the philosophical canon, and that whole traditions in ancient China raised fundamental questions regarding precisely what Parmenides and company faithfully assumed, namely our human capability to understand the inner most meaning and working of reality.

The *Tao te Ching*, presumably written by Lao-Tzu around 600 BC, has been notoriously hard to both interpret and translate due to its poetic form and also to its ancient Chinese grammatically

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sparse notation. It reads as wisdom coming from an almost shared voice, and it is even unclear if Lao-Tzu was in fact the sole author. But these complexities remind us of the situated nature of philosophy and the difficulties of moving insights between wildly different contexts and audience expectations.

Further it shines a light on the individualist position of most western philosophers. In this chapter, *I argue xyz*, but is it not my social position e.g., in a liberal democracy that in part allows me this individual stand? The Spanish nun Teresa D’Avila, in 1577 anticipated many of Descartes most famous insights yet her work is rarely taught. I think today it might only indirectly be because she is a woman. Most directly it might be because she does not position the arguments and insights as her own, but rather as God speaking through her. But the difficulty is that had she claimed them as her own, she might not have survived their publication. Now we must ask: Would it be fair to demand that only persons privileged and politically protected enough to own their position individually can write philosophy?

Now back to the Tao te Ching. The opening lines goes – at least in one often used translation – as follows:

“The tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao
The name that can be named is not the eternal Name.
The unnamable is the eternally real.
Naming is the origin of all particular things.”

Without going too deep into the notion of Tao or “the way” what I want to highlight are two profound insights of these opening lines. 1) That we cannot capture the ultimate tao and presumably the ultimate reality with words or names. But yet 2) that our words frame and thus generate “particular things” or what we could think of as our lived reality.

Note that these two insights are from around the same time as the early pre-Socratics, but clearly resist the strict logic of Parmenides and company. They commit the sin of relativizing human knowledge and suggest that the ultimate nature of things might simply be unknowable. But the heresy does not stop there. The further claim is that our humanly produced knowledge actually has consequences. It does not leave the world intact, it produces things.

These lines lay bare a deep tension in the self-image of western philosophy. On the one hand it prides itself with a genesis narrative intimately intertwined with natural science, math and technological invention. Here it is quite obvious that knowledge has real life effects. We quite have literally built the complex fabric of modern human societies on these kinds of knowledge.

On the other hand, many canonical philosophers have sought to ignore the generative aspect of knowledge, and with that the notion that the production of ideas might come with a great deal of responsibility. The assumption is that philosophy is either mainly descriptive, as a pursuit of truth, or alternatively overtly about values and morality, about how we ought to live our lives and construct our worlds. The implicit idea is that the latter case we can expect controversy but not in the former. However, if we think of our knowledge about the world as generative then we will need - as the contemporary Indian philosopher Sundar Sarukkai has suggested - an “ethics of curiosity.”

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An analogy: We teach our kids to not stare at strangers, and that it is not all truths that should be told. We teach them to be sensitive and that knowledge about others comes with the responsibility to care. Thus Lao-Tzu - and parental wisdom – tells us that all our ideas have effects and construct our worlds, also those that seek truth. The map cannot, but also should not, contain everything.

Now with these insights we can turn back to the genesis myth of philosophy, and perhaps get a clearer view of why I see it as harmful. Lao-Tzu provides one of the oldest written sources for some of the ideas of philosophy that I express in this chapter. However according to the “origin myth” of Western philosophy the Tao te Ching does not really count. It is not philosophy. But why? Throughout my schooling I have repeatedly seen two different justifications spring up: One is about methodology and tools, e.g., the universal explanations and logic that we have seen in Thales and Parmenides. But as Western philosophers themselves began to question these methodologies and their unquestioned assumptions about whether the world is necessarily logical, a second kind justification is frequently used: Namely that it is about a cultural heritage and a textual genealogy if you will.

6) Post-Kantian philosophy, policing strategies and the analytic-continental split.

The interesting second act of the Greek origin myth is that many philosophers, not only in ancient China and India have pondered the limitations of our experience and of logic and rationality as tools of knowledge. Within the Greek/Western tradition these questions reared their heads already among pre-Socratics, like Heraclitus with his ideas about constant change and of the world as being in flux. But where Heraclitus easily was dismissed as a kind of mystic, it is with Kant that old assumptions of the world as logical and mirrored in human understanding gets its core challenge from within.

One of Kant’s main insights was that our knowledge about the world is relative to aspects our own minds, and that we can never know the world as it is “in itself” - independently of our minds. This is a dangerous challenge to a self-conception of philosophy as pursuit of ultimate truths about the world through a method of logical and empirical reasoning.

Even Kant himself sought to temper the earthquakes of his own views by arguing for a universally shared rational human mind (somehow compatible with his racism and misogyny). But his evidence here was perhaps more wishful than his cumbersome methodology suggests. In any case a tsunami of “post-Kantian” philosophy was unleashed – and with Hegel and Nietzsche - not to mention the French – the seeds were ignited for almost a civil war within many philosophy departments in the 20th century – between the so-called “continental” and “analytic” traditions.

Now I came of age within philosophy during these often quite dramatic continental-analytic divides. To over simplify we can say that the continental were the post-Kantians that problematized the foundations of universal knowledge and the – often Anglo-American - analytic philosophers were those who insisted on rationality, logic and empirical perception as unproblematic and necessary tools for philosophy. All else was nonsense.

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But now where does all this leave us in terms of the question of what philosophy is and why it matters? We saw that the first act of the myth of the Greek genesis of philosophy pointed basically to the appearance of the tools of analytic philosophy and science: Systematized and logically categorized empirical observation. Now after Kant how do we see this genesis story? Can we think of these post-Kantians as philosophers at all? If they - like Lao-Tzu and Heraclitus did - suggest that these tools might not be able to yield ultimate knowledge, wouldn't that exclude them from being philosophers proper? This has in a sense been the view of many analytic philosophers.

But particularly within the continental tradition another – and dare I say xenophobic - second act of the genesis myth became common. Namely that what is proper philosophy is the thinking that has the right ancestry, the thinking that stands in the right relations to the ancient Greek philosophers. The Nazi-supporting German philosopher Martin Heidegger stands out as a glorious example. His philosophy, which took much inspiration from Asian philosophers, poets and many other uncredited sources, was truly taking on board the relativity of being and our knowledge and also the complexities of truth seeking. However, in a 1955 lecture entitled “What is that - philosophy?” he wrote this highly revealing and hypocritical passage:

“The often-heard expression “Occidental-European philosophy,” is in truth a tautology. Why? Because “philosophy” is in its nature Greek... The proposition that philosophy is in its nature Greek says nothing but that the Occident and Europe, that they alone, are in the innermost course of their history originally “philosophical.” This is attested by the rise and domination of the sciences. It is because they stem from the innermost Occidental-European course of history, that is the philosophical course, that they are today able to put their specific imprint upon the history of mankind over the whole earth.”

This is what I call the second act of the Greek genesis myth – and the twisted self-serving contradictions are eye-popping. Without attempting to summarize Heidegger's thought the point is this: His own philosophy is not the kind that is intertwined with science, nor is his view of truth one that says that truth is dominance and power. Rather truth is an “uncovering” that rely on an attitude of listening - and even care - that allows the world to appear as itself. Yet he claims that his writings - as opposed to those of other non-European thinkers from which he steals – is philosophy because of his “Europeanness”; his ancestral history. Thus, not only excluding, without principle the voices of others, but even silencing his own influences as they do not have the right ancestral standing to count. Mansplaining and whitesplaining galore: Only when he – or someone of his ilk - says it, does it become philosophy.

Now to sum up, the Greek genesis myth have gone through several iterations - with various harmful effects:

- 1) The myth of the end of myth: The fiction of a radical beginning, and a neat rational basis of both philosophy and knowledge itself. The nature and position of the “knower,” the possibility of truth through reason and passive perception were left as unexplained dogma. Western philosophy has thus been intimately tied to the idea that the embodiment and situation of the knower was irrelevant.
- 2) The plot thickens as this neutral, ahistorical and disembodied notion of knowledge is threatened not only by alternative traditions of thought, but from within. Now how does one police what counts as philosophy and what doesn't?

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- 3) Two core methods are used: A) expel the heretics – this has been the methodology within many more analytically inclined communities. B) To tell an ancestral narrative of shared heritage, texts and private clubs. This has been the method within many continental communities. Or C) some hybrid of the two.

7) **A future of philosophy beyond the flat earth society**

The tragic irony that I have sought to expose in this chapter is that philosophy has constructed a fictional self-image that denied its own situatedness and its own dependencies and responsibilities. This lie has been maintained by systematically denying anyone into the club that through their different perspective would expose the cracks in the foundational myth.

One might want to draw an analogy to the “Flat earth society,” which has gained “around the world” support – through internet and telecommunications supported by orbiting satellites. The point is that internal consistency given a narrow observational perspective is not a guarantee for truth or wisdom – even (or perhaps especially) about our relative dependencies and responsibilities.

But the silence is broken. The rubber is meeting the road and we are finally beginning to see a new pluralistic, situated and social world of philosophy. Many are beginning to listen to – and of course appropriate - the many voices, past and present, that have been excluded.

Donna Haraway reminds us in her famous 1988 article “Situated Knowledges - ” that if philosophy is a situated and embodied practice then we should not expect self-transparency, nor should we expect our insights to come without cost. In her words:

“Vision is always a question of the power to see – and perhaps of the violence implicit in our visualizing practices. With whose blood were my eyes crafted? These points also apply to testimony from the position of “oneself”. We are not immediately present to ourselves. Self-knowledge requires a semiotic-material technology to link meanings and bodies. Self-identity is a bad visual system. Fusion is a bad strategy of positioning.”

We will arrive at any question with our entire situated selves, and therefore with host of tacit assumptions. Our pragmatic lenses if you will, are always shaped in ways that we neither control nor easily grasp. Self-knowledge cannot be taken for granted but takes work, and a special kind of work, it takes the integration of a multitude of perspectives. It is not only that that the kind of mythological and magic disembodied philosophical knowledge is impossible – it is also not desirable given the social and situated purposes philosophy serves, as “Fusion is a bad strategy of positioning.”

Ideas change us, which is why it matters who our philosophers are and how they are situated. And, what their perspective and social context allow them to understand, to value - and not least to say.