

**On Bitcoin Kings and Public Philosophers:
Some lighthearted comments in honor of Onora O’Neill’s Berggruen Prize**

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It’s an honor to be asked by the APA to comment briefly on Onora O’Neill’s Berggruen Prize lecture. I suspect I was asked because of her overall Kantian leanings, and the unmistakable “Back to Kant!” flavor at the end of her address. This is a Prize lectureship, however, and it’s on a Saturday afternoon at the end of a long conference before a nice reception, so this is not the place to go into detailed exegesis or critical engagement of her paper, though I will say something briefly at the end about her proposal regarding minimalist justification of ethical frameworks and the demands imposed by intelligibility.

Instead I want to just offer a few lighthearted reflections -- in the spirit of the Berggruen Prize, and in Baroness O’Neill’s honor -- on the idea of being a public philosopher. Or rather, in her case, the idea of being both a public and an excellent philosopher – excellent *qua* philosopher, but also sometimes working in and for the public.

1. Trust and trust funds

In thinking about what to say today and looking over Onora’s immense CV I was struck by how different she is from many of the other people who might publish important pieces, like she has, in venues like *The Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* or *The Cambridge Companion to Kant*. Her work ranges from all aspects of Kant to Rawls and the theory of justice to bioethics, global poverty issues, trust and money – and that’s just the philosophical work! In addition to that there is her work on policy and in politics generally, not to mention TED talks and work in Parliament and speeches to the Federal Reserve and leadership of the UK Animal Procedures committee and the Equality and Human Rights Commission. Beyond all this there are the countless awards and honorary degrees [aside: although I must say I found the recent honorary doctorate from Harvard in 2010 a bit humorous, given that you already got a real doctorate from them back in 1969. Were they worried that the first one didn’t take?].

Given all this, it is not a surprise that Onora would also be chosen by the Berggruen Prize jury as someone who represents the best that philosophy has to offer -- in terms of professional work, but also practical application and public engagement.

As I understand it, the Prize itself was awarded last December at a big ceremony at the New York Public Library with various luminaries in attendance – the great and the good of from the more public side of Onora’s career. If you go to the Berggruen Institute website, you’ll see a link to a [gushing Bloomberg news story](#) that has all sorts of celebrity photos of the event as well as an odd description of the meal they had: “meticulously prepared root vegetables and chocolate cake.” (!?) The story has a somewhat surprising title, however: “BitCoin King Tyler Winkelvoss Dines with Trust Expert Baroness O’Neill.” It was written by one Amanda L. Gordon, and starts with this opening hook: “It may not be every financier’s or techie’s dream, but some actually get a thrill from dining with philosophers...”

Gordon doesn’t explain exactly why Winkelvoss was there (or why it was only him and not also his usually inseparable twin) but the implicit suggestion was that because Onora has worked on trust and spoken to the New York Fed on the subject of trustworthiness a year earlier, she is the kind of philosopher with whom the Bitcoin King would be *thrilled* to dine.

Now I know what you’re thinking: the Winkelvoss twins still have serious trust issues ever since they hired a certain fellow freshman at Harvard to help them write code over the 2003 winter break for a startup social network idea they had, and then that certain freshman ended up stealing and patenting the idea by the time they all got back from vacation...

But in fact this was not the trust issue in question; rather the idea was that Winkelvoss’s new pet project – BitCoin and other cryptocurrencies -- are based in a rather extraordinary level of trust: trust in one another and in a system of exchange and in the expectation that other people do and will confer value on something that is untested and, in the absence of those mutual conferrals, not really of much intrinsic worth. (You can see why a Kantian constructivist would be attracted to the philosophy of money!)

The story doesn't mention it but I'm assuming that the Berggruen Prize itself was not awarded in Bitcoin. (Otherwise I fear the headline writer would not have been able to resist using the phrase "Bitcoin Baroness".) I'm glad, too, because just two days after the dinner BitCoin hit its all-time high and since then the inevitable dialectic of trust and questions about trustworthiness in a new asset class has led it to crater by over 70%. So I suspect that the Bitcoin King – who is depicted on that same Bloomberg site as predicting that Bitcoin would become Gold 2.0 and go to \$400,000 per coin -- may have trust issues of yet another sort now. (Or trust fund issues, in his case.)

2. The Case against Public Philosophy

Here we are at the APA, though, rather than with the great and the good at a billionaire soiree in Manhattan, and here I think there might be a bit more ambivalence about not just cryptocurrency but also the idea of public philosophy, or, more precisely, about whether such philosophy can be excellent.

One source of ambivalence might be the fact that deep pocketed organizations are interested in philosophy at all – providing funding and publicity but also seeking to encourage certain research projects or reward certain lines of thinking. Is it a good idea to have outside influences coming in and inevitably leading people to write about certain issues or for a broader audience, inevitably also wanting to see somewhat more immediate bang for their buck than we are used to providing? These concerns here are real, whether the money is coming from a more liberal democratic cross-cultural philanthropic French-Swiss-German billionaire whose name is on a \$1m prize and an Institute for Philosophy and Culture, or from a more libertarian and vaguely religious-panentheistic now-deceased billionaire whose name is on a \$1m prize and a family of mutual funds.

Last year I helped put together a panel here at the Pacific APA at which Craig Calhoun and some representatives from (yes) Templeton kindly came and spoke about their respective visions and motivations for supporting philosophy. There were people on the panel as well as in the audience who were recipients of funding from these sources; there were others who expressed concern about the

ultimate impact on professional philosophy of such a rise in funding for certain kinds of research projects.

What was said there on all sides was, in my view, reassuring. But it is obviously a conversation worth continuing. (And I should point out that I think Berggruen and Templeton are very different organizations with somewhat different aims.) This sudden influx of interest and funding leads to an even larger question, however, about whether philosophy should aspire to *be* public. Obviously philosophical ideas have an immense influence on the behavior of individuals and groups over time, but it's not like the latest issue of *The Philosophical Review* is moving markets or fomenting revolutions, or like the APA is being overrun by protests in the way a Fed meeting or Davos or a political convention might be. That's not how philosophy work. Rather, ideas that were generated a LOONG time ago – in places like Athens or Oxford or the British Library or Koenigsberg – were repeatedly tested as they slowly seeped their way into the broader culture, ultimately but certainly not immediately leading to revolutions in thought or governance.

I remember discussing this question with one of my colleagues once – should philosophers try to be *public*, and what would that mean? He said he thought that public work is a very different sort of exercise, and one for which we are not well-trained during our doctoral programs. When you decided to go into professional philosophy as opposed to being a judge or a journalist or a diplomat or an opinion writer, he said, you decided to cultivate specialized ways of writing and thinking that are explicitly *not* for the public. After 2500 years, philosophy has gotten to the highly professionalized point where if you focus on doing public work, you'll almost certainly end up being a less excellent philosopher, or so he thought. Whoever heard of a public mathematician, or a public chemist? There are public physicists, perhaps (and we just this week lost one of the best). But if you want to do that sort of thing, perhaps it's best to follow their example and wait until you've done your best professional work before giving up and starting to write pop material for a broader public. The problem with that idea, of course, is that (as both Onora's and Kant's examples show), philosophers sometimes end up writing their best *scholarly* work quite late in their careers. So there may simply be no good time to "go public."

3. The Case for Public Philosophy

That's one way to think about it. And yet, there is demand for philosophical content in the public sphere, and it will be met one way or the other. We are all aware of the ways in which talk radio and religious podcasts and social media and cable news are full of philosophizing of various and often dubious kinds.

There is also increasing demand in the marketplace – yes, Apple has some sort of University that hired Joshua Cohen away from Stanford and something called “Ontology Project” seems to advertise occasionally on PhilJobs, but that's not what I mean. Nor do I mean that what goes on here at the APA is ever going to be of great interest to the broader public, with reporters breathlessly speaking into cameras outside our conference rooms and CNN drawing electoral maps trying to predict the whether Becko Copenhaver, Amy Ferrer, and the current APA leadership will gerrymander the borders of the Pacific vs. Central Division in an effort to elect a President who is to their liking.

I also don't mean, more seriously and more unfortunately, that we can reasonably expect the outside world to increase demand for philosophy in a way that would help our anemic job market or improve the lot of the most vulnerable among us – the deserving but desperate job candidates and the casualized laborers.

Rather, I mean that there is also and hopefully increasingly demand for at least some of the *skills* that philosophy provides, to us but especially to those we teach.

A thinker no less subtle and elegant than Mark Cuban recently said that he would much prefer to hire people with liberal arts degrees than computer science degrees, and that [in 10 years a philosophy major will be one of the most valuable degrees](#) because we'll need people with the ability to think broadly, systematically, ethically, and publicly as the ongoing technological transformations of the human and natural landscapes continue. Multiply 10 by at least 2 or 3 to take into account Cuban's usual tendency to hyperbole, and that's still an exciting prospect.

So we can try to produce these skills in our students, but it's also important to have exemplars at the highest levels of our field. And that's where Onora comes in. For what I mean by public and excellent philosophy is precisely what she has modeled for us, and why Baroness O'Neill is such a fitting recipient of *both* the Berggruen Prize *and* the International Kant Prize a couple of years ago in Vienna (a ceremony that Eric Watkins and I also witnessed, in fact.)

Instead of *only* burrowing into deeper and more intricate articulations of the categorical imperative or the difference principle, although she can certainly do that, O'Neill combines her specialized, focused work on Kant and political philosophy with scholarly but still accessible presentations on poverty, global justice, trustworthiness, and bioethics. Instead of *merely* going public and trying to generate the most likes and buzz and appearances and honoraria, she has worked in a manner that captured public attention but still retained the respect of peers and students in the profession (although she's not doing too badly on the honoraria front either – no matter what currency they are paid in). She is equally comfortable discussing financial policy with Mark Carney and grand strategy with Fareed Zakaria as she is discussing the original position with Christine Korsgaard or the Antinomy of Pure Practical Reason with Paul Guyer. Through a kind of superhuman fortitude, it seems, she has managed to take a both/and approach to public philosophy and excellent philosophy.

One of the points she has made repeatedly in her more public appearances is that the talk in pop psychology and business of trust and transparency and integrity can be quite vacuous or even misleading. We have to remember that leaps of trust can be dangerously irrational if there is not something trustworthy *in* the person or thing on the other side of the chasm. Indeed, Evan Spiegel (co-founder and CEO of Snapchat and a member of the Berggruen Institute's 21st Century Council who was also present at the dinner of meticulous root vegetables and chocolate cake) built an entire and very successful platform that thrives on lack of trust – Snapchat users send messages to one another that self-destruct a few seconds after they are read. Onora makes a similar point about integrity: it's no good trying to integrate or unify a whole that isn't *itself* good. Calls for trust and integrity on their own are merely formal and empty gestures: what's on the other side has to have real value, worth, and worthiness – and thinking about that requires doing some real philosophy.

In the present talk O'Neill exemplifies an impressively synoptic ability to see, steadily and whole, a century's worth of developments in ethics and political philosophy, noting along the way how different movements asked different questions, took up new perspectives, and thereby made old questions invisible and old perspectives unintelligible. She also manages to leave us with a substantive provocation when she proposes a return to a "minimalist, modal" reading of the Kantian idea that we should focus on the *mere* but "*necessary* conditions for the possibility of offering one another intelligible reasons for action that could be adopted" in a broad and pluralistic polity. It is minimal because it does not build in a commitment to either "exorbitant" or "arbitrary" assumptions about the people to whom we justify ourselves. It is modal because it demands that we "reject principles of action that *cannot* be principles for all: but no more."

If there were time, I might quibble with what looks to me like a slide in the paper from a claim about intelligibility to a claim about possible adoptability. I suppose it depends on how widely we interpret the modal "can" in "can adopt" here, but my sense is that in a justificatory context I may find your reasons for acting *intelligible* well before I find them *adoptable* myself. If we stick with "intelligible," then I think we might end up back in original Rawlsian project of seeking reflective equilibrium within coherent but potentially radically different pictures; if we go with "adoptable" then I think we might wonder whether and how practical reason could really motivate such a high standard of justification.

4. To conclude...

The fact that *this* event is being held, in addition to the one that was already held in NYC with the Spiegels and the Winkelvosses and the Zekariah's of the world, suggests, I think, that there a serious commitment on the part of the APA to continue to engage entities like the Berggruen Institute which would, in turn, like to see us take a somewhat more public role. The fact that Craig Calhoun – a sociologist in name, at least -- showed up two years in a row at the APA suggests that there is at least *some* enthusiasm on the other side for keeping the Berggruen Institute's work engaged with professional philosophy as a discipline. On their website they downplay this a bit and say that they think of philosophy quite broadly and that academic philosophy is just one discipline among many. And I know from experience that over the past couple of years the Berggruen

Fellows appointed at places like Stanford and Harvard are no longer mostly professional philosophers in the same way that they were a couple of years ago.

But the constituency of the independent Prize jury is largely composed of professional philosophers, and that speaks to Nicholas Berggruen's ongoing desire to invest in and promote excellent philosophy. At some point, of course, the list of professional academic philosophers who are making policy in Montreal or members of Parliament in the UK but also publishing in the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* or the *Phil Review* will run out and the Prize will go to people whom we might not consider philosophers in the APA sense. (Actually, we may have already run out now).

Still, I think we can take these well-deserved honors that Berggruen has given to Charles Taylor and now to Baroness O'Neill to represent a kind of challenge to the rest of us here at the APA as well as in the BPA and the CPA -- a challenge, especially to the younger people and students here, to consider whether we have the calling to emulate Onora in trying -- at least trying, while under no illusion that it's easy -- to be both excellent philosophers and, occasionally perhaps, excellent and public philosophers.