A DEMOCRATIC APPROACH TO PUBLIC PHILOSOPHY

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Guest Editors

As the theme of this issue indicates, there is a strong appetite in 'the wild' (i.e., beyond the academy) for public philosophy. There are myriad forums available, from magazines and online publications to podcasts and YouTube videos, for those who wish to engage in philosophy in a non-academic context. For academic philosophers, this has raised methodological and metaphilosophical questions like: '*what is the best way to engage in public philosophy?*' and '*what are our aims when we engage in public philosophy?*'

But what do 'the public' want? If public philosophy is philosophy written *for* a public audience, what is it, exactly, that it can or might do *for* them? Several answers have been proposed by philosophers, but less attention has been paid to how the public themselves might answer that question. The aim of this essay is to try and put together at least the beginning of an answer.

To that end, in June 2022 we put out a survey in the hope of eliciting views from 'the public' on issues relating to the nature and aims of both philosophy (more generally) and *public* philosophy. In doing so, our aim was to take a 'democratic' approach to answering the question: What is public philosophy? Within two weeks, we received over 170 responses.

We did not put any limits on who was eligible to respond which, unsurprisingly, meant that a number of responses came from students of, or those working, in academic philosophy. However, we did include several questions which allowed us to discern whether respondents saw themselves as engaging professionally or academically in philosophy (or not). We will make it clear how respondents identified as and when it becomes relevant to our conclusions.

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1. What is Philosophy?

Before discussing the topic of public philosophy, we asked respondents how they perceived the discipline more generally, by responding to the following prompt (in 250 words or less): "In your own words, describe what philosophy is. In answering, give examples of philosophical topics."

One motivation for this question is that we expected a high response rate from non-academics and, having both engaged in philosophy in the public sphere, recognised that perceptions of the subject can vary drastically. This speculation was confirmed by the following responses to multiple-choice questions:

- 23% of respondents answered "true" in response to the prompt "Self-Improvement books [like 'Atomic Habits' by James Clear] are an example of philosophy," while 71% answered "false," and 6% "perceive them as the same thing."
- 28% answered "true" for "philosophy is similar to psychology," while 70% answered "false", and 2% "perceive them as the same thing."

Working on the assumption that a respondent's preconceptions about philosophy will impact what they see the role of *public* philosophy to be, it seems sensible, before discussing a democratic approach to *public* philosophy, to establish the public's perception of philosophy *per se*. While responses were qualitative, they can all (except for a few outliers) be categorised into one of six themes.

ONE RESPONDENT CHARACTERISED PHILOSOPHY AS "PURSUING THE QUESTIONS OF CHILDREN, WITH THE TOOLS OF LAWYERS"

In response to the prompt 'Describe what "philosophy" is', a high number linked philosophy's primary aim to thinking and questioning in an abstract way. These responses emphasised the processes rather than the outcomes of philosophy. Some stated we should take seriously the questions that children ask, implying that this practice was intrinsically good. One respondent, for example, characterised philosophy as "Pursuing the questions of children, with the tools of lawyers."

Others indicated that thinking in some abstract way might help us achieve a desired end, like a better life: "We all think. We have to. So why not think about

thinking? It might help the rest of our lives." Further, some responses indicated that philosophy is a way of thinking about topics with no pre-existing consensus: "The best definition I have is that philosophy is the study of questions where there is no consensus method for studying them."

It is worth noting, though, that, overwhelmingly, this type of answer came from older respondents who identified almost exclusively as either studying academic philosophy or having done so in the past (with little experience in public philosophy).

A high number of respondents who either had never studied academic philosophy or had engaged in public philosophy alongside academia (through discussions with friends, podcasts, and other accessible mediums) tended to put philosophy at the centre of human existence. Such responses emphasised how philosophy can help us identify the best way of living in society, often with reference to the human condition and behaviour, or a deeper search for meaning. For example, a respondent who had only ever engaged in public philosophy wrote:

> Philosophy is the process of human beings contemplating the nature of themselves, their relationship to others, the world they inhabit, and the universe at large. This includes religion, ethics, social-political theory, cosmology, all concepts of Being, meaning, existence, consciousness, theories of knowledge, and what it means to be human. There is hardly a subject, when investigated deeply enough, that doesn't have a philosophical aspect to it.

Several responses in these categories mentioned mainstream topics at the intersection of self-improvement and philosophy, including the teachings of Stoicism. Such responses often characterised philosophy as similar to psychology and self-improvement in our multiple-choice questions.

Another dominant theme was the idea that philosophy is a non-scientific enquiry (an interesting result, given that analytic philosophy, at least, is often characterised as striving to be scientific). For example, one respondent, who engages in public (but not academic) philosophy, wrote:

Philosophy is the non-empirical exploration and investigation of conceptual things (e.g. existence, truth/knowledge, justice, goodness, morality) using some form of methodological commitment and carried out using some form of reasoning or argumentation.

For other respondents, philosophy goes beyond – and has the capability to achieve more than – the sciences through its abstract methodology. Consider the following, from an academic who engages in public philosophy:

Philosophy is the analytical discipline of exploring topics in a scientific fashion when there is no data to be used. I.e., philosophy is science without the facts. This makes philosophy heavily reliant on logic, analogical reasoning, and abduction. Good philosophy uses these tools to arrive at the most plausible and coherent answers to deep questions which are beyond the realm of science.

The final three themes that emerged are closely related and fit (often stereotypical) public conceptions of philosophy. In accordance with the etymology of 'philosophy', approximately 10% of respondents mentioned a 'love of wisdom' and perceive philosophy as something to solve logical problems and find truth: "The Greek meaning of the word 'the love for wisdom' conveys correctly what it is for me. It is literally that. Engaging with the shared wisdom of others via reading."

Similarly, some respondents perceived philosophy as testing our pre-existing assumptions, presuppositions, and concepts. The majority of these had studied academic philosophy before, and seemed to have a stronger grip on the terminology and methodology of philosophy (and analytic philosophy, in particular): "Clarification of thoughts; research and analysis of 'concepts' and their rooting in everyday life; disentangling 'logic' of doing/experiencing/thinking/ talking; and doing so by studying examples/exemplary situations from everyday life…"

Lastly, a somewhat related theme that emerged was philosophy's role in accepting truths from different perspectives, in search of a fundamental understanding of reality. This was alluded to by both academic philosophers and those who have never studied philosophy. An example of the latter suggested that philosophy addresses "topics to discuss make you think differently about how you've always thought, it's good to challenge your perceptions."

For these recipients, philosophy is less about logic or language games and more a tool that can be used to shift our perception of the world (perhaps towards some practical end).

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2. What is Public Philosophy?

The second prompt was 'In your own words, describe what good public philosophy looks like.' We phrased the question this way to elicit more than just descriptions of the public philosophy respondents were familiar with, but a more normative sense of what respondents think public philosophy *should* be like. Our hope was that responses to this prompt would allow us to make democratically informed forward-looking recommendations about the

directions public philosophy ought to be going in (as we do in the next section).

What emerged in response were the following themes: public philosophy should be written clearly and accessibly; it should emphasise and foster critical thinking skills; it should have practical application in society more widely; and it should be a social activity. In this section, we break down these different themes in greater detail.

Overwhelmingly, the most common response emphasised the importance of clarity and accessibility. Around a third of responses highlighted the importance of clear writing, with several responses claiming it is important for public philosophers to avoid complex, technical language or jargon:

> I think a lot of the audience for public philosophy is probably people like me who've studied some academic philosophy and want a lighter treatment of something either to broaden their philosophical horizons, as a way into a new topic, or just for fun. But to be good public philosophy it's got to be something pretty much anyone can engage with.

Another respondent, who identified as a reader of philosophy books aimed at a non-academic audience, cited Carlo Rovelli, Daniel Klein, and Stephen Mumford as good examples of public philosophy; explaining: "I can engage with these writers even when I'm tired after a day's work."

It seems plausible to suggest that the style and form of academic philosophy can be off-putting to readers who are not professionally engaged. This is perhaps understandable: a piece of academic philosophy has a pre-established audience who are obliged to take note of the latest research. It may also be that certain writing *styles* (e.g., those from different traditions) can be a barrier to accessibility. For instance, even a professional philosopher working in one tradition (say, analytic philosophy) might struggle with philosophy writing from another (e.g., 'continental' thinkers like Bergson or Heidegger). A piece of public philosophy, it seems plausible to suggest, is more like journalism, at least insofar as it requires the author to capture the interest of a potentially disinterested observer (and one who is not embedded within a particular tradition).

The second most common response emphasised what can be described as 'critical thinking'. Responses of this kind went in one of two directions. The first focused on the *way* public philosophy is written or presented. Several answers contrasted the logic and arguments employed in public philosophical outputs to less rigorous forms of reasoning on offer – perhaps in the context of journalism or political discourse. For instance, one respondent, who identified as having engaged in or studied academic philosophy, described public philosophy as: "Applying philosophical methods in the public sphere to call out incorrect ways of arguing – ranging from pointing out fallacies in political discourse, to using philosophy to understand the nature of conspiracy theories."

IT SEEMS PLAUSIBLE TO SUGGEST THAT THE STYLE AND FORM OF ACADEMIC PHILOSOPHY CAN BE OFF-PUTTING TO READERS WHO ARE NOT PROFESSIONALLY ENGAGED

The second strand of 'critical thinking' focused on how public philosophy can invoke deeper critical thought and get people thinking about issues they would otherwise not consider. In the words of one respondent: "Good public philosophy is one whereby non-specialists are provoked to think philosophically". Another wrote: "Good public philosophy often starts with commonsensical premises and goes on to show their surprising consequences".

These kinds of answers indicate that by exemplifying good critical thinking skills public philosophers can encourage their audiences to do the same. It's a case of doing as I say, *and* as I do.

Another theme that emerged was the value of public philosophy to society. Several responses noted that public philosophy has the capacity to foster empathy and a sense of value in the welfare of others; what one respondent described as "more compassionate care of our

fellow citizens". Some answers connected this to politics and the possibility of healthier political discourse. As a participant who identified as engaging with philosophy books for a non-academic audience put it: "I think good public philosophy is important for politics as it helps us value humanity and individual people."

On the other hand, several responses also emphasised the value of public philosophy to oneself and that engaging with public philosophy can help one to lead a better life. A respondent who identified as having engaged with or studied academic philosophy, contrasted public philosophy with self-help literature in the following way:

> Any socially accepted idea, image, or way of life that is questioned as acceptable is good public philosophy. Self-improvement books usually re-affirm these social norms, helping people attain them, whereas a public philosophy will work as an intervention on whether these social norms are worth attaining in the first place.

As we found in answers that emphasised critical thinking skills, these answers imply public philosophy is about scrutinising and questioning ways of life, rather than simply endorsing one over another.

Interestingly, several responses suggested that good public philosophy should be social and interactive. For instance, one respondent suggested that good philosophy might happen "with friends" and "maybe written on a wall in a public space." Such answers suggest the *public* dimension of public philosophy was seen as important (or that some respondents took the prompt very literally).

Another common idea was that good public philosophy deals with what might be referred to as 'real issues'. Some emphasised that public philosophy should have practical consequences. In the words of one respondent, good public philosophy "aids in the resolution of public issues".

Finally, while an emphasis on clarity and accessibility was overwhelmingly the most common type of response, there were several cautions against 'dumbing down' philosophy for a public audience. It is worth noting that all but one of these responses came from someone who identified as having engaged with or studied academy philosophy. This detail might be relevant: it would be

understandable if specialists might not want ideas to be 'dumbed down'. On the other hand, it seems plausible that non-specialists may not be looking for 'watered down' content either – if you're going to engage in philosophy in your own time (the argument might go), then you want the real thing, not a facsimile.

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3. Forward-looking Recommendations: *a Tension*

We have now heard, from the horse's mouth, what 'the public' think philosophy is and what public philosophy *should be*. In deciding how to engage in public philosophy, it seems to us, we should at the very least give a nod to these answers. But are they what's best for the public and the discipline? There is certainly some pushback from academic philosophers, suggesting that there might be a trade-off to be made.

In discussing what he calls the "rules of engagement" on public philosophy, academic John Huss (in 'Popular Culture and Philosophy: Rules of Engagement' in Essays in Philosophy) worries that - in a world of YouTube, Twitter, and 30-second Tik-Tok videos - philosophy is competing with *pseudophilosophy*. Huss draws an analogy (originally made by William Irwin in 'A pop culture manifesto') between pesudophilosophy and other forms of 'knowledge-acquisition.' He argues that things like astrology and Tarot Cards are becoming popular because they are attractive and neatly packaged. That is, they answer our questions in a direct, straightforward way; and those answers are rarely subjected to closer scrutiny.

We might think that, if public philosophy is to grab the average YouTuber user's interest, it needs to be equally as attractive. It needs to grab the attention of a disinterested observer. But some academic philosophers have expressed the concern that this is not possible. Jeremy Barris (in 'The Nature and Possibility of Public Philosophy'), for example, has expressed the worry that the very concept of public philosophy is flawed because: "Philosophy is defined partly by a questioning reflection on its own sense, while public culture characteristically relies unreflectively on its ultimate givens."

If so, philosophy, by its very nature, cannot compete with the simplified nature of pseudophilosophy. This is because, in line with the views of several respondents,

many academics believe philosophy means going beyond what we know and take for granted. This is often what makes certain philosophical writings publicly incomprehensible because, as Karl Jaspers has argued (in 'Reason and Existenz: Five Lectures') "[Words and concepts] are used to go beyond the limits and should not be used in their original sense".

Despite such resistance to public philosophy, philosophy that is *not* publicly accessible has a serious PR problem, and there are signs that this has led to decreased interest in the discipline. In the US, for example, philosophy's share in the uptake of total annual bachelor's degrees is at a low of 0.42%, and philosophy doctorates completed have dropped by more than 13% since 2012 (as reported by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences). This provides an additional incentive, one might argue, to work out what 'the public' want from philosophy.

If academics want to increase uptake, interest, and funding, it seems plausible to suggest they must do *something* that is publicly interesting. Eric Bettinger and Bridget Terry Long argue (in 'Do college instructors matter? The effects of adjuncts and graduate assistants on students' interests and success') that this might involve teaching the basic value of philosophy, which they see as the first step to more complex discussion. Their claim is that academics should be the ones to carry this task out, because students are more likely to pursue higher-level studies in humanities when introductory classes are made by tenured faculties.

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4. Forward-looking Recommendations: *a Trade-off*

We seem to be at a crossroads, where the best thing for the future of the discipline is to promote public philosophy, yet that public practice is resisted and criticised by several professional philosophers. This is the lens through which we should be reviewing the answers to our questionnaire. In doing so, we should ask: is there a trade-off that adequately balances the demands of academics and the public?

Looking back at our results, it seems significant that something like 23-30% of our respondents opted for a definition of philosophy that is at odds with the way it is typically defined by those who work in academic philosophy, i.e., as something close to (popular) psychology.

We take it that most academics would disagree that philosophy is like (popular) psychology, of which self-improvement is an example. Stoicism, for example, is often romanticized and neatly packaged in this sphere - often entailing nothing more than blanket quotes like 'focus on what you can control, and ignore the rest' (see Angie Hobbs' contribution to this issue for more on Stoicism in popular philosophy). Of course, that is not to deny that philosophy can be used to achieve a better life (that was clearly the aim of much of Aristotle's writing, for example). But philosophical approaches to 'the good life' typically go deeper in analysis and discussion than you would find in most self-improvement books. They are also more likely to raise questions and challenge assumptions (e.g., *what is a good life in the first place?*) than provide simple rules to live by (less *live, laugh love*, more *pause, think, reflect*).

PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACHES TO 'THE GOOD LIFE' TYPICALLY GO DEEPER IN ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION THAN YOU WOULD FIND IN MOST SELF-IMPROVEMENT BOOKS

On the other hand, there were plenty of responses that characterised philosophy in a manner more familiar to those working in the field academically, i.e., as the pursuit of wisdom. This involves questioning answers with no consensus, non-empirical investigation that goes beyond science, and an examination of the human condition.

Acknowledging this divide in our responses, we think it seems plausible to suggest that, going forward, there should be two branches of public philosophy:

- Corrective public philosophy: fixing the pre-conceptions of what philosophy is, by defining and elucidating it in an accessible way that does not assume prior knowledge.

- Engaging public philosophy: for those familiar enough with the topic who want to engage in the same practice that academics do, but in a more publicly engaging and accessible manner.

It is important to note that most ordinary folk who attempt public philosophy are unlikely to know which camp they belong to. For instance, those who truly think philosophy and psychology are identical, may attempt to engage in public philosophy, only later realising their mistake.

This bipartite characterisation of public philosophy is compatible with a recent account of different approaches to engaging in public philosophy from Michael Burroughs and Desiree Valentine (in 'Toward Engaging a Broader Public: Children and Public Philosophy'). According to Burroughs and Valentine, different approaches to public philosophy (currently on offer) include:

- Field philosophy: involving collaborations between philosophers and other experts, discussing issues to bring about practical change.
- Popular philosophy: aimed at broadening access to philosophy by presenting complex ideas in an interesting and accessible form, including blogs, podcasts, or pop-culture philosophy books.
- Activist philosophy: promoting social and political reform by encouraging the public to reflect on and question those things we take for granted.

At face value, it seems that 'corrective' public philosophy could be exemplified through 'popular' philosophy (in Burroughs and Valentine's terminology). By contrast, 'engaging' public philosophy could be exemplified through any of these three approaches.

Further, looking back at the responses to what public philosophy should be like, it seems most can be categorised into one of these camps. For example, in our answers:

- Mention of helping politics and humanity implies a type of 'field' philosophy.
- Reference to a "lighter treatment of topics" and an ability to "engage when tired" would be an example of 'popular' philosophical methods.

- Applying philosophy to the public sphere to call out incorrect ways of arguing would be 'activist' philosophy in action.

Our answers indicate that 'the public' want public philosophy in the forms outlined by Burroughs and Valentine, but we are also suggesting that their responses justify a further division between 'corrective' and 'engaging' public philosophy.

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There is a tension at the heart of the notion of public philosophy between the rigorous, challenging cross-examination of beliefs and opinions that (according to both 'the public' and academic philosophers) constitutes philosophical thinking, and the accessibility that any form of public engagement demands. Thus, while 'popular' philosophy, which draws on familiar concepts, everyday experience, and (e.g.,) pop culture is an intuitive approach, it needs to be managed carefully and supported by other forms of engagement. For that reason, we think (in line with our findings), that 'corrective' public philosophy is as important as 'engaging' public philosophy. In other words, just as it is important to provide philosophy students with the means of understanding what they are doing when they are doing philosophy (and why), it is important to provide 'the public' with the means of understanding the distinctive aims and methodology of public philosophy. If approached in this way, we think, public philosophy promises to be more democratic.

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