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Public Philosophy: Introduction

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This issue of *Essays in Philosophy* is, as far as I know, the first extended effort to look at the theoretical structures of public philosophy. It is therefore, idiosyncratic and diverse in its approaches. There are times when the authors speak with tentative caution and others when they proclaim with loud and certain voices. In other words, they are all philosophers engaged in philosophical inquiry, a fact that, surprisingly, the vicissitudes of professional life require that I underscore.

The relevant call for papers defined public philosophy as “*doing philosophy with general audiences in a non-academic setting*,” adding that “while it is often said to play a role in democratic education, public philosophy is its own enterprise. It is philosophy outside the classroom, a voluntary endeavor without course-credit, assignments, or even a clear purpose.” As broad as it is, this description hides the fact that many consider the very name “public philosophy” to be an oxymoron. It is said that only philosophers can do philosophy and that the most that the general public can be are students. Furthermore, whatever a philosopher chooses to do with his or her time, public philosophy should not count as research. It might be teaching, it might even be service, but it is most definitely not scholarship, or so many pre-tenured philosophers are told.

Critiques of public philosophy tend to revolve around two objections. The first is that public philosophy is not disciplined enough. Because it addresses non-specialists, the argument concludes, it does not have the precision or extended nature of true philosophical inquiry. Audiences are usually unaware of the philosophical literature that preceded their discussion and, as a result, old ground is retrodden, and no new knowledge is created. Responding to

this objection is always the subtext and often the supertext of the articles in this issue. I shall defer my rebuttal to the contributors.

The second major objection is that public philosophy is just *bad* philosophy. This is the critique of the philosophy blogosphere, the essence of the complaints and jabs from professors who have embraced the “snarky” *ethos* of the World Wide Web. And no single category of public philosophy has received more of their negative attention than the “philosophy and popular culture” collections that dominate philosophy sections in whatever brick and mortar bookstores still dot the American landscape. These anthologies are the last refuge for scoundrels, the bloggers and their commenters tell us. They are publishing warehouses for the unpublishable and the creation of audiences for those with nothing worth saying.

These blogs are ripe for Marxist if not Freudian analysis. They often read as power preservation rather than thoughtful contributions, and by declaring who is “in” and who is “out,” they seem to believe that they institutionalize their own leadership. I shall also defer these deconstructions; they are too “inside baseball” and, frankly, too boring to concern us here. Instead, I shall remark simply that no area of philosophy is reserved for purely good or the purely bad publication. One can only evaluate quality on a case-by-case basis. There is indeed bad public philosophy out there, but there is equally bad work for specialists. Some of the most prestigious publishers have pushed some of the most indefensible texts.

Ultimately, though, the problem this critique of quality reveals is that there are, in fact, no established standards for public philosophy. There is no community agreement as to what public philosophy should look like, let alone, what criteria it ought to privilege. There isn’t a public philosophy canon, either. Most agree that the historical Socrates was doing some form of public philosophy, but the Platonic version engages the Classical Greek equivalent of academics at least as often as he does general audiences. Aurelius, Machiavelli, Astor, Mandeville, Montaigne, Wollstonecraft, Dewey, Rand, and Russell are but a few other candidates for public philosophy canonization, but each of them had academic or professional motives as well, and such a list of prestigious practitioners suggests that public philosophy is just traditional philosophy with a different rhetorical slant.

This concern, identifying the standards and canon of public philosophy is also a preoccupation of the contributors to this issue. They each attempt to consider the history and practice of public philosophy in order to find the criteria implicit in the most successful of public philosophy endeavors, including, of course, the philosophy and popular culture anthologies. None of the authors are so unsophisticated to think that every work of public

philosophy is worth celebrating. Most, however, suggest that the public philosophy project is inherently valuable as a whole.

And this philosophical analysis leads to a further complexity: the subject of this issue is public philosophy, but professionals will dominate its audience. There is no small amount of sociology underpinning these discussions and often more than a bit of hope that an essay can reach a wide audience of amateur philosophers who want to understand what it is they are doing. But they are still specialized essays about a public endeavor and this has led to confusion. More than one author presented essays with an informal voice, adopting the public philosophy technique of modeling writing on everyday conversation. In response, I, as editor, asked them to add formality to their work. I believed that if they did, they would have more chance of persuading skeptical professionals to take their academic voices more seriously and to think better of the ideas they communicate. My hope was and remains, that these readings would inspire a reevaluation of public philosophy by the skeptical.

In other words, given the controversial nature of the subject, this journal issue is a work of advocacy as well as philosophy. It attempts to suggest the *legitimacy* of the project, not just the nature. It is analogous to the many conversations that philosophers are having in Deans' and Provosts' offices around the world: in each instance apologists are asserting that their tasks are worthy of celebrating and, therefore, funding. By showing both the necessity and the sophistication of the project, the authors in this issue are declaring the value of their contributions. Through *Essays in Philosophy*, many public philosophers are coming out of the closet.

Given the complexity and diversity of contributions, I have divided the essays into three groups. The first "What is public philosophy?" attempts to articulate the standards and *teloi* of the activity itself. Here the question of quality is front and center, as is the legitimacy of the philosophy and popular culture series.

The second section "public philosophy and the profession of philosophy" considers the place of public philosophy in academic life. It contains articles asking whether public philosophy should count as teaching, research, and service, and whether professors who engage in these non-university activities are making legitimate contribution to the field and their department. One of the authors offers a spirited defense of the philosophy and popular culture books; another concludes that public philosophy is a moral obligation, even for professionals.

The third section contains nominations for the public philosophy canon, showing that its practitioners are not just public intellectuals, but diverse scholars from three disparate schools of thought: Christian apologetics, analytic philosophy, and pragmatism.

None of the contributors are under the delusion that these essays will settle controversies about public philosophy, its criteria and canon, professional role, or history, but each hopes that they will spark further conversation. It should not escape notice that there are few citations in this issue that point to articles *about* public philosophy. Instead, references advert mostly to work from which conclusions can be teased out. This adds support to my earlier conviction that this is the first extended effort to look at the theoretical structures of public philosophy. As time moves on, however, all the authors hope that this collection will be referenced by those who seek to further the agenda they've established. Public philosophy, in order to survive, must be taken seriously, and to be taken seriously, it must cultivate a body of academic work that explores and refines the practice. This is only a founding collection in a new and important area of inquiry, and there is more disagreement than consensus among the authors. But this just means there is more room to welcome those who choose to respond. If this collection is quickly superseded, it means that more professionals have taken on the challenge of theorizing public philosophy, an outcome that all of the contributors would welcome.