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# What Does Public Philosophy Do? (Hint: It Does Not Make Better Citizens)

**Jack Russell Weinstein**

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## Abstract

In this article, I examine the purpose of public philosophy, challenging the claim that its goal is to create better citizens. I define public philosophy narrowly as the act of professional philosophers engaging with non-professionals, in a non-academic setting, with the specific aim of exploring issues philosophically. The paper is divided into three sections. The first contrasts professional and public philosophy with special attention to the assessment mechanism in each. The second examines the relationship between public philosophy and citizenship, calling into question the effect public philosophy has on political reasoning. The third focuses on the practice of public philosophy, describing actual events to investigate the nature and limits of their outcomes. I conclude that public philosophy aims at future philosophical inquiry but is best considered a form of entertainment.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

I write this paper from the perspective of a public philosopher who has hosted close to 125 events over the last six years. As director of *The Institute for Philosophy in Public Life* and the host of the public radio show *Why? Philosophical Discussions About Everyday Life*, I have blogged, lectured, facilitated discussions and film series, and interviewed some of the most impressive philosophical minds for audiences ranging from six people to a couple of thousand. My personal experiences permeate this paper, although they become most relevant in the third section.

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## Public and professional philosophy contrasted

Philosophers don't like the general public; we have a tendency to regard them as the enemy. The very first story in the Western philosophical narrative—Thales's monopolization of the olive presses—is one of a philosopher getting revenge.<sup>2</sup> It is a self-serving anecdote that confirms for many philosophers, their attitude of intellectual superiority, suggesting that philosophers could indeed get the upper hand economically, politically, or otherwise, if only we cared about worldly goods. But, the story suggests, because philosophers are morally as well as intellectually superior, we choose not to take advantage of those whom we could easily best.

This attitude is theorized and codified in *Republic*, in which philosophers disdain power to such an extent that they are literally dragged back amongst the masses and forced into governing. Much is made in undergraduate classes of the value of the philosopher king, but little attention is focused on Plato's own failures at Syracuse.

The superiority of the philosopher reappears in some form or another throughout the history of ideas from Aristotle to Nietzsche to Quine, especially in political theory, but it permeates contemporary professional life as well. Brian Leiter<sup>3</sup> sums it up best when he remarks that it would be odd if any non-philosopher ever came up with an "interesting philosophical insight."<sup>4</sup> This may be offensive to some, but Leiter sees himself as defending the concept of expertise itself. Philosophers are trained to do philosophy just as engineers are trained to do engineering, his position holds. Since no one expects an average person to design and build a bridge, no one should expect him or her to parse Hegel or define justice.

Leiter's position isn't the full-blooded claim of superiority in Plato, but it still suggests qualitative and not quantitative difference; the analogy is faulty. Non-engineers are not asked to build bridges, but non-philosophers are required to make philosophical decisions every day, often with the most significant consequences.<sup>5</sup> They make ethical judgments ranging from whether they should have an abortion to whether they should return excess change they received at the supermarket, metaphysical decisions about whether there is a God or whether their pets are capable of love, epistemological decisions such as determining if the person in a chat room is who she claims to be, and aesthetic decisions like whether a new hit song is good or just popular. Additionally, non-philosophers make countless logical decisions as they go about their daily lives, determining both the best means to an end and evaluating the possible consequences of hypothetical actions.

If Leiter is claiming that one has to have advanced training to become “the next Descartes,” so to speak, then statistics are on his side. In this case, Leiter would only be making a judgment about how best to be recognized within a specific professional community and his remarks would be about advancement, not philosophical content. If, however, he is claiming that non-philosophers cannot make good, sophisticated, meaningful, interesting, and sometimes even novel philosophical judgments or discoveries without advanced philosophical specialization, then either he hasn't a leg to stand on, or he has to reject democracy in virtually all of its forms. In essence, Leiter seems to be saying that non-philosophers can't do philosophy at all.<sup>6</sup>

Democratic theory presupposes the philosophical and rational capacities of the general public, including assuming the ability to make defensible and complex moral and political judgments, and the meta-level skill of reflecting on and evaluating one's own rationality. Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen's “capabilities approach” is only the latest politically-oriented philosophy of education to glorify and cultivate the everyday intellect. Thus, if Leiter is even partially correct, it follows that philosophers are, by definition, better citizens and better decision-makers than everyone else. The empirical evidence for this is weak and I shall return to it below.

In general, claims about the superiority of philosophers involve equivocations. Philosophers frequently use the term “philosophy” to signify the discipline, the craft, and the profession without acknowledging their differences, where the discipline refers to continuing established discourses and the craft means any form of philosophical inquiry. Nevertheless, one can do philosophy the craft with only focused reflection even though one needs to know something about philosophical traditions and its methods to engage the discipline. And, one can engage the discipline as a hobbyist and autodidact without being eligible for recognition within the profession.

A generous interpretation of Leiter's comment may be that all he is arguing is that being a professional philosopher is impossible without advanced degrees and significant specialization<sup>7</sup>, but even this isn't a given. Credentials are indeed a prerequisite for philosophical employment, but this is a recent development. Many of oldest living philosophers secured significant academic employment without earning doctorates,<sup>8</sup> and for many centuries before our own, publications and reputation, not official credentials, were the key to professional recognition.

The Platonic Socrates, himself a non-academic philosopher by any definition, engaged the *demos*, and even though Plato only credits other philosophers with having

philosophical knowledge,<sup>9</sup> he made no meaningful distinction between the dialectic method of the discipline and the back and forth of everyday exploratory conversation. His interlocutors were slave boys and seers, strangers and playwrights, bullies and drunks, and prominent citizens.

Socrates did philosophy in the *agora*. And while in our contemporary world, the only philosophy that seems to matter takes place in the university, this is more the result of social change than disciplinary necessity. The cloistering of academia in the medieval university, the professionalization of the disciplines in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the brute necessity of financing an academic lifestyle conspire to justify equivocating the profession of philosophy with all forms of philosophical inquiry.

In short, public philosophy is not a purely contemporary phenomenon; it is simply a return to doing philosophy in the market place. I have argued elsewhere that recognizing the philosophical skills of general audiences is easier if we distinguish, not between those who do philosophy and those who do not, but between those who do professional philosophy and those who are amateurs.<sup>10</sup> I compare philosophy to basketball, pointing out that while an amateur basketball player is not as skilled as a professional, all of them are still playing basketball. Analogously, while public philosophers may not be professionals, they are still doing philosophy. Their output may not meet the standard of the academy, but there is no evidence that this ought to be the measure of philosophical success in the first place.

For a philosophical contribution to matter professionally, it must be academic and meet certain conditions. First, it ought to appear in print; while this is changing, it is still the case that items published in web-based journals are considered less prestigious than those on paper.<sup>11</sup> As a result, discussions in themselves don't count even though the vast majority of public philosophy events consist almost entirely of people talking with one another. Second, philosophical contributions must be contextualized within the discipline; they must contain citations locating them in the discourse. This excludes any public philosophy event in which people are figuring things out for themselves because they lack background knowledge or haven't read the relevant texts. Third, any contribution must be peer reviewed, but there are few products in public philosophy to peer review, and those that exist are aimed at different audiences than scholarly research.<sup>12</sup> In fact, it is unclear which aspects of public philosophy are to be peer reviewed in the first place. Is it the philosopher leading the discussion, the audience he or she is talking with, or simply the words and ideas being investigated? And, who is the peer that does the reviewing, a member of the general audience or a professional philosopher?

On many occasions, public philosophy may meet two out of three requirements—it may be in print and reference traditional texts—but peer review is public philosophy’s antithesis. And, because most professional philosophers see their work as analogous to research in science, the lack of peer review, the lack of explicit connection to a community of scholars who can vouch for its quality, relevance, and reproducibility, means that public philosophy loses a key component of its academic legitimacy.<sup>13</sup>

Public philosophy is not academic philosophy done by other means. I would suggest instead, that we understand public philosophy, not as an analogue to the hard sciences as some suggest professional philosophy should be understood, nor as a form of literature, as Richard Rorty wants philosophy to be, but as a practice, as Alasdair MacIntyre understands the terms.<sup>14</sup> Public philosophy has internal goods, intrinsic standards of success, is socially defined, and leads to human excellence in some form. This is philosophy without credentials, a craft only occasionally rooted in a discipline. By understanding it as such, we can recognize philosophy as a means of social interaction, something that can occur at informal gatherings or outside established institution, classrooms, libraries, or offices. But if philosophy can occur anywhere, what is its *telos*? If public philosophy is not *research*, what is it?

At this point, it is worth acknowledging that there is no clear consensus about what *philosophy* in general does, doubly so when we ask about the profession and its discipline. Lawrence E. Cahoon identifies three distinct ends to the professionalized discipline, but cases could be made for others.<sup>15</sup> Those of us who teach undergraduates are constantly asked to distinguish between continental and analytic philosophy for example, and we have to negotiate whether they constitute different methodologies, different traditions or even different subjects. Regardless, this twofold division that divides philosophy into, at minimum, two literary types doesn’t do justice to the sub-disciplines of History of Philosophy, Logic, and Rhetoric. These may be incommensurable, they may have different *teloi* and purposes, but they may not. Is philosophy the search for wisdom or truth? Does it reveal cultural presuppositions or simply tell interesting stories? Does it analyze language or recount the structure of experience? Is it the examination and elaboration of other work already called philosophy? These are complicated debates that I will not delve into here, but for now, my operating definition is that it *philosophy is the study of the fundamental assumptions of any discipline*.

I recognize this definition’s controversial nature and lack of justification, but it is as close to an umbrella description that applies to the *discipline* and the *craft*, their content, and their professionalized manifestation. It allows for the fact that every discipline has philosophies

related to it and that the questions its practitioners can ask are about the unnoticed structures of disciplinary discourse. Furthermore, it is a definition that, in my experience, public philosophy audiences understand. It allows them to get the overall point of philosophy and see some connection between what I do as a professional and what they do as amateurs. Professional philosophers will do doubt take issue with it, but amateurs get its point.

In contrast to philosophy *simpliciter*, public philosophy denotes the act of professional philosophers engaging with non-professionals, in a non-academic setting, with the specific goals of exploring issues philosophically. In other words, public philosophy involves getting people to think about the assumptions that govern the things they do, the controversies they are immersed in, and the experiences of their day-to-day lives by looking at those aspects that are either invisible to them or taken for granted. Public philosophy and philosophy as it is usually understood are not too far apart, although their audiences differ radically. What public philosophy need not be, however, is professionalized and refined.<sup>16</sup>

## 2. Public philosophy and citizenship

Public philosophy is often justified in the same way that public humanities programs in general are: it exists to cultivate better citizens.<sup>17</sup> In a democracy, the argument goes, better informed individuals, better arguers, more rational, objective, and big-picture-seeing individuals can make better decisions, thereby improving collective self-government. Furthermore, people are not always good at seeing their own true needs and can easily get wrapped up in either false desires or short-term goals. Philosophy then, it is said, helps agents see past these limitations to better pursue their authentic ends.

Once again, this point of view originates with the Socratic ideal, *Apology* most specifically, although Aristophanes maligns it. It is reinforced by Rousseau's conception of the General Will, Mill's justification for liberty, and even Marx, during those rare moments when he allows for a self-determining proletariat and the overcoming of false consciousness. In this sense then, and despite often-narrow interpretations of Mill, philosophy is usually understood as a central element of positive liberty. Most philosophers presume that one cannot fulfill one's own potential as a citizen or autonomous individual without it.

Like all versions of positive liberty, this approach is in tension with its negative counterpart as well as with the kind of democratic capitalism that presumes individual agents are the most qualified to make decisions for themselves. As Adam Smith puts it, "Every man... is first and principally recommended to his own care; and every man is certainly, in every respect, fitter and abler to take care of himself than of any other person."<sup>18</sup>

Taken out of context, Smith seems to be arguing that all people can, simply by being themselves, make the best decisions regarding their own care and betterment, but much of Smith's work is a qualification of this statement, enumerating exactly how individuals are to gain better perspective, a more potent intellect, and a more empathetic moral point of view.<sup>19</sup> In other words, Smith gives significant attention to the meaning of 'informed' in the term informed consent.

Nevertheless, the notion, in and of itself, of the unquestioned competence of the unmodified individual, can be found as a thread running through much of the liberal tradition. Berlin makes little of self-awareness in his famous discussion of negative liberty and Taylor responds with a devastating critique reasserting personal growth.<sup>20</sup> Taylor's Hegelianism butts its own head against Karl Popper liberal critique of authoritarian claims of false consciousness, and Hayek reaffirms Popper's point of view in his glorification of the localized knowledge created by the free market. All this suggests that in some important sense, the notion that philosophy makes better citizens is anti-liberal, not pro-liberal as is often assumed. At minimum, it runs counter to the more libertarian interpretations of modern individualism.<sup>21</sup>

Of course, some might take issue with this characterization of liberalism. Locke, Mill and many other liberals see persuasion as the cornerstone of individualism and Smith saw price and the impartial spectator as providing the requisite aggregate information for economic and moral knowledge respectively; he also argued for mandatory education in philosophy and science.<sup>22</sup> It is no accident that each of these thinkers devotes some of their writing to the importance of education; liberalism, and self-improvement are intimate siblings.

Nevertheless, while *the necessities of participation*,<sup>23</sup> —the skills and capabilities required for political life—are philosophical in nature and are often reduced to philosophical techniques such as argumentation analysis and reconstruction, the claim that philosophy as a discipline, craft, or profession is a prerequisite for individual judgment inherently discredits the wisdom, judgment, and rationality that the liberal individual is supposed to act upon naturally.<sup>24</sup> The mythical "age of reason," that moment when an individual becomes capable of adult reasoning, marks the necessary intellectual standard for political participation. It is also a sufficient intellectual condition.<sup>25</sup> If philosophy in any form is a prerequisite for political participation, then it usurps the purpose of the age of reason. In other words, if the liberal individual needs to do more than reach this age, whatever it may be, if he or she needs to be philosophical as well, then the individual ceases to be the kind of person liberalism traditionally describes.



My argument here is that liberal theory cannot depend upon philosophy to legitimize citizenship; to do so would be to contradict the central premise that individuals are entitled to participate *qua* individual. This means that one cannot fall back on liberalism to justify public philosophy's existence either. The liberal individual must be capable of participation *qua* individual.

Although some might want to argue that philosophy and public philosophy might make citizens *better*, it is unclear what better would mean in this context. Being more informed or a more successful rhetor may lead to more personal satisfaction or more power, but these are not the proper goals of the citizen, at least not according to the minimal liberal standard that is its normative core. Wanting citizens to be more successful is to confuse the profession of politics with the practice of political participation, an equivocation analogous to the equating of philosophy the profession and philosophy the craft as described above.

Furthermore, it is unclear whether philosophy, even if it could inform the general populace, would have any effect on political life. The argument that public philosophy makes people better citizens assumes that rational argumentation plays an essential part in democratic participation. Yet, it is easy to be skeptical of this claim. Politicians lie, issues-ads manipulate, and overt words are rarely as important as subtext. As cognitive science advances in its ability to explain how the mind works, it also provides those in the media with the tools and knowledge to subvert rational decision-making by emphasizing unconscious, emotive and neurochemical influences. Research has shown, for example, that merely making a package green makes consumers think a product is environmentally responsible.<sup>26</sup> Semiotics is neither logic nor rhetoric, yet it is often much more persuasive.

It is not just the politicians and media who are dishonest or manipulative. Citizens consistently act on false information, skewed attitudes, gut reactions, prejudices, and malicious motives. For example, a 2011 poll suggested that, in the United States, 51 percent of Republicans believed that the American President Barack Obama was born outside the U.S., a figure that had increased from 44 percent in 2009.<sup>27</sup> These polls show that additional conversations and continuous debates about the issue actually *increased* ignorance rather than mitigated false belief, a violation of the liberal optimism about deliberative democracy. Even the Republican operative Karl Rove tried to persuade his fellows that Obama was born in the U.S., but they would not be swayed.<sup>28</sup> More exposure to ideas and debate solidified ignorance; it did not rectify it. The "birthers" won the public imagination despite their lies and misdirection.

As is well known, the argument for publicizing fringe positions in the U.S. is a remnant of the equal time doctrine, a 1934 Federal Law mandating broadcast media provide equal access to the airwaves for all political parties. In the public mind, this evolved into a general position on fairness, a philosophical commitment that public argument must consider all “sides” of an issue when publicizing a debate. However, as many a philosopher has said before a classroom of undergraduates, equal time may be worthwhile for the most controversial unresolved issues like abortion, the death penalty, the legitimacy of individual wars, or citizen initiatives about immigration, but it misleads when it comes to brute fact or accepted science. Allowing the famed Flat Earth Society rebuttal time whenever a news story involves space travel, for example, is not what either the equal time or fairness doctrines intend.

This compulsive need to present even the most blatantly false positions on every issue—the philosophically motivated need to offer a rational, logical response to all claims—may very well be a prime example of philosophy actually distorting public discourse. The intellectual practice of refuting all criticism may be a prerequisite for a philosophical treatise. It may even be a successful heuristic. But it is not suitable for public political discourse. Public philosophy will not redeem this practice. It will only make responding to untenable objections into a sport, a conversion that I do not object to, but one that is more akin to entertainment than civic education. In short, ignorance and voter behavior wouldn’t likely change if we mandate that the entire population take advanced critical thinking classes or visit public philosophy events. In this section, I am arguing only against the position that public philosophy creates better citizens.

Consider an exchange I heard on public radio. A retired engineer called in to a program about the future of the nuclear industry expressing his concern that nuclear power plants contribute to global warming. He remarked that nuclear plants were notoriously inefficient and as a result, they give off a lot of heat. The featured guest, an expert in the technology, responded that nuclear power plants don’t create carbon emissions. Since they just heat up water, they do not effect climate change, and this ought to be considered one of their virtues. The caller responded by arguing that the heating of water is exactly the problem; nuclear energy “adds *warmth*,” he insisted. The expert explained further that *thermal heat* is an entirely different product than CO<sup>2</sup> and patiently repeated that it had no effect on the environment, but the caller once again insisted that these plants were still *warm* and passionately asked why people weren’t worrying about its effect. The back and forth lasted about 60 seconds—an eternity on the radio—until the host cut off his call.

This is an anecdote and proves nothing, but it is instructive. The caller was uninformed, shockingly so if he were indeed an engineer as he claimed. But he was also genuinely concerned. He was doing everything he was supposed to: being a good citizen, participating in the public discourse, asking for more information, and trying to help solve a problem for the betterment of human kind. He was the very ideal of an engaged person. Public philosophy would not have helped him past his ignorance of basic physics. Instead, what he needed was a good dose of the “appeal to authority” fallacy. He should have understood that an *expert* was telling him he was wrong, that the person was an expert because the radio said so, and that he should probably reconsider his opinion precisely because the expert was telling him to. This is the very point Leiter made about philosophy and there is indeed an important role for expertise in our culture. The fact that this particular caller assumed his opinion was of the same caliber as the specialists’ is a serious problem for public discourse.

I do not mean to suggest that the caller should not have engaged in further investigation after the fact, but I do suggest that he should have paid enough attention to the guest to at least doubt his own point of view. To put it another way, and to quote an old Yiddish proverb, “if three people tell you you’re drunk, go home.”<sup>29</sup> Individual conviction and perspective have serious limitations and a community of experts ought indeed be respected, even, or perhaps, especially in, a democracy.

In public philosophy, the tension between the specialist and the generalist is what I call elsewhere, *the problem of expertise*.<sup>30</sup> If non-philosophers are to do philosophy of any kind, they must acknowledge that the discipline requires background knowledge. Someone who is familiar with the tradition has an advantage, and someone who brings in specialized knowledge from other fields ought to have significant influence in relevant debate, even if only as a touchstone to ground the discussion rounded in reality, as it ought to have done for the radio program.

A good general education would have helped the caller. A college course or a few readings in basic thermodynamics would have as well. But public philosophy would have not. What this person needed was time, long-term reflection and study, precisely the opposite of what public philosophy provides. An average public philosophy event is an hour to ninety minutes, revolves around a discussion that is self-contained and requires no advanced planning or previous knowledge, and the host has to be as welcoming and supportive of the audience as possible, so as not to alienate people. It takes a very special interlocutor to correct people at a public philosophy event. One can do it, but it’s difficult and necessitates a very delicate touch.

I return therefore to my claim above that democratic deliberation is frequently irrational and is usually not improved by advancing philosophical skills. How much rational thought is involved in voting behavior is still a matter of controversy, but most studies suggest very little.<sup>31</sup> Again, I won't get into the details here. I will reveal however, that I do subscribe to the contemporary notion that reasoning is fluid and that different rationalities can be built on different and contradictory assumptions.<sup>32</sup> But, regardless of what definition of rationality we settle on, we should have to be intellectually honest about what people believe and what has to happen for them to change their minds. Just as political science doubts the presence of rational voter behavior, some in the argumentation theory community question whether we can ever persuade someone of anything; not to mention that discourse is always complicated by confirmation bias, belief persistence, and confabulation. When persuasion does happen, it is rarely the consequence of an editorial or a well-reasoned presentation.

Allow me to be clear. I do not mean to claim that no one can be persuaded of anything ever, but rather that the stronger the conviction, the less argument-inspired any cognitive change will be. The possibility of persuasion diminishes radically in the political realm, or so a myriad of studies bear out.<sup>33</sup> The mistake that Mill and others make is to assume that our political beliefs are predominantly rational, and that we must deemphasize the emotive components because they, somehow, have less moral worth. I think that attitude is built on an empirically false moral psychology and a problematic normative account of what matters intellectually. Furthermore, it seems to me that the more polarized a society is, the less rational persuasion can bridge difference. This may mean, as Amartya Sen argues, that in the face of the "good grounds for skepticism about the practical effectiveness of reasoned discussion," that reason "may be particularly important."<sup>34</sup> But this doesn't change the fact that reason is the exception to the rule. We may have to renegotiate the honoring of reason above all else.

Case in point: A close friend who served in the National Guard and is currently an officer in a state police force recalls the exact moment that she changed her mind about gays serving openly in the military; she was moved by something someone said in the television show *The West Wing*. Until that point, she was opposed to integrating hetero- and homosexual soldiers based on, among other things, fear of dissent and disorder in the ranks.<sup>35</sup> But then, a black actor pretending to be a Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said this:

The problem with that is that's what they were saying about me 50 years ago. Blacks shouldn't serve with whites. It would disrupt the unit. You know what? It did disrupt

the unit. The unit got over it. The unit changed. [Now] I'm an admiral in the U.S. Navy and chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff... Beat that with a stick.<sup>36</sup>

The friend describes her response as a simple “huh,” perhaps best understood as a less dramatic eureka moment. She realized that her mind was changed; she did not consciously alter her attitude. She witnessed the cognitive change as an outsider. More importantly, though, this did not happen during a professional debate or because of an opinion piece. It happened because she identified with a character and saw herself in him.

Is there an argument in the actor's comments? Informal logicians will want us to think so, but one would have to add so many missing premises to reconstruct it that it would no longer be the speaker's argument; it would be the viewer's. He certainly announced a conclusion, but the missing premises and warrants would come via interpretation, not reportage. This is argument creation, not argument reconstruction, and, as such, I am reluctant to assert that he is making an argument in any meaningful sense of the word. At most he is inspiring viewers to come up with their own arguments—to argue from a conclusion—and the results would come in many variations, even though they would all be, in theory, compatible with his point of view.

In the end, my friend was not persuaded by an argument. She was moved by an intuitive reaction to an analogy, a comparison that may or may not be historically accurate, recited by an actor reading lines that may or may not reflect an actual experience. It was the kind of reproduction of a reproduction that Plato's Socrates rejects. It was also the most effective way to change her mind; she still holds to the new position, vociferously, a decade and a half later.

Again, this is only an anecdote, but it is one of many. One could find endless examples of people choosing sneakers because an actor they like told them to, or consumers with immovable brand loyalty to products that are identical in virtually every way to their competition, or fan loyalties to sports teams based on arbitrary factors such as where one lives or who their parents supported.<sup>37</sup> These examples are all standard fare for critical thinking textbooks. What I mean to argue then is simply that if public philosophy were able to make people better citizens, it would have to disarm all of these factors to change political outcomes. It doesn't and it can't.

Furthermore, if public philosophy promoted excellence in citizenship then it would follow that I am, by definition, a better or more informed citizen than others, simply because I engage in public philosophy regularly. And, if this were true, it would also suggest that I

have the moral responsibility of coming down from on high as Zarathustra does, or letting myself be dragged back into the cave as Plato's guardians demand. Paolo Friere famously critiques this "banking model of education" in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and frankly, I'm really uncomfortable with this role, for just the reasons he cites.<sup>38</sup> There is no philosophical *noblesse oblige*.

Do I believe my political opinions are correct? Yes. Do I want those who disagree with me to be quiet, stay at home, and abstain from the next election? I most certainly do. But this isn't because I'm a philosopher and my opponents are not; it's because I think I'm right, and because, like most people, I want the policies I prefer.

John Stuart Mill, Bertrand Russell, and many others caution against assuming our own infallibility. As prescribed, I am open-minded enough to recognize that I could be mistaken on any particular issue. But this is only theoretical awareness and it doesn't mean someone won't have a hard time persuading me I'm wrong about those positions I'm committed to. I'm *supposed* to have conviction and I would suggest then that democratic participation has more in common with Thomas Kuhn's tenacious scientists who hold onto their points of view<sup>39</sup> until the bitter end than it does with Mill's and Russell's open-minded practitioners of liberty. Democratic commitments parallel MacIntyre's remarks on the competing truth commitments of coexisting traditions:

...within every major cultural and social tradition we find some distinctive conception of the human good presented as — *true*. And although these claims to truth are supported within different traditions by appeal to rival and often de facto incommensurable standards of rational justifications, no such tradition is or can be relativistic about the truth of its own assertions or about truth.<sup>40</sup>

In other words, I *have* to be committed to my truths even if I recognize that they may turn out to be false because one cannot be committed and relativistic at the same time. And while I must fight through those things that impair my attempts at objectivity—confirmation bias, conflicts-of-interest, brute selfishness, ignorance—I also have to trust myself enough to act on my political beliefs. Without such convictions, I am left with mere preference, inaction, or Stephen Colbert's self-consciously absurd *truthiness*.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that people cannot become better citizens. Nor am I suggesting that education as a whole, that *Bildung*, does not contribute significantly to this process. I believe quite strongly that liberal education is an essential component of democracy, and that it makes people's participation more defensible and more in tune with

the values of a stable pluralistic society; I have written about this in detail for much of my career. My claim instead is that the *practice of public philosophy* does not create better citizens, in part because *Bildung* is a life-long, intensive, systematic approach to understanding the world in an integrated way, and that public philosophy is ephemeral with no necessary or even explicit connection between one public philosophy experience and another.<sup>41</sup> Over time education allows for communication with expertise, mentorships and directed study, but public philosophy does none of these things because it is too discrete. It only creates a temporary space where a philosopher acts as a catalyst for ephemeral group-based exploration, and where the criteria of success are discovered and revised by often-uninformed participants.

I therefore reiterate both my claim that public philosophy does not make better citizens and my question asking what it does instead. In order to better answer the latter, I shall change my approach and find theory in practice rather than the other way around. With this in mind, in the next section, I discuss the characteristics of a successful public philosophy event and examine what can be generalized from them. My aim is to show what actually works and what people really do get out of them.

### 3. Public Philosophy in Practice

I am the host of *Why? Philosophical Discussions About Everyday Life* (or *Why? Radio* for short),<sup>42</sup> a public radio show in which philosophers discuss their research in ways that are accessible to non-professionals. We will be starting our sixth season soon, and we have an international audience of both philosophy professionals and amateurs.<sup>43</sup> I've also hosted film series, given talks, and written and edited volumes for the general public. In each, my job was to get people to think philosophically, sometimes for the first time in their lives, and to walk away feeling good about the event. I have described this process as “a bit like a first drug deal — we give you this one for free because we know that you'll get hooked, hoping that you'll come back on your own, a regular compelled by an inner desire for more.”<sup>44</sup> Here's how I elaborated on my role:

But just as I'm not teacher in this context, I'm also not a drug dealer. Neither am I the wizened old philosopher who has come down from the mountain or dared entered the cave to lead the ignorant through the darkness. I'm a huckster, a playmate, the guy who offers the promise of something new, something exciting. I hope it's something hip but I'll settle for being a pleasant distraction. I aim to be the mythical guy you might want to share a beer with, but hope to be someone with whom you'd enjoy a nice stroll, chatting away while you notice how the leaves have

turned color or the water seems very high this year. Eventually, maybe, you'll want to go to a museum with me and share your thoughts on a painting, consider my point of view to modify your own, and dare the joint project of embracing the *avante garde*; that *object d'art* that makes you uncomfortable but compels you to it all the same. But I admit, I'll settle for the beer and see what happens next. Just getting you on the stool next to me is hard enough.

Virtually every philosopher I know bristles at the notion that philosophy can be a “pleasant distraction.” Perhaps this is because, when it comes to the subject itself, philosophers tend toward the conservative, holding fast to the classical belief that philosophy is foundational to all knowledge, that it is the umbrella discipline. By conservative, I do not mean to imply an ideology. Instead, I mean that philosophers hold tight to the philosophical canon, they are largely resistant to change, obsessed rankings—this is most evident in the philosophy blogosphere, in which article after article seeks to determine the top fifty doctoral programs, the ten most influential journals, or the most cited or influential philosophers of recent times—and philosophers tend to be insular, often resisting the legitimacy of other or interdisciplinary discourses.

Maybe this is the result of the deep need philosophers have for validation, the remnant of Thales's humiliation and revenge, or maybe it is because we believe that the discipline is inherently *important*. The tenuous nature of funding and the perceived attack on philosophy in the modern university certainly plays a role in our defensiveness. Nevertheless, nothing alienates a non-academic audience more than acting with entitlement, and philosophers who walk into a public event projecting the belief that they are the smartest people in the room will experience a very unsympathetic response. While many people like to learn, most are uncomfortable with being taught. So, whatever I do, I have to act as a role model rather than a teacher. I have to show, not tell, and to commit myself to the project to make people want to join with me. This is not teaching in any traditional sense and I think any attempt to think of a public philosophy event as a class or an academic lecture will limit its success and acceptance. People are in the audience by choice and unlike students, they can leave at any time and for any reason. They are not being graded.

My first rule of public philosophy then, is “let them see you think.” Consider how rarely one sees professional interviewers contemplate on the job, or pause as they consider the next question or reframe the discussion. The most polished ones move from sentence to sentence flawlessly, sacrificing the follow-up question in order to appear practiced and smooth. Consider also how few politician answer debate question with the phrase “I don't know.” How can democracy presume fallibility if leaders refuse to publicly consider



alternatives or fail to acknowledge their own limitations? Finally, consider how often all of us start talking before an answer comes to us and then change midstream as we realized that what we are saying doesn't make sense, but refuse to acknowledge changing our minds. Silence ought to be part of conversations, but real-world arguments tend to become mile-a-minute sprints. They become louder and faster as they continue on rather than more pensive and articulate.

Philosophy, whatever it is, involves thinking, but much American culture, at least, makes the thought process invisible. It is therefore my job, as a public philosopher to stop, ponder, and acknowledge the rational deliberation that happens in my head. If I get to think, the audience gets to think. Public philosophy gives people *permission* to engage their intellect in a community space.

This shouldn't mislead. This type of philosophy is public, but it is not collective the way that academic philosophy is. As I already remarked, as a professional philosopher, we read others' work and integrate it into our research. Our writing must show that we are aware of the relevant literature, show what we have learned from it, indicate how we advance the field, and document where we disagree. Our publications are peer reviewed and evaluated, and one of the great pleasures of being a philosopher is presenting a professional audience with our ideas and answering their challenges when the lecture is done. Most philosophers revel in intellectual combat.

Public philosophy, however, is individualistic, not collective. The initial discussion happens with others, but the real deliberation happens once the event is over. The ultimate goal of public philosophy is to get the audience to take the issues away with them. Whenever people remark that they went home and told their spouses, partners, roommates, or friends about the event, and that, in the end, they had a long discussion because of it, this marks the event's success because it reflects the fact that the audience member has established ownership over the debate. This may be the closest public philosophy events get to actual peer review.<sup>45</sup> It is an indication that he or she has something to say, something to contemplate, something to, for lack of a better term, put on the table. True public philosophy events allow people to see the world slightly differently in a narrow but powerful way. But this is not something that they will necessarily build on, and it doesn't have the same relationship to the community that professional research has to the scholars that predated it. Ironically, public philosophy is private. It has more in common with the meditations of Siddhartha than it does the scholasticism of Aquinas.

Public philosophy is also passionate. Good academic philosophers must remain detached and self-critical. They must consider arguments in light of research, against their own beliefs, and present them in a cool scientific voice. The passion is always behind the scene—part of the motivation, not the content. In fact, one of the hardest things about learning to write academic philosophy is removing one's personality from the text. Articles and books are often flat, frequently boring, and regularly interchangeable. Ideas become associated with individual philosophers, but prose styles are much harder to distinguish. There are exceptions, of course, but the odd trajectory of a research life is losing one's personality through one's doctoral dissertation and then slowly, usually post-tenure if not significantly later, carefully reinserting it back into one's text. Senior philosophers' writing is usually easily identified as such, not simply because their abilities are often more developed, but because their advanced positions permit them the latitude to put idiosyncratic voice into their work.

Public philosophy, in contrast, is all about personality. Radio listeners do not develop a relationship with individual episodes; they develop one with me. Certainly, people may come to *Why? Radio* because of a specific topic or guest, but they will stay because of how they identify with my attitude, presentation, and presence. The same is true with my film festivals or my public writing. It has to feel like *me* or the regulars are disappointed. Public philosophy challenges the philosophical commitment that ideas matter instead of people.

Philosophers will claim that a moral precept is equally true or false regardless of who utters it. But public philosophy attaches the argument to the presenter and, as such, nothing is more detrimental to the project than hypocrisy or inauthenticity. It emphasizes *ethos* as much as *logos*. If I fail as an interlocutor, then the event and the philosophy, comes collapsing around me. This is reminiscent of the classroom because teachers play essential roles in motivating students, but most students understand that a class may be important even if they don't like the instructor. Public philosophers don't have such luxuries. Again, public philosophy is not teaching.<sup>46</sup>

Is subsuming the idea under the person fair? Is it not a violation of the independence of ideas? Does it not conflate the knower and the thing that is known? To answer these questions in reverse, yes it conflates the knower and the known, yes it does seem to give less importance to ideas, but as for fairness, I'm not sure the concept applies. My goal in public philosophy is not to get the audience to increase their philosophical sophistication, but rather to prepare the groundwork for future philosophical deliberation. Academic philosophy reaps; public philosophy sows. It prepares the ground, plants the seeds, and waters the crops. But the shoots come later, the buds even later than that. As a professor I

get to see my students bloom. As a public philosopher, I am ecstatic if all I have done is turn the dirt.

Here then we have the first step to finding out what public philosophy does. It prepares people for *future* philosophical insight. It does not, as professional philosophers hope for their own work, answer questions so much as it prepares interlocutors to ask them. Public philosophy is future oriented. It seeks to create openness where there may not be any.

Another key characteristic of public philosophy is that its philosophers advocate for audiences and not ideas. We have to make those in attendance feel like co-creators of the content and (often) persuade them of their worthiness to be there. This is qualitatively different than whatever self-esteem building teachers try in class. Furthermore, when I teach a philosopher in class, I want each student to be persuaded by the text and the argument that we discuss; I teach every philosophy as if it were true. But then, when we move on to the next text and I want my students to reject the previous philosopher for the current one. This process is supposed to train them to adopt the critical perspective, to understand the philosophical method and to, eventually, step outside themselves and create a philosophical persona to criticize their own work. They have to be Aristotle to their own Plato, Hegel to their own Kant, Rousseau to their own Locke.

So, while the goal of teaching philosophy is to create independent philosophers who can defend their views against ideas that get thrown at them, there will never be independence in public philosophy. There isn't enough time or enough discipline. What I have to work against instead is the anti-intellectualism of the dominant culture and the intellectual laziness of habit. I advocate for the audience by giving them, again, *permission* to peek into the deep recesses of their convictions. When the conversation is technical or alienating, it is my job, not to teach new terminology, but to move away from jargon. If the questions are too complex, I have to redirect them and make them simpler. If the audience's questions are unfocused or irrelevant, I have to find a way to utilize their experience, saying those things that the people would have said if their thoughts were clearer. Again, there is overlap with the classroom, but the progress is much more spontaneous. Public philosophy events are fluid because audiences remain unknown. There can be no lesson plans at public philosophy events, only an agenda, at best.

This should not suggest that public philosophy doesn't use technical terms, doesn't introduce new concepts, or doesn't allow for complexity or sophistication. It is just presented in a different way. The more technical aspects approach from the periphery.

We are now watching a picture of public philosophy come into focus. It models thinking, is individualistic not collective, it is built on personality not ideas, is passionate and not detached, and advocates for people not ideas. It seeks to prepare ground for future philosophical endeavors, and while the questions asked may be about any area of life, knowledge or inquiry, it should become obvious that public philosophical investigation skews towards the individuals who happen to be there. Most public philosophy involves examination of one's own personal life. It is about self-knowledge before it is about anything else.

The Delphic oracle's command to know thyself is often considered to be the core of philosophical investigation, but the form it takes in discussion is much more commonly the formulation that the unexamined life is not worth living. The pursuit of self-knowledge is a perennial theme in philosophy. However, the difference between the traditional usage and public philosophy's is that for the professional philosopher, self-knowledge is a starting point for other inquiries about nature, reality, justice, knowledge, God, etc. Public philosophy offers no such guarantee of future questioning, again, because the event is so short and because there is no promise that one inquiry will build on another. I certainly want my public philosophical interlocutors to see society in a different way, but the best path to this insight is if they see *their relationship* with society in a different way. Public philosophy is dominated by its rhetorical and pedagogical strategies.

My tentative answer to the question "what does public philosophy do?" should therefore be understood as follows: public philosophy creates the groundwork for philosophical reflection in personal life with the hope and that this reflection may inspire future wide-ranging conversations about culture and meaning in life. It is a return to the Delphic command to know thyself, but it sees this project as entertainment or hobby, not as a moral imperative. Public philosophy is a good in itself because it is not judged by its consequences; an event can be successful without leading to further inquiry. If public philosophy were justified by its contribution to citizenship, it would only be an instrumental good, but entertainment is valuable in itself. Contemplation and reflection are as well, even when contemplation and reflection themselves become entertainment.

It is worth mentioning that public philosophy is good marketing. As funding for philosophy departments, faculty, and programming decrease, a philosophically engaged public is more likely to support the professional endeavor. It is odd that so many professional philosophers find public philosophy threatening and discredit it as illegitimate work. It is in all of our best interests to engage the taxpayers and allow them to experience the value of what we do. But this political and financial benefit is also an instrumental good. In the end, the value of

public philosophy is the ephemeral experience that audiences have while doing it. They are engaged, they are enjoying themselves and they are entertained.

## Conclusion

In *After Virtue* Alasdair MacIntyre provisionally concludes “the good life for man is the life spent in seeking for the good life for man.”<sup>47</sup> He argues that this search for meaning is best described as a quest because a quest has rules—it is a practice—and because it can be evaluated on its own terms, not based on the success or failures of its outcome. All this, I think, can be said of public philosophy as well.<sup>48</sup> Public philosophy is a practice; it has an internal logic and intrinsic standards of success. Academic philosophy is only a success if something new is brought to the table, if the researcher contributes meaningfully to his or her field. But public philosophy may lead to trite, hackneyed, or familiar conclusions, and still be considered successful because it brings something new to the individual, perhaps a new perspective or maybe just the realization that intellectual life can be fun. These are modest goals, but they are important, and they are goods in themselves. Brian Leiter’s demand for interesting philosophical discoveries is as absurd for public philosophy as it is irrelevant.

I think MacIntyre is right that the good life for people is the search for the good life for people. But his quest is not the property of academic philosophers and it is not limited to disciplined, professionalized, career-long research. It comes in spurts and starts and the changes that may result can take virtually any form. Will this result in people being better citizens? I suppose it could, but it also might result in a person being a better parent, being more aware of the beauty of flowers, or simply being more interesting and fun. Chances are it will result in none of those things. In the end, I’m just not qualified to say. My job as a public philosopher is to prepare the ground and to let people figure it all out on their own. I turn the dirt and watch what grows.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This paper was first presented as a keynote address at the 2011 *South Minnesota State University Undergraduate Conference*; I have happily incorporated the excellent audience comments into my argument. It was revised during a visit to the *Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen* in Vienna, Austria, Fall, 2013. Paul Sum helped me navigate the relevant literature in political science, and Lawrence Cahoon and Mark Weinstein commented on early drafts. As always, I am tremendously grateful to all those who help me refine my ideas.

<sup>2</sup> The story is found in Aristotle *Politics* 1259a. It reads: “Thales, so the story goes, because of his poverty was taunted with the uselessness of philosophy; but from his knowledge of astronomy he had observed while it was still winter that there was going to be a large crop of olives, so he raised a small sum of money and paid round deposits for the whole of the olive-presses in Miletus and Chios, which he hired at a low rent as nobody was running him up; and when the season arrived, there was a sudden demand for a number of presses at the same time, and by letting them out on what terms he liked he realized a large sum of money, so proving that it is easy for philosophers to be rich if they choose, but this is not what they care about” (Aristotle, *Politics*, Translated by Harris Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1932), p. 55).

<sup>3</sup> Brian Leiter is the most relevant commentator here because he has become the unofficial official gatekeeper of philosophical status. He administrates *The Philosophical Gourmet*, an annual ranking of the professional perceptions of the top doctoral programs in philosophy. What may be of more interest is his popular blog in which he dispenses professional news, reports of faculty appointments, remarks on and critiques philosophical work, and shares his political opinions. It can be found at <http://leiterreports.typepad.com/>. Mark Oppenheimer called Leiter “the most powerful man in academic philosophy,” (“The Philosophical Kingmaker” *The Boston Globe*, April 20, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Leiter’s full remark is that regarding “the ordinary person on the street,” without advanced and specialized education, “the likelihood of interesting philosophical insight is probably pretty limited, though of course, what ordinary people think is often the data point of what philosophers are interested in.” He added that they could only have such insight, “by chance.” *Why? Philosophical Discussions About Everyday Life*, episode 20 (September 20, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> One might object that non-engineers are expected to build bookcases, stack objects so they do not topple, and improvise solutions to many household engineering tasks. However, the impact of this kind of amateur engineering is not on par with the moral decisions that people are faced to make in their daily lives.

<sup>6</sup> It might be objected that even if we grant that there are non-philosophers who make *better* decisions than philosophers, they cannot articulate their ideas or arguments as well. The decisions may also not be as warranted. I would respond by asking what better or warranted means in this case. Is there some universal standards at play or are professional philosophers’ articulations and warrants simply more in line with the practices of formal and informal logic? Most likely, better refers to the latter, but these structures are themselves controversial, even within the history of philosophy. For example, the relevance of the syllogism and the enthymeme have been challenged more than once. As Locke put it, rejecting Aristotelian logic, “God has not been so sparing to Men to make them barely two-legged Creatures, and left it to *Aristotle* to make them Rational” (Locke, *Essay*, IV.xvii.4, 671). In other words, what constitutes better or worse reasoning is not a given. (For a detailed discussion of the eighteenth-century retreat from formal logic, see Jack Russell Weinstein, *Adam Smith’s Pluralism: Rationality, Education, and the Moral Sentiments* (New Haven: Yale University Press, pp. 109-128).

<sup>7</sup> I do not think this interpretation is defensible because it runs counter to his claim that philosophical insight is the exclusive domain of the philosopher. Nevertheless, it is worth being generous for the sake of argument.

<sup>8</sup> Burton Dreben, Saul Kripke, and Alasdair MacIntyre are prominent examples.

<sup>9</sup> I have in mind Diotima in *Symposium* and the Eleatic Stranger in *Sophist* and the *Statesman*.

<sup>10</sup> Jack Russell Weinstein “Philosophy and its Public,” *On Second Thought* (“The Philosophy Issue”), North Dakota Humanities Council, (June, 2010), pg. 6.

<sup>11</sup> As contributors to *Essays in Philosophy* are no doubt aware of and struggle with.

<sup>12</sup> The prevalence of philosophy and popular culture books series is a perfect example of how these two standards do not mesh well. While many of these volumes are quite good, the individual essays rarely meet the academic standards for original contributions to the field of philosophy. If they did, their intended audience would likely not read them.

<sup>13</sup> I would argue that economics has been the most successfully discipline in either the social sciences or the humanities to model itself on science, although I would also suggest that this is a rhetorical victory and that economics as a discipline would not meet the basic requirements of the natural sciences. See, for example, Philip Mirowski, “Physics and the ‘Marginalist Revolution’,” *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, vol. 8 (1984), pp. 361-79; E. Roy Weintraub, “How Should We Write the History of Twentieth Century Economics?” *Oxford Review of Political Economy*, vol. 15 (Winter 1999), pp. 139-152; and E. Roy Weintraub, *How Economics Became a Mathematical Science* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

<sup>14</sup> MacIntyre’s definition of a practice is: “any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers are to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved are systematically extended” (*After Virtue* (Notre Dame Indiana, Notre Dame University Press, 1984, p. 187).

<sup>15</sup> Lawrence E. Cahoon. *The Ends of Philosophy: Pragmatism, Foundationalism, and Postmodernism* (New York: State University Press, 1995).

<sup>16</sup> It has been suggested that Sartre’s essay “Existentialism as a Humanism” is an example of refined public philosophy. I think this is correct even if the text were edited for publication after it was originally given. Nonetheless, this counter example illustrates that the rhetoric and method of public philosophy will vary from culture to culture, and more “intellectual” or more “philosophically capable” societies will have a higher tolerance for and better understanding of more technical public philosophy.

<sup>17</sup> For a general defense of the public humanities, see “The Humanities in America: The Case for Public Funding” *Why? Philosophical Discussions About Everyday Life*, episode 14, March 14, 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Indiana: Liberty Classics, 1982), VI.ii.1.1.

<sup>19</sup> For Adam Smith’s philosophy of education and a discussion of the development of moral and intellectual capacities, see Weinstein, *Adam Smith’s Pluralism*, especially chapters three and four.

<sup>20</sup> See: Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” *The Proper Study of Mankind* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1998): 191—242 and Charles Taylor “What’s Wrong With Negative Liberty?”, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985): 211-29.

<sup>21</sup> Charles Flinn Arrowood claims that “Smith’s political doctrines reflect a thoroughly naive and inadequate theory of the nature of mind and of knowledge.” He repeatedly asserts that Smith saw people as “complete in all their faculties apart from the operation of any social forces” (*Theory of Education in the Political Philosophy of Adam Smith* (Privately printed, 1945), pp. 10, 13, 13. Both of these statements are patently false. See also Weinstein, *Adam Smith’s Pluralism*, pp. 170-171).

<sup>22</sup> Weinstein, *Adam Smith’s Pluralism*, pp. 147-154, 210-215.

<sup>23</sup> The phrase “the necessities of participation” is mine and will prove central to a work currently in progress. I first use it publicly in “Forcing the Iraqis to be Free: Comments on the Question: “Can Democracy be Imposed by an External Military Force?” a panel discussion on March 8, 2007 at the University of North Dakota. The full text is available at <http://philpapers.org/rec/WEIFTI> or <http://www.und.nodak.edu/instruct/weinstei/jrweinstein%20-%20forcing%20iraqis%20to%20be%20free.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> My claim in this essay is not that all people are philosophical from birth; some are better at philosophy than others and some, no doubt, are just uninterested. My assertion instead is that it is possible for non-philosophers to be non-academically philosophical and that such inquiries also count as philosophy. As such, the democratic participation of all people, philosophical or not, is the issue here.

<sup>25</sup> On the public policy level, the age of reason is not actually sufficient. Gender, age, race, ethnicity, citizenship, literacy, and wealth have been all historical impediments to universal participation. These are, however, cultural variations, unjust or not, and, as such, the philosophical purpose of the age of reason is to denote the moment of moral and political competence.

<sup>26</sup> This practice has come to be known as “greenwashing.” See for example: Joshua Karliner “A Brief History of Greenwash”, *CorpWatch*, March 22, 2001. (Available at: <http://www.corpwatch.org/article.php?id=243>).

<sup>27</sup> Aliyah Shabid, “Majority of 2012 Republican primary voters are birthers, do not believe Obama born in U.S.: poll,” *New York Daily News*, February 16, 2011. Available at: [http://articles.nydailynews.com/2011-02-16/news/28622364\\_1\\_birther-movement-public-policy-polling-survey-ppp-poll](http://articles.nydailynews.com/2011-02-16/news/28622364_1_birther-movement-public-policy-polling-survey-ppp-poll)

<sup>28</sup> While Rove insists that the President was indeed born in the United States, he falsely suggests that the persistence of this particular conspiracy theory is a “white house trap” intended to delegitimize the Republican Party. Interview Fox News, February 16, 2011. See: <http://gop12.thehill.com/2011/02/rove-confront-birthers-now.html>

<sup>29</sup> A Spanish proverb tells it this way: “If three people say you are an ass, put on a bridle.”

<sup>30</sup> Weinstein, “Philosophy and its Public,” p. 5.



<sup>31</sup> As the abstract of one recent study puts it: “The familiar image of rational electoral choice has voters weighing the competing candidates’ strengths and weaknesses, calculating comparative distances in issue space, and assessing the president’s management of foreign affairs and the national economy. Indeed, once or twice in a lifetime, a national or personal crisis does induce political thought. But most of the time, the voters adopt issue positions, adjust their candidate perceptions, and invent facts to rationalize decisions they have already made. The implications of this distinction—between genuine thinking and its day-to-day counterfeit—strike at the roots of both positive and normative theories of electoral democracy.” (Christopher H. Achen and Larry M. Bartels “It Feels Like We’re Thinking: The Rationalizing: Voter and Electoral Democracy,” presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Philadelphia, August 30-September 3, 2006.

<sup>32</sup> For a full-length introduction to a unified account of Smith, see: Jack Russell Weinstein, *On Adam Smith* (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 2001).

<sup>33</sup> For an overview of the research suggesting that rational argument reinforces political belief rather than changes peoples minds, see: Jarol Manheim, *Strategy in Information and Influence Campaigns: How Policy Advocates, Social Movements, Insurgent Groups, Corporations, Governments, and Others Get What They Want* (London & New York: Routledge, 2011), especially chapter three.

<sup>34</sup> Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), pg. xviii-xix.

<sup>35</sup> I should note that my friend had no moral or social objection to homosexuality itself; her concerns were entirely managerial in nature.

<sup>36</sup> *The West Wing*, episode 19, “Let Bartlett be Bartlett.” [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3jWOamlD9\\_8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3jWOamlD9_8)

<sup>37</sup> For a full-bodied justification of the arbitrary nature of home-team loyalty and the philosophical theology that results, see the compelling account of a North Carolina Tar Heel’s animosity towards the Duke University Blue Devils: Will Blythe, *To Hate Like This Is To Be Happy Forever* (New York: Harper Publishing, 2007).

<sup>38</sup> Paolo Friere, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum International Publishing, 2006), pp. 71-86.

<sup>39</sup> Irrational or not.

<sup>40</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “A partial response to my critics,” *After MacIntyre*, edited by John Horton and Susan Mendus (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), p. 295.

<sup>41</sup> *Bildung* should also include the kind of learning a person does at work. See: Mike Ross, *The mind at work. Valuing the Intelligence of the American Worker* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005).

<sup>42</sup> Why? Radio is broadcast and produced on the Prairie Public radio network (North Dakota public radio), is syndicated and broadcast in a couple of other markets. It is available for online streaming and as a podcast at

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[www.whyradioshow.org](http://www.whyradioshow.org). “Philosophy Talk” is another longstanding philosophy radio show, produced out of Stanford University and can be found at: <http://www.philosophytalk.org>.

<sup>43</sup> *Why? Radio* has listeners in every county in North Dakota, in every state of the United States, and over 100 countries in the world. There are an estimated average of 30,000 listeners per episode with 12,000 listeners tuning in live. Listener demographics are diverse in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, and religion, with approximately one quarter of the audience being of high school age.

<sup>44</sup> Jack Russell Weinstein, “Leaving the Classroom Behind: Teaching and the Public Humanities,” Teaching Thursdays Blog (April 12, 2010). See: <http://teachingthursday.org/2010/08/12/leaving-the-classroom-behind-teaching-the-public-humanities/>

<sup>45</sup> This would be rejected out-of-hand as an evaluation model for the classroom because it is too close to the student-as-consumer model that so many of us oppose. Public philosophy is, in general, more accepting of the notion that it must “satisfy” its audience.

<sup>46</sup> I do not mean to argue that teaching does not share any of these qualities; we have all had favorite professors. But taken as a whole, a syllabus is at least as important as personality. I have known many beloved teachers whose students learned nothing and teachers who were hated but whose students learned a great deal. The classroom dynamic has influences that a public philosophy event does not.

<sup>47</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1994) p. 219.

<sup>48</sup> *MacIntyre once claimed that his ideal audience is* “small farmers, fishermen (and women), schoolteachers who refuse to become bureaucratic functionaries, those who retain ideals of craftsmanship in manual or mental labor and members of cooperatives aimed at remedying hunger or homelessness...” (Jack Russell Weinstein, *On MacIntyre* (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 2003), p. 8. This is an odd assertion for someone who writes such difficult and technical philosophy but I sympathize with his sentiment nonetheless. It is also a sign of how compelling the idea of public philosophy can be. If philosophy is a quest, it will be different in form if the seeker is a professional or an amateur, if it is a life’s goal or simply a distraction.