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SANTA CRUZ

**VIRTUES FOR PUBLIC PHILOSOPHERS:
FIVE EPISTEMICALLY AMELIORATIVE REGULATIVE IDEALS**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

PHILOSOPHY

by

James Patrick Read

August 2026

The Dissertation of James Read
is approved:

Professor Jon Ellis, chair

Professor Janette Dinishak

Professor E. Hande Tuna

Donald Smith

Interim Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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2026

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“Chaos should be regarded as extremely good news.”

- Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche¹

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¹ Quoted Pema Chödrön, *When Things Fall Apart*, p. xi

Abstract

Virtues for Public Philosophers: Five Epistemically Ameliorative Regulative Ideals

James Patrick Read

The present work examines five virtues that promise to be helpful for public philosophers as they seek to promote knowledge in non-academic or non-traditional spaces through teaching and dialogue. These five virtues, in order of discussion, are self-forgetfulness, graciousness, Murdochian charity, creativity, and courage. In particular, these virtues promise to be *epistemically ameliorative*, by which I mean they help public philosophers both promote norms of reasoning that are conducive to knowledge in others, but also in themselves. The ineliminable *dialogue* at philosophy's core is a key theme in this work, as is reflected in appendix 1, which serves as a model both for myself and others who are interested in a public-facing philosophy in the spirit of Plato and Socrates. Appendix 2 examines the public philosopher's epistemic life as it intersects with a challenging case in aesthetics. Appendices 3 and 4 serve as creative prose expressions of the virtues recommended here for public philosophers, in either professional or non-professional settings, while only the former (appendix 3) is non-fiction. Appendices 5 and 6 serve as meditations on writing – part of being a public philosopher involves writing in a way that earns attention from that public – and here again there is a split between non-fiction and fiction, appendix 5 being a non-fictional, faithful examination of the anxieties of Simone Weil, whereas appendix 6 is a fictional poem grounded in metaphor, written to distill the spirit of what I take to be Weil's most exciting, provocative, and instructive work, *Gravity and Grace*.

In memory of Jasmine
For her love, teaching, and sacrifice

Acknowledgements

“No one gossips about other people’s secret virtues.”

- Bertrand Russell²

Chief thanks go to Dr. Janette Dinishak, who, more than anyone else I’ve worked with, embodies the virtues of self-forgetfulness, graciousness, and Murdochian charity. If it were not for her influence, I may not have been inspired to write on virtue at all. Her intelligence is matched only by her character. If it were not for her clarity of mind and the care and respect she’s shown toward members of the philosophical community, I likely would not have finished this work at all. Bertrand Russell once claimed that “[n]o one gossips about other people’s secret virtues.” I retort that he had never met his intellectual great-great-grandchild,³ who, when it comes to gossip, does *nothing but* emphasize other people’s secret virtues. If it were not for her influence, I likely would not have recognized a kind of wisdom in many of my students and would fail to appreciate many of the wonderful qualities in my teachers and colleagues.

Second thanks go to Dr. Jon Ellis, who, in a very important sense, has guided this ship safely to shore, even if I stood rather stubbornly with my hands at the rudder (or, more literally, fingers at the keyboard). His chief virtues are twofold and readily apparent to all – patience and perseverance. For a writer, patience is the virtue one most appreciates in a colleague. But his perseverance cannot be overlooked either. Patience

² Bertrand Russell, *On Education*, p. 59. In fairness to Russell, in the context of this passage, the claim is not that no one ever *speaks* of other people’s secret virtues, but rather that gossip is often inspired by, in his own words, “malice.” So, the claim is about the nature of gossip rather than the behavior of individuals.

³ Dr. Janette Dinishak’s teacher was Dr. Ian Hacking, who was taught by Dr. Casimir Lewy, who was taught by Ludwig Wittgenstein, who was taught by Bertrand Russell.

relies on a willingness to wait, to quiet one's anxieties. But perseverance requires continual effort and a determination to see a work through to its completion. I view *TEQ Deck* and similar public philosophy pursuits as expressions of creativity and courage. I know many friends and colleagues who have derived great pleasure from the deck, and this would not have happened without Dr. Ellis' steadfast leadership on the writing and development team as principal investigator.

Finally, I must thank Dr. Hande Tuna for so many things that can hardly be put into words.⁴ They have served as an example of a genuinely well-rounded and healthy human philosopher. They opened their home to professors and graduate students before the pandemic, and I still remember the opportunity it afforded me to bond with Dr. Emily Robertson, Dr. Tyler Olsson, Dr. Paul Roth, and Dr. Daniel Guevara. I still often think of a story I overheard about Saul Kripke at their home. Their taste in art and aesthetics inspired my Qualifying Exam project, which served as my master's thesis, and I still remember their words of encouragement and support after a presentation I gave in Montréal at the American Society for Aesthetics. I am also deeply grateful for their many reading groups in aesthetics and the care and respect for the graduate student community these reflect.

I will now thank the many graduate students and professors I have worked with over the years, as well as a select list of friends and family members who have perhaps unwittingly made this work possible. These are, in no particular order:

⁴ In the very best Wittgensteinian sense. See appendix 2 for further discussion.

Dr. Roger Henderson, for opening his home to me and for his example, as well as sharing an appreciation for Simone Weil; Inge Henderson, for opening her home and placing trust in me; Sabine Henderson, for challenging me; Ruben Henderson, for modeling a certain kind of wisdom; Grant Freeman, for being an excellent student and friend; Zak Pendleton, for sharing his wisdom, his patience, and his grace; Cassy Pendleton, for her kindness; Marley Holtzclaw, for the same; Karen Read, Daniel Read, David Read, and Susan Read, for everything; As well as my grandparents, Eleanor Clark, Warren Clark, Margaret Read, and David Read, posthumously, for all that they did for me; Henry Stanke, for shaping my upbringing; Mairin Gale, for her conversation and book recommendations; Shelby, for modelling Christian virtue; Lindsey Harris, for her openness and for the same; Dr. Caro Flores, for her help with my thinking regarding self-forgetfulness; Jean-Paul Gazzaneo-Duarte, for his patience with me, as well as challenging me; Nat Burke, for modelling calmness of mind; Dr. Emily Robertson, for being an excellent colleague, team member, and friend; Andrey Friedman, for his friendship, support, and much more besides; Dr. Philip Groth, for his friendship, advice and support; Dr. Jeanne Proust, for her energy and enthusiasm; Dr. Barry Lam, for his advice and example; Dr. Paul Roth, for seeing value in my writing; Dr. Daniel Guevara, for his advice and his teaching; Dr. Robbie Kubala, for his interest in my work; Alex Polland, for modelling faithfulness; Cassie Nickel, for the same; Matt Koda, for modelling calmness and grace; Sam Kahn, for pushing me to excel; Dr. Rachel Achs, for her feedback and advice; Dr. Abraham Stone, for sharing his knowledge; Dr. Hanna Gunn, for challenging me; Dr. Nico Orlandi, for his example; Luna Beller-Tadiar, for

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For what I have said about each of these, there is so much more to say. And there are also many more who deserve my gratitude for contributing to this project. If I have omitted anyone, or have failed to appropriately honor anyone, it was out of negligence on my part.

Introduction

“An expert is a person who has found out by his own painful experience all the mistakes that one can make in a very narrow field.”

- Niels Bohr⁵

At the heart of this work lies an interest in love. I say an *interest*, because I in no way claim expertise on the topic, nor do I claim always to embody the five virtues contained in the four chapters of this work, namely “graciousness,” “self-forgetfulness,” “Murdochian charity,” “creativity,” and “courage.” In fact, I will be the first to confess that I often have embodied the exact *opposite* of these virtues, and for this reason, I seek to investigate them. I hope that we will be able to more readily contribute to the well-being of others by embodying these virtues, which is what love, for me, is: Doing what we can to contribute to the well-being of others. Iris Murdoch, in her still underappreciated 1962 piece, “The Idea of Perfection,” recognizes what is still true today: “Many philosophers have spilled much ink over the idea of freedom, but more seldom talk of love.”⁶ Of course, as a Platonist, Murdoch knows that philosophers have had an interest in love from philosophy’s infancy onward. As Murdoch also notes in the same work, philosophers often find themselves having to “return as it were to the beginning,”⁷ and this dissertation is presented in the same spirit. None of the virtues under discussion are original to me. Graciousness has already been written on by Giannini. I first happened upon the notion of self-forgetfulness (at least

⁵ 1954 September 6, LIFE, Dr. Edward Teller’s Magnificent Obsession by Robert Coughlan, Quote Page 61, Quote Page 62, Time Inc., Chicago, Illinois. [link](#)

⁶ Iris Murdoch, “The Idea of Perfection,” <https://yalereview.org/article/iris-murdoch-perfection>. Thank you to Caro Flores for first introducing me to the piece.

⁷ Ibid.

in print)⁸ in the work of Laura Callahan, who was fortuitously recommended to me by Caro Flores. Murdochian charity I derived jointly from Iris Murdoch's work and an aside in Julia Driver's famous 1989 article.⁹ Creativity, as we all know, is introduced to many of us early on in the classroom, often accompanied by crayons.¹⁰ But Barry Lam and others – including Jon Ellis and Emily Robertson – first showed me by their actions the close connection between courage and creativity. There can be no creativity without courage. So, these virtues themselves are not new, nor is their being prescribed new. What is new, however, is my recommendation that philosophers in particular practice these five virtues specifically, and especially what I will call “public philosophers.” Public philosophers are those who are interested in engaging with and learning from members of the public, especially those outside of academia or academic contexts.¹¹ But why ought public philosophers practice these virtues? On my view, these virtues are important because they allow philosophers to engage with the public in more ameliorative, intellectually and epistemically productive, and ultimately more loving ways.

As is true of any work, this one rests within a historical context. Philosophers from the second half of the 20th century through today, such as the aforementioned Driver, have revived a robust scholarly interest in virtue ethics and in virtue more

⁸ Thank you to Roger Henderson for first introducing me to this virtue in conversation over his dining room table. I remember him calling it “such a wonderful virtue.”

⁹ Julia Driver, “The Virtues of Ignorance,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, 1989

¹⁰ Or as often the case in this country.

¹¹ Note that, as we will see in what follows, that this does not discount school contexts – the public nature of public philosophy refers to its interest in spaces outside of the typical academic university setting in which philosophers are usually employed and where contemporary philosophy, at least in the West, is often done.

generally, even in contexts that are not explicitly ethical, including virtue epistemology. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy characterizes virtue epistemology as a “diverse collection of approaches to epistemology,” that generally 1.) views epistemology as a normative domain, and 2.) views intellectual agents and communities as the primary focus of epistemic evaluation, “with a focus on the intellectual virtues and vices embodied in and expressed by these agents and communities.”¹² In my investigation of the five epistemic virtues under discussion here, I will follow the prevailing tendency among virtue epistemologists and see our epistemic projects as involving a normative element, and see epistemic agents and communities as embodying or expressing virtues and vices. This said, my focus will fall as much as possible on virtues expressed by epistemic agents I have encountered and worked with. As we will come to see, this is in keeping with Murdochian charity or at least aspires to be. As I will discuss in chapter three of this work, Murdochian charity also requires us at times to offer criticism of others, provided that the criticism is offered with a direct view toward growth, epistemic improvement, and well-being.

These considerations bring us to a note on methodology. Despite my personal love for and inclination toward armchair philosophy, this work does not constitute armchair philosophy. Each of the four main chapters draws on my personal experience doing public philosophy either in a paid, professional capacity or in a volunteering capacity. Part 10 of this work, Appendix 4, is entirely a non-fictional personal experience. In her impassioned if often troubling 1943 work, *The Need for Roots*,

¹² <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epistemology-virtue/>

written mere months before her death in August of the same year, Weil lauds those who cultivate a “love for truth,” seeing this kind of love as the only solid basis from which serious, honorable scholarship can be grown.¹³ It would be inconsistent with a love of the truth for me to neglect the real-world, physically instantiated experiences I have had, and so I will not do so here. Wherever possible, names have been changed to protect the identities of those with whom I have worked. No, I was not enough in Philosophy’s good graces to have had the opportunity to work with Sage and Moore,¹⁴ though I worked with two wonderful children who did and said what I’ve attributed to these names. That said, nobilities of character common to most, if not all, contemporary career philosophers are their respect for and reliance on philosophical voices that have come before. The primary tasks of this dissertation will be to engage with the philosophical literature for the sake of bolstering my own ability, as well as that of the reader, to do public philosophy and teach well, and to ask: How does the literature on self-forgetfulness inform our publicly philosophical work and our behavior when engaging in this work? How does the literature on graciousness inform our publicly philosophical work and our behavior when engaging in this work? And so on for the remaining three virtues, namely, Murdochian charity, creativity, and courage. But also, I draw heavily from my own direct experience doing public philosophy to “report back,” as it were, on my experiences, which others can learn from here and perhaps reflect on so as to improve their own practices while participating in public philosophy.

¹³ Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots*, p. 39.

¹⁴ See chapter 3 of the present work.

The title of this work is clear: “Virtues for Public Philosophers,” but the subtitle is less so: “Five Epistemically Ameliorative Regulative Ideals.” First, though there are many epistemically ameliorative virtues to choose from – including “honesty,” “patience,” “perseverance,” and “charity” more generally, I will restrict myself in this work to five for brevity’s sake. The five chosen have been chosen on the basis of perceived gaps in the philosophical literature. Though each of the five virtues chosen has been written on before, the literature on many of them – particularly “graciousness,” “self-forgetfulness,” and “Murdochian charity” – is itself scant (even when forgetting about public philosophy entirely), while the literature on all five’s relevance to public philosophers was formerly nonexistent. Secondly, we ought to ask what it means for these to be “*epistemically* ameliorative,” per the title. By this, I mean that “graciousness,” “self-forgetfulness,” “Murdochian charity,” “courage,” and “creativity” all promise to help us become better knowers and more fruitful epistemic agents in general. We should not overlook this distinction – these virtues help *us* to more reliably come to knowledge, but they also help others with whom we are in community to more reliably come to knowledge as well. So, by “more fruitful epistemic agents,” I mean to refer to our ability to teach and help *others* acquire knowledge, not just ourselves. If anything, this second point is the more important one for the public philosopher. While presenting my research at the University of California, Santa Cruz’s Annual Research Symposium, an audience member asked what they preemptively labelled a tough question: “What is the role of the public philosopher?” The role is very simple. To nurture what is already there. I reminded my questioner of the scene in

Whisper of the Heart when the mentor compares the mentee's latent artistic capacity to that of a geode, its riches hidden beneath the "surface," so to speak.¹⁵ But even before I first watched *Whisper of the Heart* in my brother's apartment in South Florida in 2024, I was comparing students' latent abilities to the geode.¹⁶ The philosopher does not put something of value into anyone – rather, they uncover riches that are already there. Their task is to help bring out the good – including much truth – that is already present in others. To deny that most if not all of us – that is, somewhere in the vicinity of eight billion of us – know at least *some* truths strikes me as unreasonably elitist and paternalistic. Most folks over a certain age know that $5 + 7 = 12$, and so on. Nearly everyone possesses knowledge of at least some truth, and it is the public philosopher's job to nurture that truth, not squash whatever they find inside the minds of others and replace it with what they feel to be true. Through public philosophy, we may discover ways of understanding more about ourselves and how to be better reasoners in community. In this sense, the five virtues described here will be taken to be epistemically *ameliorative* – they help the truth that is already in others give rise to more truth, rather than falsehood.¹⁷ This is what I take the term *ameliorative* to signify.¹⁸ Finally, in what sense can these "virtues" be said to be "regulative ideals"? In the following sense: I do not assume that "self-forgetfulness," "graciousness,"

¹⁵ *Whisper of the Heart*

¹⁶ Student Experience of Teaching Survey Report, 2022

¹⁷ The rise of misinformation – especially in an increasingly polarized political and intellectual environment – is a key concern in this work.

¹⁸ Other philosophers, such as Sally Haslanger, may have different uses of this term, which I will not necessarily be employing here. My usage is likely much closer to the ordinary dictionary definition. By *ameliorative* I have in mind something along the lines of "to make easier," or "to improve a difficult situation."

“Murdochian charity,” “creativity,” and “courage” are *things* we either have or do not have. All too often, character traits, virtues, and especially vices become problematically reified – I wish to avoid any such thing. When someone is self-forgetful, I do not take this to mean that they have self-forgetfulness inside of them, so to speak. So, the geode metaphor is exactly that – a metaphor, and nothing more. Inside of us, we have organs and other things which a biologist or some other expert in the sciences could tell us more about than I. I see these five virtues as regulative ideals that are intended to serve as guiding principles for our behavior rather than as tangible realities “in the world,” so to speak. So, when I describe someone as courageous, unfortunately, I do not mean that they have courage inside of themselves, but rather that they more or less consistently live in a way that is consistent with an ideal – courage or a courageous individual – and that this ideal seems to regulate their behavior. If on one day they acted in a manner inconsistent with courage, I would describe this as out-of-character but would not be surprised. We all have off-days, and some of us even have off-weeks, off-months, and off-years. And yet we can still take these virtues as regulative ideals and continue to strive for them, even if we believe they do not indwell us in anything approaching a literal sense.

A final note should be made on the structure of this work before a concluding reflection on the place from which we started. In general, this dissertation ought to be seen as consisting of two distinct parts: 1.) Non-appendices and 2.) appendices. Of the non-appendices, there are six parts. These are 1.) an introductory section and 6.) a concluding section, filled out in the middle with four chapters (these are chapters 1, 2,

3, and 4.) corresponding to the virtues on which the literature has the least to say, and a fourth corresponding to creativity and courage. Much ink from Plato onward has been spilled over creativity and courage, so my task in chapter four is not so much to give an account of these two virtues, but to show how they relate to public philosophical work by examining a specific case – Barry Lam’s *Daily Nous* post “Why do Philosophy PhD Programs Even Exist?”¹⁹ Chapter 4 is less an abstract investigation into the virtues of creativity and courage themselves, and more an effort to elucidate how they may look in public philosophical writing. For this reason, Chapter 4 is divided into two main parts – a defense of the dialogue form, followed by an analysis of Lam’s writing. Any attempt, too, at writing in a dialogue form *within* an academic philosophical context will likewise be seen as courageous and creative – for example, Torin Alter and Robert Howell’s 2009 work, *A Dialogue on Consciousness*. Of course, if we go back even further, examples of rather serious philosophical dialogues abound, such as Berkeley’s *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous* and St. Augustine’s *De Magistro*. What is truly novel today is not the acceptance of dialogue as a legitimate form for doing serious philosophy, but rather the reluctance to recognize canonically accepted ways of doing philosophy as good or rigorous modes. But as Murdoch said, we must often “return as it were to the beginning.”²⁰

The non-appendix portion of this dissertation consists of more traditional analytic philosophical writing. There is great value in this way of writing and

¹⁹ Thank you to Barry Lam for his helpful and illuminating correspondence with me via email regarding this topic.

²⁰ Murdoch, “The Idea of Perfection,” <https://yalereview.org/article/iris-murdoch-perfection>

communicating, which is why the non-appendix portion of this dissertation constitutes roughly two-thirds of the work. The epigraphs serve as guiding thoughts – thoughts invariably pulled from the voices of others – to frame one’s thinking during each chapter or section. I have always found this very helpful in my own reading and point to John R. Hale’s *Lords of the Sea* as just one example of a work where this practice has proved fortuitous.²¹ I use the word “fortuitous” because, in an important sense, all good writing is fortuitous. Nothing written is written by sheer necessity – choices must be made. For each epigraph I have chosen, I could have just as easily chosen another. But in each case, my goal has been to *illuminate* my thinking with the epigraph. In this way only – that is, by the inclusion of epigraphs – do my non-appendix portions of this work depart significantly from more standard, traditional philosophical writing. Chapter 4, by one reading, serves as an introduction to the first appendix. The first appendix is a necessary demonstration that I am capable of what I, alongside Dr. Barry Lam, am asking of others: namely, that we be creative and courageous enough to write in a way that serves our own philosophical ideas and ideals, and that is consistent with our own philosophical ideas and ideals. To fail to include a dialogue I have written as an appendix to this work would be a serious misstep. So, Appendix 1 is a necessary demonstration of my own creativity and courage via the dialogue form, which I take as regulative ideals for my own philosophical writing.

The remaining appendices, 2 - 6, serve other ends. Appendix II, while originally my master’s thesis, serves as an exploration of the way in which a public philosopher

²¹ John R. Hale, *Lords of the Sea*

visits an art museum, and specifically how she views non-figurative art. In my public philosophical work, I have always found that I have a lot to learn from everyone whom I encounter. But what if I encounter the work of an abstract expressionist? Can I learn anything from *her* work? My answer is yes – you can learn even from non-figurative art. Appendices 3 - 6 can be divided into two groups along two axes – two of these appendices are poems, and two of them are stories. But also, two of these appendices are fiction, and two of these are non-fiction. “Dayya” is a non-fiction story about an experience I had at El Camino Health in Mountain View, California, during the summer of 2024. “Dayya” gives an account of how these regulative ideals instantiate “on the ground,” as it were – even in one of the most unlikely of settings. “The Origin of the World” is a fictional story about which much that can be said of “Dayya” can also be said, except that it more fully represents an expression of creativity and courage insofar as it required more imagination and “artistry,” so to speak, to produce. Sophie, in the story, expresses each of the five virtues under discussion, with the plausible exception of creativity. I would argue, however, that her imaginative exercise in her office – which forms the focus of the story – is itself a creative exercise, even if it resulted in nothing other than added courage on her part (see Appendix 4 for more details). Finally, “Breath of the Author” is a non-fictional poem written by me during the summer of 2024, whilst recovering from my hospital stay described in “Dayya”. While the dialogue form takes center stage as an example of a writing style that requires creativity and courage, poetry serves as another example, and it has the added benefit of possessing the enormous power of concision, almost to a shocking degree. Poetry

accomplishes what no other manner of writing can accomplish, in terms of the ratio of power per word. Richard Rorty, shortly before his passing in 2007, published “The Fire of life,” in *Poetry* magazine, inspiring Haris Vlavianos to write this haiku in his voice:

I would have found the
thread of life if only I’d
become a poet.²²

Thich Nhat Hanh, a favorite thinker of Jon Ellis and me, often writes poetry, and his felicity in verse is readily apparent in his prose. The clarity of his writing is frankly unrivaled by any analytic philosophical writer I have yet encountered. “Alligator’s Tear” is a fictional, metaphorical poem that serves as a concluding thought for this work. As I have already said in this introduction, none of the five virtues under analysis in this dissertation is an all-or-nothing state that may be permanently attained. They serve as regulative ideals to come back to again and again, no matter how many times we feel we have failed to live up to them, or how confident we feel in our having lived up to them.

For this reason, I claim a degree of expertise on the relationship between “self-forgetfulness,” “graciousness,” “Murdochian charity,” “creativity,” and “courage” as they relate to public philosophy. I could probably write a longer dissertation than this one chronicling all the various ways I have *failed* to live up to these ideals in public philosophical contexts, and many examples of my missteps concerning these virtues already appear in what follows. We become experts via our mistakes because we learn

²² Haris Vlavianos, “The History of Western Philosophy in One Hundred Haiku,” p. 96.

from them. That said, either love is too broad a topic to claim true expertise in – which I suspect is the case – or I have been too inactive in this domain to make the necessary mistakes required for expertise. That said, I hope and expect that “self-forgetfulness,” “graciousness,” “Murdochian charity,” “creativity,” and “courage” will go some way toward cultivating a more loving way of doing public philosophy.

Finally, in Murdoch’s spirit of returning, as it were, to the beginning, I should warn the reader that this dissertation is not so much etched in stone but rather invites the author to rework and revisit it.²³ There will be evidence of this in the text. For over a year I’ve searched for a better name than the virtue under discussion in chapter 3 of this work, what I will be calling “Murdochian charity” here, a name helpfully suggested to me by Nat Burke during a works in progress talk I gave during the spring of 2026. This name serves as a nice portmanteau, as it were, of Murdoch’s vision and Driver’s blind charity. At times the text may show some evidence of the previous name and the philosophical advantages and disadvantages it carries. Chapter 4, while Laconian – true to its theme – deserves added road mapping and structure, as does chapter 3. Like the Alligator in appendix 6, I recognize that the life of this work, too, is touched by both gravity and grace.

²³ See appendix 5 of the present work.

Chapter 1: Self-forgetfulness and Public Philosophy

“The sage has no mind of his own. He takes as his own the mind of the people.”

- Lao Tzu²⁴

1. Introduction

The virtue of humility poses unique challenges, as well as potential opportunities, for the public philosopher. Here, I will argue that humility is a key virtue for public philosophers. However, this will not be without qualification. First, it will be important to specify which feature or features of humility will be of value to public philosophers. Second, it will be necessary to specify precisely *why* and *where* humility is of value to public philosophers. Public philosophy takes different forms and is done in a variety of contexts, and humility may have more value in certain contexts than others. Additionally, humility may be of more value for certain specific classes of epistemic agents than for others. I have alluded to “self-forgetfulness” in the title of this chapter because I will argue that the feature of humility of greatest value to public philosophers is self-forgetfulness, understood as distinct from what others may have in mind when they speak of humility. So, the feature of humility that is of most value to public philosophy will be its capacity to encourage self-forgetfulness, on my view. While I do believe that humility has self-forgetfulness as an ineliminable component, and therefore humility is of value for public philosophy if self-forgetfulness is,²⁵ it is

²⁴ Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. by D.C. Lau (London: Penguin Books, 1963), 56.

²⁵ This intuition is not in and of itself obvious, and further support must be given to justify it. By the same reasoning, one might argue that because water is good for children, wine must be as well, since wine has water as an ineliminable part. Just as wine has features that water does not have, such as

less ambitious to argue for self-forgetfulness's value for public philosophy than for humility as a whole, which may be interpreted in a variety of ways, some of which may not carry with it the notion of self-forgetfulness. In fact, many who reject the value of humility²⁶ may have understandings of humility that do not include self-forgetfulness as an explicit defining feature. We will look at some of these cases more carefully in the body of this chapter. As for *why* and *where* self-forgetfulness is of value to public philosophers, our answers to these two questions will be directly related to one another. The purpose of self-forgetfulness as a virtue in public philosophy will determine the contexts in which it is of most value. Therefore, the goals of this chapter will be threefold, with the second two goals relating directly to each other: 1.) to argue for self-forgetfulness specifically as a feature of humility that is beneficial to public philosophers, 2.) to specify *why* self-forgetfulness is of value to public philosophers *as public philosophers*,²⁷ and 3.) to determine the contexts where self-forgetfulness will be most beneficial.

2. Self-Forgetfulness as a Virtue Related to Humility is of Specific Value for Public Philosophers

containing alcohol, humility may have features that self-forgetfulness lacks that make it of less value of public philosophers in certain contexts.

²⁶ See Rachel Fraser, "Against Humility," *Aeon*.

²⁷ After all, it may be the case that self-forgetfulness is of benefit to everyone generally, in most if not all contexts. In this case, arguing for the value of self-forgetfulness may be like arguing for the value of honesty for public philosophers. If honesty is generally of value for everyone, as many would argue, then the view that honesty is also of value to public philosophers does not need to be defended. Furthermore, philosophy as a field or as an activity may have features which make self-forgetfulness particularly important for philosophy, in contrast to, for example, science.

As has already been suggested, it may be tempting to defend humility in general as a virtue appropriate for public philosophers. This may be because philosophers may have a reputation for pretentiousness. But special attention should be given to the defining features of humility, as well as its limitations. I will argue that humility is a *volitional disposition* rather than a set of beliefs about oneself. To borrow a quotation often misattributed to C.S. Lewis,²⁸ “Humility is thinking of yourself less, not thinking less of yourself.”²⁹ While I do not wish to promote this as a *definition* of humility, or any specific definition of humility, for that matter, this quote does capture the *dispositional* character of humility and discourages interpreting humility as a set of beliefs about oneself or one’s abilities. My goal here will be to highlight the status of humility as an intellectual or epistemic virtue for public philosophers, one that tends toward truth or knowledge rather than the satisfaction of any moral or ethical norm associated with humility.³⁰ This point is worth considering in the context of public philosophy’s goals more generally. It may be reasonably argued that the goal of public philosophy is not necessarily to discover truths or promote knowledge formation.³¹

²⁸ Though Lewis’ view is similar: “Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call ‘humble’ nowadays: he will not be a sort of greasy, smarmy person, who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody. Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what *you* said to *him*.” (2002: 72)

²⁹ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 149.

³⁰ For example, some may hold the view that humility is a virtue that is divinely commanded, and that we therefore have a duty to be humble in order to satisfy certain ethical norms established by a divine authority.

³¹ Barry Lam argues that the public philosopher’s epistemic goals are often if not always much more epistemically modest than the academic philosopher’s. Lam writes: “As a species of academic writing, much of philosophy is engineered for epistemic justification, not for engagement or entertainment, and most certainly not for the task of holding the attention of a reader,” (Barry Lam: “Public Philosophy Through Narrative,” p. 253.)

Here, we begin to see the tension that often emerges between academic philosophy and public philosophy. In academic contexts, something like truth preservation or knowledge formation is aimed for. But in public philosophy, our goals may be restricted to, for example, fostering public engagement with philosophy, which is not necessarily the same thing as truth preservation or knowledge formation. In the same way, Carl Sagan's goals as the host of *Cosmos* were different from his goals as an academic researcher. Sagan does not host *Cosmos* with the goal of making discoveries about the universe. Rather, he hosts *Cosmos* intending to foster public interest in science, or to disseminate knowledge about the universe that has already been formed by scientific researchers. At the same time, however, there is a reason why Carl Sagan was the host of *Cosmos* and not, say, Robert Redford. Similarly, there are reasons why academic philosophers, or at least those with academic philosophical training, make good public philosophers. In both the case of public philosophy and Carl Sagan's *Cosmos*, knowledge and truth are of great concern. Disregard or lack of appropriate attentiveness to knowledge or truth threatens the integrity of public philosophy and other efforts to popularize academic fields. So, if humility has value in public philosophy, its value will at least in part be epistemic. In this chapter, I will focus on the *epistemic* value of humility and the related virtue of self-forgetfulness.

Much, moreover, has already been written on the value of humility in our epistemic pursuits.³² This is to say that intellectual humility tends to be truth-conducive,

³² See Mark Leary, "Intellectual Humility as a Route to More Accurate Knowledge, Better Decisions, and Less Conflict," *American Journal of Health Promotion* 36, no. 8 (2022).

at least according to some. But not everyone is in agreement. There is an ongoing debate, usually centered on whether holding specific beliefs about oneself, especially the belief that one may be mistaken about that which one purports to know, is actually truth-conducive. While it will become necessary to spend some time engaging with this debate in this chapter, I will focus on a more specific disposition that may be subsumed under the broader term “humility.” I will call this more specific disposition “self-forgetfulness.” In discussing self-forgetfulness, it will be necessary to speak of humility because I see self-forgetfulness as a natural consequence of being properly humble.³³ In other words, self-forgetfulness is arguably a kind of sub-virtue within the more general virtue of humility. To see this, one must only imagine cases where an individual is self-deprecating but overly focused on oneself. They are more engaged with their own limitations than they are with the world around them. So, while they hold limiting beliefs about themselves, and are therefore far from arrogant in any traditional sense, they are not properly humble insofar as their focus is on themselves rather than on those around them. As practitioners of public philosophy, it is of utmost importance that we practice a healthy degree of self-forgetfulness to better create space for the free expression of ideas in certain public philosophical settings. Crucially, the

³³ Laura Callahan’s view is similar to my own, except that self-forgetfulness is a virtue *adjacent* to humility, on her view. Self-forgetfulness is, for Callahan, an adjacent virtue and not a sub-virtue because *inclusivity* is arguably a desideratum for any satisfactory account of humility, which self-forgetfulness does not seem to satisfy. Often, it is important that those in oppressed or marginalized groups remember themselves and their self-worth, which historically has been denied by oppressive social structures and/or individuals. For Callahan, *inclusivity* and *uniqueness* are the two primary desiderata which a satisfactory account of humility must meet. In other words, humility must be shown to be a virtue for all people (inclusivity) and an account of humility must show why humility is *unique* and not to be confused with other, similar virtues like modesty. (Callahan, 2021)

public philosopher should be as interested in *learning* from the public as they are in educating them. This, in my view, is what gives self-forgetfulness its specifically *epistemic* value for public philosophy. Ultimately, self-forgetfulness has an advantage as a virtue insofar as it facilitates the transmission of knowledge and/or the preservation of truth, in the context of public philosophy. While humility and self-forgetfulness may also have ethical or axiological benefits, these benefits are not what make self-forgetfulness of particular value for public philosophy. To illustrate this point, one context in which public philosophy is done is through collaboration between academic philosophers and non-academic philosophers on articles or op-eds intended for a wider audience than that of academic philosophy journals. John Altmann and Bryan W. van Norden represent one such case of collaboration. They point out that “[h]aving the humility to recognize what you don’t know is as important as recognizing what you do know. Professional/outsider interactions can go very wrong, but when they do, it is almost always because the mutual respect and learning is absent.”³⁴ As experts in philosophy, public philosophers must wrestle with the temptation toward a kind of “self-remembrance,”³⁵ or in other words, the temptation to correct the reasoning and perhaps even the beliefs of others when possible, and to demonstrate that one is contributing something of value to the discussion. But by practicing intellectual humility through self-forgetfulness, public philosophers have the opportunity to turn public philosophical spaces into collaborative enterprises where each participant can

³⁴ John Altmann, Bryan W. van Norden, “Interactions Between Professionalized and Non-Professionalized Philosophers,” p. 394.

³⁵ Callahan uses the term “self-focus”. See Callahan, “Humility for Everyone,” 634.

learn from the other, regardless of their identity or positionality, whether inside or outside the academy.³⁶ This has the potential to make public philosophical spaces more democratic and serves as an invitation for members of the public to engage with philosophy as an activity, rather than passively absorbing what a public philosopher is saying in their capacity as an “expert”. In other words, public philosophy serves as an invitation to participate in philosophy, and participation in philosophy is by its very nature an epistemic activity in at least some way, even if it is not aimed at knowledge formation in the same way in which, for example, academic conferences are.

Humility and self-forgetfulness, as epistemic virtues, would be of no use to public philosophers if they did not address an ongoing problem or set of problems with the way in which public philosophy is often done. In this chapter, I will restrict myself to the *epistemic* problems public philosophy faces, though this by no means represents all its problems. In a set of 2018 blog posts on *Imperfect Cognitions*, Eric Schwitzgebel and Jon Ellis highlight important blind spots to which even the most rigorous academic philosophers are prone. They argue that “moral and philosophical topics are especially fertile grounds for rationalization,” and that “the likely inability of intelligence, vigilance, and expertise to effectively protect us against rationalization, support[s] the following conclusion: Few if any of us should confidently maintain that our moral and philosophical reasoning is not substantially tainted by significant, epistemically

³⁶ It should be noted that audiences for public philosophy events often include academics outside of philosophy.

troubling degrees of rationalization.”³⁷ If we accept, at the very least, the possibility that our moral and philosophical reasoning is tainted by “epistemically troubling degrees of rationalization,” then this gives reason to seek out remedies or ameliorative strategies. A call for self-forgetfulness, as an epistemic virtue aimed at improved reasoning and decreased rationalization, is one such strategy. To show where this might be useful, consider a case that illustrates a distinct *lack* of self-forgetfulness. Anthony Cashio recalls the *Rush Limbaugh Show* and remembers that “[s]plashed in a large font across Limbaugh’s website were the words ‘I won’t stop until everyone agrees with me’ – indicating the lack of humility and intellectual curiosity that his show embodied.”³⁸ Of course, we can be thankful that Rush Limbaugh does not represent a typical public philosopher, or any philosopher, public or otherwise, for that matter. But at the same time, public philosophers have their own podcasts and talk shows,³⁹ and it is not difficult to imagine cases where changing the opinions or beliefs of others may implicitly or explicitly become a goal of the public philosopher. It may seem clear to the public philosopher, for example, that vegetarianism or veganism is the best solution to many of the climate issues humanity currently faces. And while he or she may not explicitly recommend vegetarianism or veganism to their students or audience members, leading questions such as “Does vegetarianism seem like a viable solution to the climate issues we’re facing today?” still have the potential to lead students and

³⁷ Jon Ellis and Eric Schwitzgebel, “Why Moral and Philosophical Disagreements Are Especially Fertile Grounds for Rationalization,” *Imperfect Cognitions*, (February 20, 2018), <https://imperfectcognitions.blogspot.com/2018/02/why-moral-and-philosophical.html>

³⁸ Anthony L. Cashio, “Welcome to Voice Land: Public Philosophy on the Radio,” p. 211.

³⁹ Barry Lam’s “Hi-Phi Nation” is just one example.

audience members to a conclusion that aligns with the public philosopher's. By remembering oneself and one's positionality, the public philosopher risks unduly influencing the beliefs and opinions of others. Furthermore, there is the temptation, arguably a consequence of a lack of self-forgetfulness, to assume a certain uniformity between oneself and others. So, while Limbaugh would like to make his audience agree with him, there is the other risk of assuming that they already do, or that they are sufficiently similar to oneself to treat them in a particular way. And rather than arising from viciousness of any sort, this temptation is often the consequence of good intentions. Gustave Thibon, in his introduction to *Gravity and Grace*, recounts an episode where Simone Weil "thought she had detected signs of an intellectual vocation [in a young working-class Lorraine girl] and to whom she poured forth at great length magnificent commentaries on the Upanishads. The poor child nearly died with boredom, but shyness and good manners prevented her from saying anything..."⁴⁰ So, while Weil showed admirable generosity to the Lorraine girl by responding to and then attempting to satisfy "signs of an intellectual vocation," Weil in this instance was not self-forgetful insofar as she recognized someone like herself in a child who really was uninterested in what interested Weil. So, self-forgetfulness is only properly self-forgetfulness when we can attend to the other, not when we are absorbed by our own – often faulty – *idea* of the other.

This is not to say, however, that humility – considered more broadly – is always or wholly good. Humility as a disposition has its limitations, even when employed with

⁴⁰ Gustave Thibon, Introduction to *Gravity and Grace*, p. 6-7.

good intentions and with epistemic well-being in mind. Recently, Rachel Fraser has situated her discussion of the demerits of humility in terms of “intellectual virtues,” which for her are akin to epistemic virtues.⁴¹⁴² Fraser identifies three traits common among the “intellectually humble”: “The intellectually humble have a keen sense of their own fallibility (‘I’ve been mistaken in the past’). They tolerate uncertainty (‘We might never know the full truth of what happened’). They recognise the partiality and ambiguity of their evidence, along with the limits of their ability to assess it (‘New information might come to light’; or ‘I might be misinterpreting this data’).”⁴³ Fraser ultimately argues that humility is not always conducive to epistemic well-being, offering the scientist Barbara McClintock as an example where humility would ostensibly prove to be a barrier to the progress of knowledge formation. McClintock, under Fraser’s formulation of intellectual humility, would have suffered a loss in epistemic well-being and eventual success in knowledge formation were she to embrace the three hallmarks of intellectual humility listed by Fraser. I agree with Fraser on this point. McClintock, despite winning the Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine in 1983, spent much of her career in obscurity and even stopped publishing after 1953, when her research was met with disapproval from her peers during a conference at Cold

⁴¹ Rachel Fraser, “Against Humility: Why Intellectual Humility isn’t Always a Virtue,” *Aeon*, (October 3, 2024), <https://aeon.co/essays/why-intellectual-humility-isnt-always-a-virtue>

⁴² Intellectual virtues and epistemic virtues are arguably distinct. (Though I have not seen evidence of this argument being made.) A novelist may have intellectual virtues that aid her in her fiction writing, but lack epistemic virtues that lead her toward truth. Additionally, a rhetorician (or a politician) may have intellectual virtues that make them a formidable adversary in debate, but which fail to lead the rhetorician toward knowledge. It seems odd that intellectual virtues should be assumed to lead to knowledge, especially when so many who are intellectually virtuous often fail to arrive at knowledge.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

Spring Harbor Laboratory. Fraser writes that in this early period, “[m]ost people, confronted with such a mixture of hostility and incomprehension, would pause to reconsider their views.”⁴⁴ Instead, McClintock continued her research, arguably displaying a lack of intellectual humility that would yield returns on investment 30 years later. But the question important for my investigation is, did she practice self-forgetfulness?

By framing our discussion in terms of self-forgetfulness, we see that there may be less disagreement between Fraser and me than at first appears. While Fraser argues against intellectual humility as a reliable path to knowledge, I will argue that it is her formulation of intellectual humility that is flawed, not intellectual humility itself. As stated previously, I take intellectual humility to be a disposition to act or think in a certain way, rather than a set of beliefs about oneself or one’s cognitive abilities. Fraser offers *beliefs*⁴⁵ as examples of the traits she associates with intellectual humility. It is easier, then, to provide an example of someone who rejected these beliefs and yet flourished epistemically, since intellectual or epistemic humility does not consist of specific beliefs but rather a set of *dispositions* to think or act in a certain ways.⁴⁶ Moreover, McClintock’s dispositions are arguably consistent with epistemic humility, especially the virtue of self-forgetfulness. If we accept the notion that epistemic

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ “I’ve been mistaken in the past,” “We might never know the full truth of what happened,” and “New information might come to light,” or “I might be misinterpreting this data.” Note that each may be easily reformulated as a belief: “*I believe* I’ve been mistaken in the past,” “*I believe* we might never know the full truth of what happened,” and “*I believe* new information might come to light,” or “*I believe* I might be misinterpreting this data.”

⁴⁶ Laura Callahan offers a compelling account of humility framed in terms of *dispositions* to think or behave in certain ways. I’ll borrow from her work in more detail in the remainder of this essay.

humility may involve a disposition to *think of oneself less*, McClintock was prone to this disposition, by Fraser's own admission. Fraser writes: "She felt herself merge with the chromosomes she examined. 'As you look at these things,' [McClintock] reflected, 'they become part of you. And you forget yourself.'"⁴⁷ Self-forgetfulness, then, seems to be a trait toward which McClintock was prone during her academic research. I would argue that this self-forgetfulness constitutes a form of epistemic humility that is beneficial for knowledge formation across disciplines, but especially in philosophy, particularly public philosophy. Laura Callahan helps show how this might work, and why self-forgetfulness and humility have the potential to provide epistemic benefits, particularly for those who are relatively privileged, as many if not most public philosophers are.

Callahan frames her discussion of humility in terms of two desiderata: Inclusivity and Uniqueness. The Inclusivity desideratum is the intuition that humility, if it is a virtue, should be a virtue for *all* people, not just for certain groups or for those who belong to certain identities. The Uniqueness desideratum is the intuition that a satisfactory account of humility should show what is unique about *humility* in particular, and what distinguishes it from related virtues like modesty or graciousness. Callahan's account of humility satisfies both these desiderata. On her view, as on mine, humility is a disposition to think or behave in certain ways that does not reduce humility to a set of beliefs (or lack thereof) about oneself. On Driver's influential 1989 account of modesty – which she sees as very near if not indistinguishable from humility – this

⁴⁷ Ibid.

virtue is achieved through ignorance or underestimation. Moreover, Driver emphasizes the epistemic features of modesty and related virtues, just as I do in this chapter. Except for her, the virtue of modesty “is dependent upon the epistemic defect of not knowing one’s worth.”⁴⁸ Ignorance of one’s own good qualities or the value of one’s achievements is what constitutes this particular virtue, on her view. So, for Driver, modesty and humility are about what one *believes* about oneself – or more specifically, what one does *not* believe. One does not believe that one’s good qualities are as good as they really are, or that one’s achievements are as valuable as they really are. To speak of a *disposition* toward ignorance seems indefensible.⁴⁹ Moreover, to frame modesty and humility in terms of ignorance seems to weaken the stability of these virtues in particular individuals. *Ignorance* – unlike virtues of attention, which we will discuss later – is simply not knowing. But ignorance is easily changed by coming to know – once one knows, one is no longer ignorant. This is true even if one chooses not to dwell on what one knows, as is the case in attention accounts of humility. Callahan’s view is strong because it frames humility in terms of dispositions rather than beliefs. For her,

⁴⁸ Julia Driver, “The Virtues of Ignorance,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, 1989.

⁴⁹ Ignorance seems to be a state one finds oneself in with respect to certain facts. If my friend does not know that Paris is in France, they are ignorant of that fact. But this does not suggest that they are *disposed* to not know that Paris is in France. (Though this is arguable – of course, they are disposed to remain in the same state until their ignorance is corrected. But why shouldn’t it be the case that our ignorant friend is disposed to *come to know* that Paris is in France? Surely it is only the ignorant who can come to know a fact, since the knowing already know it.) Once they are told that Paris is in France, they are no longer ignorant. Consider, for example, the difference between claiming that a glass is disposed to break and claiming that a class is disposed to be broken. The first seems plausible because breaking is something that a glass *does*. Being broken, however, is the state the glass is in after it breaks. Similarly, because knowing or not knowing seems to be more of a state than an action that may be repeated (like breaking – the glass broke twice). To borrow an example from Wittgenstein (with perhaps a slightly different upshot) if you read a stack of identical newspapers in succession, you do not come to know the contents of the newspaper more than once.

humility is the disposition to be free of distracting pride.⁵⁰ Moreover, on Callahan's view, humility has clear epistemic advantages (rather than arising from an epistemic defect, as on Driver's view). She writes that "the predictable end of being disposed to freedom from distraction by pride is simply better thought and action."⁵¹ As I read Callahan, she recognizes both the epistemic ("thought") and moral ("action") benefits of humility, even going so far as to say that "[h]umble teachers are better teachers; humble scientists are better scientists; humble politicians are better politicians."⁵² What is of interest here are the epistemic benefits of humility, and note that for Callahan, scientists like Barbara McClintock are at least *prima facie* better scientists if they are humble scientists. But whether McClintock was or was not humble is still an open question, despite Fraser's assumption that she wasn't.⁵³ I will argue that she was, if we take self-forgetfulness to count as a form of humility.

Remember that for Callahan, any satisfactory account of humility must meet our Inclusivity and Uniqueness desiderata. One failure of Driver's view, for Callahan, is that it is not inclusive because, for example, a woman who is a victim of gaslighting should not be ignorant of her worth or abilities. So, ignorance of one's worth fails to meet inclusivity because it is often harmful for oppressed or mistreated individuals not to know their own worth. In fact, ignorance of one's worth for oppressed groups seems to reinforce the very dynamics that give rise to oppression. A theory of modesty or

⁵⁰ Laura Callahan, "Humility for Everyone: A No-Distraction Account," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 635.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ And this assumption is not ill-founded. McClintock certainly doesn't *seem* like your typical image of a humble person, coming off as more stubborn and strongheaded.

humility that gives more power to oppressive structures should clearly be avoided. This, at least in part, is why Callahan rejects the view that oppressed individuals should be ignorant of their worth. She writes that for “many people, far from being generally tempted to think too well of themselves, [they] receive more or less subtle messages constantly to the effect that they are worthless. No good. Undeserving.”⁵⁴ Callahan wants to preserve humility as a virtue while ensuring it is a virtue for oppressed groups. Note that in distinction to Callahan, Fraser denies that humility is a virtue, seemingly from considerations of Inclusivity: humility should not include Barbara McClintock, who had her worth underestimated by those around her.⁵⁵ Humility should not be inclusive in light of the tendency both for marginalized groups and their oppressors to underestimate their worth or abilities. So, at the very least, humility is not a virtue for those in McClintock’s position, on Fraser’s view. And because humility is not a virtue for some, it should not be taken to be a virtue for all – or anyone. Callahan and I will reject this view – humility does seem to be a virtue for all, but it does not require us to be unaware of our own worth. Rather, it requires us not to be *distracted* by a high view of our value or worth, i.e., distracting pride. At this point, one may wonder what the difference between Callahan’s view and self-forgetfulness *really is*, since they both seem to require us to put something to do with ourselves out of mind. Isn’t Callahan’s account really a self-forgetfulness account? In fact, Callahan recognizes that

⁵⁴ Callahan, “Humility for Everyone,” 637.

⁵⁵ Not only was humility not a virtue in the specific case of McClintock, but for her there are no intellectual virtues, but rather “traits that are sometimes conducive to knowledge, and traits that are sometimes not.” Fraser <https://aeon.co/essays/why-intellectual-humility-isnt-always-a-virtue>

“[h]umility, on this account, is thus closely related to self-forgetfulness.”⁵⁶ But she emphasizes “that I have *not* said that humility *is* appropriate or moderate self-forgetfulness.”⁵⁷ However, and this point is crucial for this chapter, she does concede that “dispositions to self-forgetfulness... often – at least for privileged folk – are helpful in allowing us to get on with good projects.”⁵⁸ I find her use of the word *us* to be both beautiful and telling here, if not unexpected. And I do not wish to argue that Callahan herself does not belong to any oppressed groups – she certainly does. But as Peter Singer noted in his 1972 paper “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” most philosophy professors in the West are relatively privileged, by most metrics.⁵⁹ So, whatever virtues are most appropriate for privileged persons should be appropriate for public philosophers as well, specifically the project of doing public philosophy. In the remainder of this chapter, I will examine what this looks like in more detail and why *self-forgetfulness* in *particular* is of value to public philosophers. Ultimately, this will be because it improves the knowledge-generating or epistemic potential of public philosophical events and activities like the “ask-a-philosopher” table and Philosophy for Children (P4C). To see this, it will be helpful to take a closer look at the epistemic value of humility and self-forgetfulness more specifically.

3. On the Epistemic Value of Humility and Self-Forgetfulness

⁵⁶ Callahan, “Humility for Everyone,” 634.

⁵⁷ Ibid. (Italics in the original.) This is because, on her view, humility cannot be adequately accounted for by appeals to appropriateness or moderation. See section 3.4 of “Humility for Everyone,” for more details.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” 1972.

Mark Leary argues that intellectual humility is conducive to more accurate knowledge, better decisions, and less conflict between epistemic agents.⁶⁰ So, on his view, the value of humility (and, I take it, the related value of self-forgetfulness) is at least epistemic, even if there are ethical or egalitarian values associated with humility as well. While such arguments are not new, Leary provides empirical research to support his claims. He begins by emphasizing the risks involved in a lack of intellectual humility: “Extensive research shows that people display a pervasive overconfidence bias in which they overestimate their performance on various tasks, believe that they compare more favorably to other people than is the case, and... have unwarranted certainty in the accuracy of their beliefs.”⁶¹ Leary’s focus here suggests that a lack of intellectual humility may involve dispositions that are not conducive to epistemic well-being or knowledge formation. Again, this thought is not new. Philippa Foot claims that humility is a virtue “because men tend to think too well of themselves.”⁶² Crucially, these pernicious tendencies can be described as involving a lack of self-forgetfulness, specifically. The overconfidence bias is a bias resulting from the tendency to believe that, because one is engaged in the performance of a specific task, one’s own performance is more satisfactory than one would otherwise think. Leary also notes that – generally – most people believe that they compare more favorably to other people than is really the case. Again, this belief arguably arises from a disposition to remember oneself in relation to others, the opposite of self-forgetfulness. Lastly, Leary warns

⁶⁰ Mark Leary, “Intellectual Humility as a Route to More Accurate Knowledge, Better Decisions, and Less Conflict,” *American Journal of Health Promotion* 36, no. 8 (2022): 1401.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Philippa Foot, 1978.

against unwarranted certainty in the accuracy of our beliefs. The issue here is that we are certain of these beliefs simply because they are *ours* – we mistakenly take our own involvement in these beliefs to somehow count in favor of the beliefs’ being true. In other words, the risks recognized by Leary all stem from a lack of self-forgetfulness – from taking the self’s involvement to be a point in favor of truth or accuracy. So, if his thesis is true that humility and self-forgetfulness have epistemic benefits, we may expect those benefits to carry over into reasoning processes as they appear in public philosophical contexts. But this is not obvious. Recall that for Callahan, an important desideratum for accounts of humility is that it be inclusive – but this is not a desideratum for self-forgetfulness, on her view. Again, self-forgetfulness may be a virtue for those in privileged positions, but not for those who belong to oppressed or marginalized groups. This is consistent, however, with the suggestion that self-forgetfulness is a good for public philosophers, since public philosophers are generally in privileged positions relative to the broader population. However, Callahan seems to assume that a virtue’s being inclusive means that the virtue will be a good for one’s work and career. Recall her claim that “[h]umble teachers are better teachers; humble scientists are better scientists; humble politicians are better politicians.”⁶³ But this may require further defense than what is needed in order to defend the view that humility is inclusive. We might say that generosity is an inclusive virtue – that is, a virtue for everyone – and yet deny that an accountant’s being generous makes them better *as an accountant*. In fact, generosity, if exercised a certain way, may make our accountant a

⁶³ Callahan, “Humility for Everyone,” 365.

worse accountant, even if it makes them a better person overall. Take another example. Being merciful may be an inclusive virtue – it is a virtue that holds for everyone. And yet, we might be hard-pressed to say that mercifulness makes a judge a better judge, in each case. Surely it would be an affront to justice for a judge to “mercifully” reduce a dangerous serial killer’s life sentence to only five years. So, even if an inclusive virtue is good for the individual more generally, it may not be good for them in the context of specific roles they play, especially if those roles are directly related to the virtue in some way. The accountant’s job is to provide accurate accounting, not generous accounting. The judge’s job is to deliver justice, not mercy. And we can say this while encouraging the accountant to be generous toward the poor on her own time (and dime), and while encouraging the judge to be merciful toward his misbehaving child. So, our next question is if self-forgetfulness is the sort of virtue that – while appropriate for privileged persons – is not appropriate for them in certain contexts. Perhaps the privileged among us who are engaged in epistemic pursuits should set self-forgetfulness aside in the interest of being better researchers, scientists, philosophers, and so forth.

McClintock, on the other hand, does not seem to have reasoned in this way. Instead of accepting her beliefs as true simply because they were hers,⁶⁴ she grounded her scientific investigation in something outside of herself. Fraser recounts an episode where McClintock made a small mistake while performing her field research. McClintock was able to predict what a sample of corn would look like under a

⁶⁴ The kind of cognitive distortion Leary takes to be epistemically pernicious.

microscope just by examining it in the field. On one occasion, McClintock's prediction seemed mistaken – when she examined the sample under the microscope, what she saw was not what she expected. Instead of discounting the evidence presented to her, she investigated what went wrong. She returned to the field, and “[t]o her immense relief, she discovered that she had made a filing error.”⁶⁵ She had been examining the next plant over from the one she had made note of in the field. So, while McClintock ultimately discovered that she was initially correct, this discovery did not stem from a stubborn insistence on herself or her intellectual abilities, but rather from a willingness to return to the field and continue the investigation. In my view, McClintock was completely absorbed in her research on genes – to the point of self-forgetfulness – and it was this dedication to her subject of research that resulted in her insight, rather than an intractable commitment to herself or her own intellectual abilities. Fraser suggests that there are no intellectual virtues of any variety – that there “are traits that are sometimes conducive to knowledge, and traits that are sometimes not,” and that we should not hastily attempt to model our own intellectual dispositions on McClintock's, because there is “no way to classify... intellectual traits as ‘good’ or ‘bad’” – rather, some traits happen to be helpful in some contexts, and happen to be unhelpful in others.⁶⁶ This said, there remains room for further inquiry into intellectual or epistemic virtues – including self-forgetfulness – that are epistemically helpful or ameliorative within the context of public philosophy. While Fraser would take McClintock's case to

⁶⁵ Rachel Fraser, “Against Humility,” *Aeon*.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*.

count against humility and self-forgetfulness as virtues, Callahan and I have the resources to call McClintock both humble and self-forgetful. On Callahan's view that humility is freedom from distracting pride, this certainly seems to have been true in McClintock's case. She was sufficiently undistracted either by pride or by self-focus that she was able to continue steadfastly with her research and focus on the corn under her microscope. And we should be thankful that she was, for of course, her focus on something outside of herself culminated in her winning the Nobel Prize, thereby pushing the boundaries of scientific knowledge and serving as a role model to those who would follow in her footsteps, including young women who aspire to scientific careers. So, not only does Fraser's example fail to show that McClintock was not humble or self-forgetful, but it also seems to suggest that if humility and self-forgetfulness are goods, they are at least goods in certain epistemic contexts where knowledge formation and accurate knowledge are our goals. So, not only does self-forgetfulness have the potential to be a good for privileged persons, but it also seems to be a good for them in at least some epistemic contexts. But are public philosophical contexts properly speaking *epistemic* contexts? And is the value that self-forgetfulness brings to public philosophy an *epistemic value*? We might say that generosity is a value for scientists in a laboratory setting – an epistemic context – but that its value is ethical or moral, not epistemic. Saying “It was generous of my lab partner to send me that holiday gift” seems reasonable, but it would be odd to say that generosity provides a specifically *epistemic* value in this case rather than a moral one. So, are public

philosophical contexts properly epistemic contexts in the relevant sense, and does self-forgetfulness provide specifically *epistemic* value in those contexts?

4. Public Philosophical Contexts and Self-Forgetfulness as an Epistemic Value

To see this, it will be helpful to review the literature on public philosophy. One form which a lack of self-forgetfulness and epistemic humility might take has to do with our starting assumptions in philosophy. In brief, some of our habits of thought, namely that principled philosophical theories can be applied usefully to most, if not all, practical problems, may need some revision. We remember, so to speak, that we are interested in philosophical principles that are applicable in a variety of cases and can potentially help us address specific questions about, say, ethics. Utilitarianism, for example, can suggest courses of action regarding how we address those with disabilities or how we decide what foods we should or shouldn't eat. Principled theories are useful in certain contexts, and are arguably particularly useful in research projects, where we can show that certain conclusions follow from principled arguments. However, injecting these theories into public philosophical discussion may not always be the best strategy. This may be one reason to suspect that there is a relevant difference between public philosophical contexts and academic philosophical contexts. Anita L. Allen borrows from Dennis Thompson in showing why this might be the case: "Pressing for philosophical humility, Dennis Thompson argued that 'philosophical principles cannot be applied in any straightforward way to practical problems and policies'" (Thompson 2007). Indeed, he argued, far from principles suggesting logical pathways for solving practical problems, practical problems can show the weaknesses in philosophical

principles, requiring their revision.”⁶⁷ In some sense, what Allen and Thompson recognize here is not new. Someone may offer a theory as to how the world works, and while that theory might sound good at first blush, problems arise when the theory is applied to specific cases. This dynamic plays out in Plato’s *Republic*, where Cephalus’s claim that “justice is paying one’s debts” encounters difficulties once one considers the case of returning weapons to a murderer.⁶⁸ Importantly, Cephalus is drawing not from a tradition of abstract theorizing, but from his own lived experience.⁶⁹ As a wealthy Athenian businessman, thinking of justice in terms of repayment of debts is only natural for him.⁷⁰ When doing public philosophy, students and audience members are often more familiar with specific practical problems than trained philosophers are, just as Cephalus was more familiar with the world of business than Socrates. Any given audience member at a public philosophy event will have had direct experiences that the public philosopher has not had, both out of considerations involving the disparity life experiences for those of different identities, and simply because each human experience is unique in some way. (E.g., “Your parents were religious, but mine weren’t...” “You had to face structural injustices, but I didn’t...” etc.) Similarly, while we may be intimately familiar with principled theories, our interlocutors can present cases that

⁶⁷ Anita L. Allen, “Getting Close: Philosophers Engage with Government and NGOS,” p. 361.

⁶⁸ See *Republic*, book I.

⁶⁹ What makes a lived experience specifically a *lived* experience and not just an experience? While I won’t endeavor to answer that satisfactorily here, one distinction could be between a lived experience and an *imagined* experience. One may feel, as I have, that upon reading *All Quiet on the Western Front* one has experienced (in at least some sense) the horrors of war, or at least has enough experience of them to know that one would like to avoid experiencing them firsthand, and to seek the prevention of others experiencing them firsthand.

⁷⁰ Language also bears on how we think about philosophical and (sometimes) theological matters. The English language – through metaphors, cognates, etc. – often shapes how we conceive of sometimes highly abstract matters. Consider the language in the Lord’s prayer, “debts... debtors... trespasses...”

pose difficulties for those theories.⁷¹ Instead of instinctually or reactively defending those theories, however, self-forgetfulness allows us to be receptive to what our students and audience members are saying. After all, if we are not properly attentive to what our audience members are saying, then we cannot effectively offer an appropriate response. While I may be a committed utilitarian in research journals and at academic conferences, identifying as such is usually unhelpful in the more exploratory, plausibly egalitarian spaces envisioned by public philosophers. We must often forget our favorite theories or presuppositions if we are to be a properly receptive public philosopher. So, there is reason to believe that self-forgetfulness has epistemic value in at least the limited sense that self-forgetfulness has the potential to allow us to be properly receptive to our interlocutors. We are better able to listen to and learn from the public if we are self-forgetful.⁷²

Beyond the temptation to defend a favorite theory or principled philosophical worldview, public philosophers face the temptation to prioritize a certain kind of

⁷¹ Agnes Callard writes of a division of labor between Socrates and his interlocutors that makes the Socratic dialogue so powerful. While his interlocutors search for truth, Socrates is concerned with avoiding falsity, giving rise to the now classic dynamic where an interlocutor will put forth a theory and Socrates will offer a refutation of that theory. However, there is no principled reason why the philosopher should be the one refuting, whereas the non-philosophy does the initial theorizing. See Callard, *Open Socrates*.

⁷² Notice that humility arguably achieves this same end, on Callahan's view. If we are free from distracting pride, then ostensibly we will be better able to attend to our interlocutors in public philosophical contexts. However, as I hope to show in more detail later on, self-forgetfulness is more beneficial than humility in public philosophical contexts because not only does it prevent us from being distracted by pride, it prevents us from being *distracted by ourselves*. Perhaps we have all encountered the kind of person for whom giving advice seems to mean speaking to a younger version of herself. When you ask her what she thinks you should do, she tells you what it would have been appropriate *for her* to do. While not distracted by pride, she is distracted by herself in ways that may be epistemically harmful. Often, what is right for you to do in each situation will be different from what is right for her to do in that situation. To give *you* advice, she must be self-forgetful – she must have you in mind and not herself.

analytic style of doing philosophy that seeks to conceptualize or name anything “important” that may come up in conversation. A student or interlocutor, for example, might say that they want to describe the way things *are* rather than the way they *should* be. As a reply, and a not unhelpful one, the public philosopher might give names to these concepts. They might suggest that the student or interlocutor wants to make a descriptive claim rather than a normative one. While the usefulness or unusefulness of such suggestions may depend on a case-by-case basis, there is the risk of seeking to reduce *anything* of significance to concepts and terminology. Andrea Christelle points out that there “is a humility in recognizing that not all matters of significance are captured by or improved through analysis. Nor are they all linguistic or conceptual. When we experience something profound, the first move is usually to put a name to it, but there are experiences that open us to non-cognitive modes of affect that can be particularly soothing, healing, or inspirational.”⁷³ Again, a certain kind of self-forgetfulness is ameliorative here. Most philosophers are tempted to analyze concepts as they come up, or to provide terminology for what our students and interlocutors observe. In many cases, however, this is neither necessary nor practical for the public philosopher. A philosopher engaged in, for example, P4C would not be able to find the time to give an analysis or concept for each student’s contribution, despite their temptation to do so. Active listening and encouraging dialogue between students are better uses of the public philosopher’s time, which entail a degree of self-forgetfulness.

⁷³ Andrea Christelle, “Philosophy in Nature as a Kind of Public Philosophy,” p. 284. Note that for Christelle, our aim as public philosophers may sometimes be toward what is “soothing, healing, or inspirational,” none of which are epistemic goals. To say that public philosophy has epistemic goals is not to say that these are its *only* goals.

It is often more useful to be receptive to what one's students are saying than it is to fit what they are saying into a conceptual mold, though this might be appropriate in a university classroom or seminar. This model of doing public philosophy – one that takes self-forgetfulness as crucially important – departs significantly from a critique leveled against public philosophy by Agnes Callard. Jack Weinstein notes that for her, “academic philosophy is superior to public philosophy for multiple reasons: (1) “The institutional structure [of academic philosophy] . . . make[s] it possible for me to tell [the students] to be philosophers. I instruct them to engage directly with questions . . . and, amazingly enough, they do it.” (2) Students ask questions even though “I don’t promise them answers, let alone helpful ones.” And, (3) even though some students find it pleasurable, “they have to do the reading, come to class, write papers – whether or not they enjoy it.”⁷⁴ The image provided by Callard places the philosopher at the center of power, at least in the context of the university classroom, and she even seems to suggest that philosophy survives or at least flourishes as a direct result of that power. But public philosophy is different. In most cases, those with whom we do public philosophy are doing so *voluntarily* or at least not within the hierarchical structure of the classroom.⁷⁵ The reality is, one which Callard recognizes, that public philosophers cannot simply rely on institutional authority in order to get the public to think and dialogue in ways that are more philosophical. Often, we must invite others to do philosophy with us, and establishing spaces where diverse voices are encouraged to

⁷⁴ Jack Russell Weinstein, “The Case Against Public Philosophy,” p. 30.

⁷⁵ See Barry Lam, “Public Philosophy through Narrative,”

dialogue with ourselves and one another is one way to make such spaces more appealing. By practicing self-forgetfulness, we are able to more freely participate in the activity of philosophy with our students and members of the public, rather than dictating what it is and should look like.

Chapter 2: Graciousness and Public Philosophy

“The world reveals itself to those who travel on foot.”

- Werner Herzog⁷⁶

1. Introduction

Arguably, one of the defining features of public philosophy is that it takes truth and truth-searching as being fundamentally *rhizomatic*, that is, as being in an important sense decentralized and non-hierarchical. Public philosophy is, in many cases, a practical effort to establish a sense of dialogue and collaboration between formally trained, academic philosophers and the broader public.⁷⁷ But it is not always obvious how academic philosophers and the broader public ought to relate to one another. What is clear, however, is that in most cases, philosophers engaging in public philosophy will have much more training and expertise – at least within philosophy – than their audience members. While training and expertise provide a clear benefit insofar as academic philosophers draw from an established literature, rely on reasoning skills inculcated through training in logic, and can more accurately delineate between what is and isn't philosophy, it can also serve as a potential barrier between an academic philosopher and their audience members when participating in public philosophy. Members of the public may feel as though they are not intelligent or knowledgeable

⁷⁶ Peter Gwin, “Werner Herzog: ‘The world reveals itself to those who travel on foot, ’” National Geographic, August 24, 2020. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/article/werner-herzog-interview-on-bruce-chatwin-film-nomad>

⁷⁷ See Lee McIntyre, “What Is Public Philosophy?” and John Altmann and Bryan W. Van Norden, “Interactions Between Professionalized and Non-Professionalized Philosophers.”

enough to “do philosophy” in a way that might be acceptable to someone with expertise in the field. And the features of this problem may look different depending on the audience in question. The term “public philosophy” arguably covers a highly diverse range of efforts to disseminate philosophy more widely, from teaching philosophy on the elementary school level (P4C) to coaching high school students in Ethics Bowl debates to discussing the ethics of AI with the general museum-going public. While adult audience members may have their own training and expertise – say, in finance, technology, or medicine – many of our younger audience members and students do not, and even in cases where our audience members are well-educated with specialized knowledge, there remains the fact that we are making an effort to converse with the public about *our own* area of expertise rather than theirs. Imagine a case where an oncologist wishes to hold a conversation with us about diagnosing various forms of cancer. We would invariably feel at a disadvantage within the conversation in virtue of our relative lack of expertise within the domain. While I will not argue that *all* members of the public must feel similarly intimidated by philosophers’ relative wealth of knowledge and expertise within philosophy, I do want to suggest that many members of the public recognize an unequal status between themselves and academic philosophers when it comes to discussing or “doing” philosophy. I will argue that this sense of unequal status can serve as a potential barrier to good public philosophy and that *graciousness*, as a virtue, can help public philosophy fulfill its ambitions to create a more equal environment where academic philosophers can learn as much from the public as the public can learn from them.

2. Graciousness vs. Other Virtues

Little attention has been given to graciousness in the philosophical literature. Much that has been written, moreover, addresses graciousness in a religious context.⁷⁸ There is no reason to suppose, however, that a secular account of graciousness cannot or should not be given, and some of the most powerful accounts of graciousness in the literature do not make explicitly religious assumptions when providing an account of graciousness in everyday life, despite the religiosity of their authors or the books and journals in which they are published.⁷⁹ That there is *such a thing* as graciousness should not be doubted either. To borrow from Heidi Giannini, “We frequently describe a person who gives of her time or material resources for another’s benefit as gracious.”⁸⁰ Furthermore, we may describe the loser of a chess match as a “gracious loser,” or we may even say that someone is charitable more or less graciously.⁸¹ Perhaps more thoroughly than any other in the recent philosophical literature, Heidi Giannini has defended an account of graciousness and how it may be defined. She is careful to distinguish graciousness from generosity, while recognizing some of the two virtues’ common features. She admits that many paradigmatic cases of graciousness involve giving but argues that the examples of graciously losing a game and ungraciously giving to the needy show that graciousness and generosity are not equivalent. On

⁷⁸ See Heidi Giannini, “On Graciousness,” in *Faith and Virtue Formation: Christian Philosophy in Aid of Becoming Good*.

⁷⁹ E.g., Rebecca DeYoung in *Faith and Philosophy*.

⁸⁰ Giannini, p. 259.

⁸¹ Those who seem charitable merely in order to win praise or to “lord it over” those to whom they give cannot be said to be “gracious” in a traditional sense.

Giannini's view, one can be gracious but not generous, as when one graciously loses a game, or generous but not gracious, as when one gives to others to "lord it over" them or to establish a sense of superiority.⁸² Here, I will follow Giannini's view that graciousness and generosity are not reducible to each other.

Giannini is also careful to distinguish graciousness from humility and modesty. Indeed, there often seems to be a close connection between graciousness and humility. Joseph Kupfer, for example, has commented, "We often think of a gracious person as one with humility."⁸³ This seems to ring true. A gracious person is not arrogant, nor do they have a habit of bragging about themselves or their accomplishments. But what is humility? A variety of perspectives have been offered, but Norvin Richards defines humility as "having a proper perspective" on oneself.⁸⁴ If we revisit the two counterexamples given earlier, that of the gracious loser and the ungracious giver, we find humility in the case of the loser, and a lack of humility in the case of the giver. The loser can accept the fact that they have lost, showing that they are willing and able to accept their own limitations,⁸⁵ while the giver wishes to emphasize their elevated status over others, the opposite of humility. But Giannini points out that humility seems to involve one's attitude about oneself, whereas graciousness involves one's ability to communicate something about one's relative status to others. On Giannini's view, one can be humble in isolation, but one cannot be gracious in isolation. Here, as with

⁸² Ibid., 259-260.

⁸³ Kupfer, Joseph. 1998. "Generosity of Spirit," *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 32: 357-68.

⁸⁴ Cited in Kellenberger, "Humility," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 323.

⁸⁵ Giannini, in her discussion of the distinction between graciousness and humility, cites Nancy Snow's account of humility: "[t]o be a humble person is to recognize your limitations, to take them seriously, and thereby foster a realism in attitudes and behavior regarding self and others."

generosity, I will accept Giannini's distinction. She writes that "humility is typically described as concerned solely with an agent's attitudes toward himself [or herself], while graciousness highlights the communicative function of human behavior in certain interpersonal contexts."⁸⁶ Humility has something to do with the kind of attitude we have about ourselves, whereas graciousness involves our ability to *communicate* something about that attitude to others. Graciousness is essentially relational, whereas humility is not.

Finally, Giannini distinguishes between modesty and graciousness. Defining or adequately describing modesty, however, is arguably even more troublesome than humility. Scott Woodcock, for example, differentiates three sets of accounts of modesty, namely, 1.) presentation accounts, 2.) cognitive accounts, and 3.) evaluative accounts.⁸⁷ According to Woodcock, presentational accounts "are primarily grounded in the ways that agents present themselves to others."⁸⁸ Because, on Giannini's view, graciousness looks most similar to the presentational accounts of modesty, she directs her attention only to these accounts to show that graciousness and modesty are distinct. Woodcock and Michael Ridge provide one such presentational account, arguing that to be "modest is to be disposed to de-emphasize your accomplishments for the right reasons."⁸⁹ This account of modesty is very similar to the account of graciousness given by Giannini, which is that "graciousness is a disposition to undercut contextual

⁸⁶ Giannini, p. 263.

⁸⁷ Woodcock, 2008.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ridge 2000, 275; Woodcock 2008, 18.

indications of one party's superior standing over another out of sensitivity to the other's discomfort with the suggested difference in status or worth."⁹⁰ Both humility and graciousness feature a de-emphasizing of one's accomplishments or a de-emphasizing of one's "superior standing," which ostensibly includes class, educational, or socio-economic differences between the gracious individual and the one to whom they are gracious. In section 3 of this essay, I will provide an account of the 1) practical, 2) moral, and 3) epistemic benefits of graciousness in public philosophy, an enterprise in which "contextual indications of one party's superior standing over another" are bound to emerge. For now, it's important to note that, while similar to modesty, graciousness becomes more obviously distinct when we consider everyday instances of how we use the terms "graciousness" and "modesty". Giannini writes that "it makes sense to describe a forgiver as gracious, but not modest."⁹¹ Furthermore, cases like the gracious forgiver suggest a broader, conceptual incongruity between graciousness and modesty, on Giannini's view. Recall that for Woodcock and Ridge, modesty involves de-emphasizing one's *accomplishments*. This suggests that *there are, in fact, accomplishments* to emphasize⁹² or de-emphasize for the modest person, whereas in the case of the gracious person, their social superiority need not be factual, but merely indicated or implied. *Prima facie*, then, we have reason to believe that graciousness is distinct from modesty, humility, and generosity.

⁹⁰ Giannini, p. 272.

⁹¹ Ibid., 265.

⁹² As in the case of bragging. See Fritz Allhoff, "What is Modesty?" *International Journal of Applied Philosophy*, vol. 23: 165–87. 2010.

3. The Benefits of Graciousness in Public Philosophy

In the introduction to this chapter, I suggested that graciousness, as a virtue, has the potential to help public philosophy achieve some of its loftier goals, such as inculcating a decentralized and non-hierarchical space in which philosophical thinking and knowledge formation can happen. I also suggested some settings, e.g., an elementary or high school classroom, where graciousness may be particularly beneficial and appropriate. But there is wide disagreement not only on the value of public philosophy, but also on what forms public philosophy can or should take.⁹³ Philosophy in elementary school classrooms and P4C more generally, for example, is arguably not public philosophy since the students' learning happens in a typical school setting. It will be important, then, to briefly state what I take public philosophy to be, what its goals are, and in what contexts graciousness can be beneficial or can help public philosophy achieve its aims. Then, I will distinguish between three sets of benefits to public philosophy achieved by the gracious public philosopher, arguing that graciousness has the potential to ameliorate 1) practical, 2) moral, and 3) epistemic problems confronted by public philosophy.

In broad strokes, public philosophy is, as I've come to know it, essentially any philosophical⁹⁴ activity or teaching done outside of the traditional university setting.

⁹³ See Jack Russell Weinstein "The Case Against Public Philosophy," 26; Evelyn Brister, "The Value of Public Philosophy," 41; S.B. Schoonover, "Public Philosophy Through Film," 221; and Barry Lam, "Public Philosophy Through Narrative," 249.

⁹⁴ As in other contexts, strictly defining what is and isn't philosophy proves troublesome, but I take it that trained philosophers have a grasp of what is and isn't philosophy, if only a tenuous one, and are able to differentiate between philosophy and other activities. "Some of what a public may regard as important philosophy might rightly be regarded by professional philosophers as something else, perhaps self-help," writes Jason Stanley. But "[o]ther times, professional philosophers might just be

This is a broad definition, and furthermore, it best accounts for public philosophy in the United States, as other nations, such as France, introduce philosophy at an earlier age and in non-university settings.⁹⁵ What may be an instance of public philosophy for an American may be merely a typical component of the educational curriculum for a French person. Because I live and work in the United States, and many of the authors in the philosophical literature on public philosophy do so as well, I will tailor my notion of public philosophy to conform with what is currently happening in the United States, while recognizing that public philosophy may have a different scope in other cultures.⁹⁶ As things stand in the United States currently, most people are first exposed to an in-depth introduction to philosophy while in college. While this system arguably protects a sense of the rigor with which philosophy should be done, it is far from egalitarian.

In 2021, the percentage of people over the age of 24 who had completed a bachelor's degree or higher was just 37.9%. Less than half of American adults 25 years old and older had earned a bachelor's degree, implying that less than half of Americans have the opportunity to take philosophy courses in the traditional university setting. Furthermore, as of 2021, men seem to be at a disadvantage when it comes to educational attainment, with 29.4% of men age 25 and older having completed a high

wrong about the scope of philosophy.” Jason Stanley, Foreword, *A Companion to Public Philosophy*, xix

⁹⁵ Catherine Porter, “What Does It All Mean? Once a Year, French Students Try to Explain,” *New York Times* <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/06/19/world/europe/france-education-high-school-philosophy.html>

⁹⁶ I think there is an argument to be made that public philosophy is simply better developed in France, even if this term isn't explicitly attached to philosophical education, philosophical broadcasts, etc. This argument appeals to me, though an adequate defense of this argument would go beyond the scope of this paper.

school diploma or GED as their *highest* level of educational attainment, compared with 26.5% of women age 25 and older. In the same year, of the adults aged 25 and older who had completed a bachelor's degree or more, 53.1% were women and 46.9% were men.⁹⁷ In a time when political polarization often falls along gendered lines,⁹⁸ I believe it is important that men have more or less equal access to philosophical spaces as women, especially considering how our culture and society remain deeply patriarchal and, for better or for worse, men often exercise more power than women. So, if we want a more philosophical populace, this will require us to break philosophy out of its university setting in order to circumvent much of the unequal access that Americans have to higher education. Here, I follow Plato in assuming that a virtuous and well-educated populace will benefit most, if not all, members in a society. So, if my fellow citizens are better reasoners and can think deeply about philosophical topics, notably ethics, I can expect that you and I will benefit as a result. At the very least, we can hope that the general public may become better equipped to participate rationally and responsibly in civic life, and perhaps even become better voters.

In the previous two paragraphs, I hope to have established (or at least suggested) two things. First, that access to philosophy teachers and professors in the United States is limited, and that, *prima facie*, we have reason to suspect that easing access to philosophy education will help make the dissemination of knowledge and critical reasoning skills more equitable. If we take equity as a good, then public philosophy

⁹⁷ <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2022/educational-attainment.html>

⁹⁸ See Jeong, Hyein and Syed, Romilla, "Gendered Disinformation and Social Media Polarization" (2025). ICIS 2025 Proceedings. 17.

serves this good. Secondly, I hope to have suggested that a more philosophical public will be a better public, and that a better public serves the collective good. So, in an important sense, my attraction to public philosophy is self-interested, just as Socrates⁹⁹ and Plato may have been self-interested when they set out to do philosophy with their fellow citizens in Athens, with the hope of helping them become better people.¹⁰⁰ A public philosopher need not be altruistic, though they should aim to benefit others and should expect to be able to do so, given enough training and experience. We might even compare public philosophy to Voltaire's injunction that "we must cultivate our gardens,"¹⁰¹ the implication being that it is one thing to argue in ivory towers about abstract theories that have little to no bearing on the average person's life, while it is another to try one's best to ensure that one's community members are thinking and reasoning in philosophically appropriate ways that are conducive to truth and well-being. Hilary Putnam, for example, may have been mistaken about one thing or another, and as professional philosophers, we are often incentivized to care that he did so.¹⁰² We may even invest a great deal of time and energy writing an article explaining this error, we might get it published, earn respect from our colleagues, and so on. But if those in our communities lack philosophical cultivation, this concerns our communities as a

⁹⁹ While I take Socrates to represent a kind of quintessential public philosopher (if we can pardon the anachronism), this thought is not new. See Lee McIntyre, "What is Public Philosophy?" in *A Companion to Public Philosophy*.

¹⁰⁰ Lee McIntyre, "What is Public Philosophy?," p. 3. Of course, Athens in the 5th Century B.C.E had only a fraction of population of most modern nation states, allowing their influence to more easily shape the political scene in Athens, which would ultimately culminate in Socrates' execution.

¹⁰¹ See Voltaire, *Candide*, trans. Philip Littell (New York: The Modern Library, 1997), 149.

¹⁰² This, of course, is not to imply that he was in fact mistaken about anything. The example here is purely hypothetical.

whole, including ourselves. On my view, it is often as much of a net benefit to the world for us to concern ourselves with the philosophical progress of those in our immediate communities as it is to focus on the “state of play” within academic philosophy.

But how can graciousness help us achieve this benefit? It is no secret that philosophical discussions are often fraught with tension. For many people, once their deeply cherished beliefs or self-perceptions are threatened, they become tense, nervous, or defensive – or perhaps even sorrowful. I recall a talk here at UC Santa Cruz given by Agnes Callard, in which she recounted one such case. Keep in mind that it is often easy to mistakenly inspire emotions in another that we do not intend, and I do not believe that Callard intended to provoke the reaction that she did. While teaching class one day at the University of Chicago, Callard was aiming to emphasize standards of correctness for the act of thinking. To drive this point home, she seems to have equated *being able to think* with *being able to think well*. At one point, a student raised her hand and claimed that she was able to think. This claim may strike many of us as innocent enough. Callard, however, retorted that the student *thinks* she is able to think, but isn’t actually able to think. And keep in mind, the University of Chicago is highly selective, and many students there pride themselves on their intelligence and their ability to reason their way successfully through the world. As Callard recounted the story, the student ended up in tears because she made the student feel as though she couldn’t think.¹⁰³ Here, Callard displayed a lack of graciousness because she made the student feel as though she possessed an ability the student lacked, namely, the ability to think.

¹⁰³ Agnes Callard, <https://thi.ucsc.edu/agnes-callard-inquisitive-politics/>

Many responses were available to her besides the ungracious one she offered. She could have said, for example, that thinking is all well and good, but *it is another thing to think well*. Recall that for Giannini, graciousness is “a disposition to respond to contextual indications of one party’s elevated standing over another by downplaying the significance of those indications out of sensitivity to the other’s perceived or reasonably anticipated discomfort with the difference in standing.”¹⁰⁴ Callard achieved the exact opposite – she emphasized her elevated standing over her student by claiming that her student is incapable of an ability she is capable of, namely, thinking. And while Callard was speaking with a university student and not a member of the general public, public philosophers face the same risk of ungraciousness, and perhaps with greater frequency. Those with whom we engage in public settings may be unaware of the critical perspective with which we view the world, and questions may even be misinterpreted as statements. For example, the simple question “Why do you think that?” may be misinterpreted in some contexts as a suggestion that the interlocutor’s judgement is mistaken or misguided. The word *why*, in fact, often seems to provoke these kinds of responses. So, while we may wish to express curiosity or to get an answer to our question so that we may better help our interlocutor reason their way through our topic of discussion, we may inadvertently offend and show accidental ungraciousness.¹⁰⁵ So ungraciousness is a risk within philosophy more generally and in public philosophy specifically. Now, let’s turn to some more specific cases in public philosophy to see

¹⁰⁴ Giannini, “On Graciousness,” 268.

¹⁰⁵ Giannini discusses the possibility of one who, lacking self-awareness, may *wish* to communicate graciousness but who nevertheless communicates ungraciousness.

how graciousness can provide practical, ethical, and epistemic benefits to the enterprise.

3.1 Practical Benefits of Graciousness in Public Philosophy

More than most other philosophical activities, public philosophy has an ineliminable practical component to it. This is not to say that its *ends* are ineliminably practical,¹⁰⁶ but rather that the successful orchestration of public philosophy often requires practical skills that are not always necessary in a university setting. Its *means* are ineliminably practical. University professors, in most cases, are not tasked with managing problematic behavior from students, nor are they usually tasked with advertising for their courses, nor are they tasked with persuading their students to try their best, make a sincere effort, and argue in good faith. Public philosophers often assume these tasks. Elementary, middle, and high school students often struggle with behavioral problems that have either been phased out by the time they are college-aged, or the selection process for university admission promotes selection for students who will function well within a university setting and meet the university's expectations. In many cases where a public philosopher works with these K-12 students, they are aided by a teacher at the school who has experience with their students and can better manage their behavior than the philosopher can. But this is not to say that problems don't come up for the public philosopher. A student may say something in conversation merely for shock value, or they may hoard the yarn¹⁰⁷ in an attempt to win attention or establish a

¹⁰⁶ Though I ultimately believe this to be the case, if we take a more wholistic view of the goods philosophy may provide for society.

¹⁰⁷ Matthew Lipman and Ann Margaret Sharp, "P4C: Philosopher's toolkit."

hegemony over the conversation. Perhaps most crucially, the public philosopher must have enough openness to engage with these students to earn their trust. After all, the idea of a “philosopher” visiting the classroom every week to discuss strange questions¹⁰⁸ may be new for many students, and engaging in these discussions may require students to overcome some initial nervousness. Furthermore, in cases involving younger students, there is an unequal power dynamic and consequent unease felt by many students in virtue of the philosopher’s heightened status as a well-educated adult who is here to discuss a topic the students may know nothing about. What might this philosopher say? What authority do they have, and what can they do? The answers to these questions are not immediately obvious to a child who is meeting a philosopher involved in P4C. There is much potential for students to feel unease in virtue of the stranger’s superior social status, and consequently, students may hesitate to engage in discussion or find themselves at a loss as to how to contribute to the discussion. So, a practical question arises – how do we motivate audiences of diverse ages, positionalities, and backgrounds to even start engaging in philosophical discussion?

Given Giannini’s account of graciousness, it is not difficult to see how this virtue, if properly habituated in an individual (which may take time and practice), can aid the public philosopher in reducing the potential unease felt by our students and audience members. Again, I accept the description¹⁰⁹ of graciousness as “a disposition

¹⁰⁸ For example, one question I discussed with the 4th grade class at Pacific Elementary in Davenport, CA, was: “If a shoe is big enough to live in, is it still a shoe or is it a house?” To paraphrase one student’s answer: The only thing about the shoe that has changed is its size, and what we decide to call it after that is a matter of convention. The object, in other words, is not defined by the name we give it.

¹⁰⁹ Generally, I am skeptical of definitions and codified descriptions of particular concepts and would not presume to formulate one myself. However, having an idea of a reasonable description for a

to undercut contextual indications of one party's superior standing over another out of sensitivity to the other's perceived or reasonably anticipated discomfort with the suggested difference in status or worth."¹¹⁰ It is intuitive to me that there actually *is* a reasonably anticipated discomfort consequent upon a suggested difference in status or worth in most instances of public philosophy. The public philosopher has training and expertise and an esoteric subject often associated with such towering figures as Plato and Aristotle, whereas the general member of the public does not, though they may feel as though they are teeming with ideas to express or intuitions about various philosophical topics. The public philosopher has authority in virtue of their credentials in these contexts. It requires graciousness to undercut this tension and put their audience a little at ease so that genuine philosophical discussion may begin. But how might this look, *exactly*? This might look as simple as reorganizing the space in such a way as to visibly reduce the suggestion of superiority. While perhaps seemingly inconsequential, I have found again and again, across contexts and with varying demographics, that organizing chairs in a circle and sitting down with the students is a powerful way to communicate to students that, at least for the duration of our conversation, our voices will be considered more or less equal – including mine – and that each student's voice is worthy of respect and consideration. Seeing the public philosopher seated in a position that is equal to all others in the conversation reduces

concept that is responsive to the literature on graciousness is helpful for keeping my account of graciousness' benefits for public philosophy on track. As stated earlier, and as Giannini points out as well, the philosophical literature on graciousness is sparse as of yet, and Giannini's paper is one of very few in the literature that explicitly focuses on graciousness as a virtue, despite a recent resurgence of interest in virtue among academic philosophers.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 258.

the sense that they are the sole authority in the conversation, though a latent sense of that authority will remain. Once an initial conversation has begun, the tendency, in many cases, is that philosophy advertises itself.¹¹¹ Many people, particularly younger persons (e.g., K-12 students), find such fascinating and arguably unresolved questions as “Is it ever okay to lie?”¹¹² or “How do we know we all see color the same way?” engaging because nearly everyone in the group has thoughts on these issues and has something to contribute.¹¹³ By being given a chance to *participate* in the activity of philosophy with their classmates and with someone who is equipped to guide them through a variety of considerations, sometimes asking questions here, suggesting solutions there, students find that they and their classmates have interesting and sometimes conflicting perspectives that call for further inquiry and discussion. By showing enough graciousness to help students and other audiences overcome that initial barrier to inquiry and discussion, we often find that the philosophical impulse is widespread, if often concealed in everyday life. So, by being a gracious public philosopher rather than an ungracious one, we invite the public to engage in philosophical activity toward which they already incline, in many cases.

Our three practical problems at the beginning of this section were 1) managing problematic behavior from students and (potentially) from audience members, 2)

¹¹¹ This, unfortunately, is not always the case in large lecture university settings.

¹¹² Another question from my time at Pacific Elementary that sparked a fascinating discussion. Some students shared meaningful ethical dilemmas they had experienced at home as examples and counterexamples, or as avenues for further consideration of the problem.

¹¹³ While this has been my experience, see Gareth B. Matthews, “The Child as Natural Philosopher,” in *Growing Up with Philosophy* for a formal defense of this view.

advertising philosophy, and 3) persuading their students to try their best, make a sincere effort, and argue in good faith. I will conclude this section by reviewing each in turn.

The first problem, as I have already mentioned, is often shared by others, whether that be a classroom teacher or the host and facilitators of a “Night of Ideas.”¹¹⁴ But insofar as misbehavior is often the result of discomfort on the misbehavior’s part, graciousness may ease that discomfort by instilling the suggestion of a more equal status between parties. This helps to establish a sense of trust and shared responsibility. Perhaps teachers, too, have the intuition that graciousness is important in their work, but it is not my place to speculate about their experiences in this essay. I will say that in my experience, skillful teaching and classroom management certainly *seem* gracious when I have seen them done well, so I would not be surprised if this were found to be the case. Secondly, public philosophers must often *persuade* members of the public that what they have to offer is worthwhile, which is not always easy, especially when what they have to offer is philosophy. But by inviting students and other members of the public to engage with them philosophically on a more equal footing, public philosophers find that the desire for philosophical discussion is often already there, and that it is only a matter of easing barriers to access that conversation, including overcoming any discomfort or unease one’s students or audience members may feel in virtue of the fact that they are being prompted to discuss an esoteric topic with someone who is much more thoroughly trained in that topic than they are.¹¹⁵ Again, graciousness

¹¹⁴ <https://nightofideas.org/santa-cruz/>

¹¹⁵ See John Altmann and Bryan W. Van Norden, “Interactions Between Professionalized and Non-Professionalized Philosophers,” in *A Companion to Public Philosophy*, for a fuller discussion of the interpersonal dynamic between those who do and those who do not have philosophical training.

promises to help reduce barriers to engaging in philosophical discussion by reducing the public's sense that there is unequal status or worth between themselves and public philosophers. Finally, graciousness can help foster a sense of *something shared*, whether that be the conversation in which graciousness is expressed, or the perceived status or worth of the gracious person and the one to whom they are gracious. Once this kind of dynamic has been established, the task of facilitating a good-faith argument or discussion becomes easier. After all, I have already displayed a degree of good faith by showing a genuine display of graciousness,¹¹⁶ and one hopes that, by and large, most audience members will follow my example, especially if they have become interested in the conversation, which many audience members ultimately do. So, the virtue of graciousness has the potential to act as a communicative virtue that impresses upon the audience a certain attitude or disposition that the public philosopher has, one that eases tension and social discomfort, and promises to ease some of the practical problems public philosophers may face when introducing such an esoteric and frequently intimidating topic to the public.

3.2 Ethical Benefits of Graciousness in Public Philosophy

Recall that at the root of our discussion lies the threat of a “suggested difference in status or worth,” and that the role of graciousness is to reduce this suggested difference. Two questions present themselves here. The first is whether there is or isn't actually the risk of a “suggested difference in status or worth” in

¹¹⁶ It does not seem intuitive to speak of “false graciousness,” though we may speak of “false modesty,” and so on. Giannini raises this point on page 269 of “On Graciousness”.

public philosophical contexts. Some may argue that in most public philosophical contexts, there is no such suggestion. Take a couple of examples:

- 1.) If an academic philosopher hosts a podcast that is readily accessible to the public, using this platform to communicate to the public philosophical problems and inviting guests to share their perspectives on pressing issues that are also relevant to the public, there is no overt assumption that the philosopher's status or worth is suggested to be superior to that of their listeners.

It would be wonderful if this were the case, and in some sense, there's truth to the idea that the podcast host's status is not explicitly assumed to be superior to that of their listeners. After all, it is possible for high-ranking politicians, business magnates, astronauts, and so on to be members of the podcaster's audience. There is nothing in principle that suggests that the podcast host *must* be in a socio-economically privileged position relative to that of their listeners. Surely Barack Obama, if he were to tune in to the podcast, would likely be considered to have a higher socio-economic status than a philosophy professor hosting a podcast. Moreover, it is often these kinds of audience members that the philosopher wants, because if they can influence highly influential persons, those persons can, in turn, pass that influence on to others. Being a philosophy professor is but one profession among others, and there's no principled reason to assume that those in this profession are superior to others. Unfortunately, the reality is not so rosy. Statistics show that academics disproportionately come from privileged socio-economic backgrounds. According to *University World News*, "approximately

half of all academics come from the top 20% of the parental socio-economic status... rank distribution.”¹¹⁷ So, being an academic, in and of itself, statistically suggests a certain level of socio-economic privilege. And adequate training in philosophy requires enormous opportunity costs, where aspirants to the profession often devote upwards of 9 years of their adult lives to training and study in the field (four years for undergrad, five years for a doctorate, at the fastest). Most people do not have the time or resources to gain this level of expertise for themselves. The very fact of being in philosophy as a profession suggests some level of privilege relative to the broader public more generally, even if some members of that public are more socio-economically privileged than many philosophy professors.

It is not immediately obvious, however, how this perceived disparity in status, worth, or social standing can be overcome. It remains the case that academic philosophers must undergo years of training to build up the skills and knowledge base necessary for projects like a credible philosophy podcast, and that access to this training is limited. All things considered, it is probably good that this is the case. Credentials are an important part of determining what is and what is not a trustworthy source. Furthermore, I do not wish to imply that the host of a philosophy podcast is necessarily being *ungracious* by hosting the podcast. All I wish to say is that such a position of authority *does* seem to imply a disparity in terms of suggested status or worth, and that it is precisely in these sorts of cases that graciousness becomes ameliorative. So, rather

¹¹⁷ Nathan M Greenfield, “Study shows extent to which wealth shaped the professoriate,” January 11th, 2025: <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20250111062337784>

than claiming that the podcaster is ungracious, my claim is much more optimistic. The podcaster is extremely well-positioned to practice graciousness and thereby invite members of the public to participate in philosophy. Christine Swanton even goes so far as to argue that graciousness can *only* proceed from a superior position to an inferior one, though neither I nor Giannini fully accepts this view.¹¹⁸ Again, Giannini offers the case of a gracious loser as a counterexample, claiming that it would be odd to imagine that the loser is in a superior position relative to the winner.¹¹⁹ An ungracious loser, for what it is worth, displays ungraciousness insofar as they display indignation over the fact that they have lost, suggesting that they *ought* to have won, presumably because of some sense of superiority on their part. So, both graciousness and ungraciousness can arise from an ostensibly inferior position, though it is more common for graciousness and ungraciousness to arise in cases where there is the suggestion of superiority. Graciousness is also essentially communicative, in contrast to modesty, on Giannini's view. Recall that we may speak of someone as modest in isolation. Perhaps a poet writes in her journal that her poetry isn't very good, thereby revealing a disposition to de-emphasize her accomplishments "for the right reasons."¹²⁰ This would count as modesty, on both Ridge and Woodcock's view. Considerations aside about what "the right reasons" may be, it seems intuitive that one can be modest in isolation, especially when one has a disposition to downplay their accomplishments and think to

¹¹⁸ Christine Swanton, "A Challenge to Intellectual Virtue from Moral Virtue: The Case of Universal Love," *Metaphilosophy*, 2010.

¹¹⁹ Giannini, 265-266.

¹²⁰ According to Michael Ridge, "[t]o be modest is to be disposed to de-emphasize your accomplishments for the right reasons." See Ridge, Michael. 2000. "Modesty as a Virtue," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 37(3): 269–83.

themselves that their accomplishments are not as significant as they really are. Graciousness, on the other hand, seems to require someone *toward* whom we are gracious, and it requires that we communicate that graciousness to them in some way. All I wish to say for now is that credentialled philosophers in positions of authority and influence – including the podcaster in our example – are well-positioned to communicate graciousness in at least some way, and that this may go some way toward ameliorating some of the inequality that may exist between public philosophers and the broader public.

Let's consider another case:

2.) A trio of philosophy graduate students agrees to volunteer at the “ask-a-philosopher” table during this year’s Night of Ideas. One is in their first year, another in their sixth. The third is in their second year and is an international student. A wide amalgamation of visitors is in attendance, many of them academics and professors with diverse backgrounds ranging from STEM to humanities and the arts, with undergraduates and non-academics also in attendance. Our trio’s task is to respond as constructively as possible to the questions put to them by the visitors.

This scenario presents an interesting case. In many instances, the trio find themselves responding to questions put to them by university professors. Two members of the trio talk with one professor of digital media about whether philosophy can be meaningfully done through film. Their original question was whether society can ever come to a shared consensus on values. (Somehow, a

mention of the recent *Dune* movies bridged the gap between these two topics.) This professor took a collaborative yet somewhat aloof attitude toward the conversation. They would correct some points the graduate students had made (they were not completely satisfied by our handling of the fact/value distinction), yet they seemed genuinely interested in hearing our perspective. If anything, I suspect this professor may have shown more graciousness towards *us*. At one point, they even asked if any of the three were faculty, and one of them ungraciously replied that they all were in their mid-20s. “You never know,” the professor replied. “There are prodigies out there.” The situation changed dramatically, however, when a non-academic from nearby Felton, California, asked, “Do we learn from the universe, or does the universe learn from us?” The best the trio could say was that it’s likely a mix of both, though there does seem to be some potentially troubling assumptions baked into the question. The sixth year’s answer was essentially that we can learn about others, and that others can learn about us – so it’s both. A rift, however, had emerged in the trio. The first year was not keen on entertaining the question and was turned off by some remarks the visitor from Felton had made that seemed woo and pseudo-scientific. In the case of the first year, the visitor from Felton was not adequately prepared for a meaningful philosophical conversation. While there is merit in recognizing that one’s starting assumptions in a conversation may be very different from one’s own, and that those differences in worldview may hamstring an otherwise productive conversation, I do believe that writing off any productive dialogue with those with whom we

disagree is an act of ungraciousness, as well as presumptuous,¹²¹ because we presume to know something about our interlocutor that we do not. Sure, our trio may be better educated and have a more accurate view of the world than the visitor from Felton, but it is exactly our task to help ensure that we help *them* become a better reasoner, too. To do otherwise would be to abandon our task as soon as it becomes inconvenient.

But our ethical obligations are not limited to our goal of inculcating better reasoning skills in our audience. John Altmann and Bryan Van Norden write of the potential for professional philosophers to learn from and collaborate with those outside of the discipline, using their own experience as an example. Van Norden is a professional philosopher working in academia, while Altmann is a disabled member of the disability community who has published popular works but does not have formal philosophical training in a university setting. They write:

The key lesson we learned from this experience, a lesson we think other professional/non-professional collaborators need to learn, is the importance of mutual respect and learning from each other's insights. Van Norden began this collaboration with the assumption that Altmann... had fresh insights that could lead him to read familiar texts in new ways and appreciate ethical issues that Van Norden had previously slighted.¹²²

They are also careful to note that Altmann is aware of Van Norden's expertise in Chinese philosophy and his experience as a successful academic and writing instructor. They emphasize that they can learn from "each other in a dialogue characterized by mutual respect."¹²³ One implication, here, is that Altmann may not always be met with

¹²¹ Thank you to E. Hande Tuna for pointing this out to me.

¹²² Altmann and Van Norden, "Interactions Between Professionalized and Non-Professionalized Philosophers," 392.

¹²³ Ibid., 393

respect. In fact, the view that disabled persons may have lower worth or standing is sometimes defended by philosophers who seek to apply theoretical ethical frameworks consistently to real-world cases.¹²⁴ But just as Jeremy Bentham, in his *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, takes it as self-evident or obvious that “[n]ature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure,”¹²⁵ it may be self-evident to anyone who has given disability serious thought that disability does not undermine human worth. Ludwig van Beethoven, after all, became deaf by the time he was in his mid-40s, and yet continued to make indispensable contributions to the history of music. Similarly, Altmann’s disabilities and lack of formal philosophical education did not prevent him from meaningfully contributing to the philosophical corpus of knowledge. In fact, through collaboration with Van Norden, Altmann was able to draw from his experiences to contribute to a co-authored piece in *The Stone* on how “Zhuangzi challenges conventional notions of disability as part of his critique of Confucian teleology.”¹²⁶ This marked the first time that *The Stone* had published a piece on the philosophy of disability, opening this domain up to a larger audience.

I use Altmann and Van Norden as an example to illustrate how professional philosophers often have much to learn from those outside the discipline. While it’s true that perhaps there is more to learn from some people than others, I take it that the virtue

¹²⁴ Consider Peter Singer’s principled utilitarian view that “that people with severe disabilities should not be considered persons and therefore have no rights or status in ethical issues.” Quoted in Gary W. McPherson and Dick Sobsey, “Rehabilitation: Disability Ethics Versus Peter Singer,” 1246.

¹²⁵ Jeremy Bentham, *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, 14.

¹²⁶ Altmann and Van Norden, “Professionalized and Non-Professionalized Philosophers,” 393.

of graciousness at least opens us to the *possibility* that we might gain something from hearing what non-professional philosophers have to say.¹²⁷ In fact, we may often learn things from non-professional philosophers that may be difficult to learn from those in the profession, perhaps because the profession – deliberately or otherwise – selects for those who do not have the features that make them reliable testifiers for certain kinds of knowledge. So, for example, if the profession selects for nondisabled people, then it may be hard to find someone with relevant personal experience with disability within the profession. In these sorts of cases, going outside of the discipline may promote knowledge formation and our broader epistemic goals, as philosophers. So not only is Van Norden being ethical by treating Altmann as someone worthy of respect and consideration, he is also being epistemically prudent, insofar as he recognizes that collaboration with non-philosophers like Altmann promises to be conducive to knowledge formation. This point foreshadows the next section of chapter, where I will discuss the epistemic advantages of graciousness for public philosophy.

In fact, both cases I have discussed – the case of the podcaster and the trio at the “ask-a-philosopher” table – reveal not only the potential ethical benefits of graciousness, but the potential epistemic benefits as well. According to Professor Ran Abramitzky, who co-directed the study on how wealth shapes academia and the

¹²⁷ My use of the term “non-professional philosophers” in this context is broader here than what Altmann and Van Norden have in mind, though their use of the term is not inconsistent with my argument. Here, by non-professional philosopher, I simply mean anyone who is not a professional philosopher, though they use this term to indicate philosophers (often autodidacts) who may contribute to philosophy – as Altmann did – but are not members of the profession. They are careful to note that this term does not imply that these are *unprofessional* philosophers. See Altmann and Van Norden, “Professionalized and Non-Professionalized Philosophers,” 392.

professoriate, “[a]cademics from poorer backgrounds introduce more novel scientific concepts but are less likely to receive recognition, as measured by citations, Nobel Prize nominations, and awards.”¹²⁸ This suggests that academics from poorer backgrounds potentially have more unique contributions to offer to their respective fields, implying that if academia values original contributions to scholarship, then the work of academics from poorer or non-standard backgrounds should be taken more seriously. In another chapter in this dissertation, we have already seen how the scientist Barbara McClintock spent most of her career ignored by her colleagues, possibly due to her positionality as a woman.¹²⁹ A diversity of backgrounds, positionalities, and perspectives promises to reap epistemic benefits for the academy. And as the case of Altmann and Van Norden illustrates, so-called “non-professional philosophers” who are often sidelined by the discipline¹³⁰ have much to contribute as well, often in virtue of those very factors that have resulted in their marginalization.¹³¹ This said, let’s turn to a fuller discussion of the epistemic merits of graciousness for public philosophy.

3.3 Epistemic Benefits of Graciousness in Public Philosophy

With some irony, Altmann and Van Norden go on to write that “It is the deepest hope of these authors that our collaboration was not an outlier but the embryonic stage

¹²⁸ Quoted in Greenfield, “Study shows extent to which wealth shaped the professoriate,” January 11th, 2025: <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20250111062337784>

¹²⁹ Rachel Fraser, “Against Humility,” *Aeon*. <https://aeon.co/essays/why-intellectual-humility-isnt-always-a-virtue>

¹³⁰ Altmann and Van Norden report that Altmann “has had to fight to overcome the institutional barriers that prevent most people in our society from fully realizing their intellectual potential.” Altmann and Van Norden, 389.

¹³¹ Shelley Tremain, “Situating disabled philosophers and philosophy of disability in philosophy.” *Biopolitical Philosophy* (2 October, 2019). <https://biopoliticalphilosophy.com/2019/10/02/situating-disabled-philosophers-and-philosophy-of-disability-in-philosophy> (accessed October 24, 2025).

of reconsidering who can philosophize and what becomes of philosophy when more room is made at the table.”¹³² Their collaboration is somewhat unique in that each party recognized that the other was able to contribute meaningfully to a shared project. Van Norden drew from his expertise in Chinese Philosophy and Zhuangzi, while Altmann drew from his experiences as a disabled person and as a member of the disabled community. But Altmann also describes himself as an “autodidact and independent scholar,”¹³³ implying a certain degree of felicity with philosophy already. The example of the “ask-a-philosopher” table from earlier, however, raises questions about the philosophical capabilities of an almost random sample of the public. Of course, the sample is not actually random, since the sample is self-selecting – only people who attend the Night of Ideas and find themselves drawn to the “ask-a-philosopher” will find themselves conversing with our trio of philosophers. But the example still shows a wide degree of variance in those whom public philosophers may encounter. Some hold many beliefs with which we would agree, and I count the digital media as falling in that camp. While we might disagree on, say, whether philosophy can be meaningfully done through film, we probably agree (in broad strokes) on what philosophy is, and that something without a mind cannot properly be said to know or learn anything, in contrast to the woman from Felton. I doubt a discussion with the professor would turn towards questions about whether the universe may “learn” something from us or our films, though we may ask if *people* can do this. So here we

¹³² Altmann and Van Norden, “Professional and Non-Professional Philosophers,” 393.

¹³³ Ibid., 389.

have a case where we might disagree with a member of the public about the starting assumptions they bring “to the table,” as it were. C. Thi Nguyen points out that it “seems like different intellectual communities no longer share basic foundational beliefs,”¹³⁴ and presumably *non*-intellectual communities no longer share basic foundational beliefs, as well. So, the question arises: Does graciousness offer any epistemic benefits to public philosophers, or does it bring epistemic risk? My answer, ultimately, will be that it’s likely a mix of both.

The potential for risk is fairly clear. Professionals with credentials have more expertise than those without them. Also, remember that because I am taking a broad view on what public philosophy may be, there is potentially a range of cases in which displaying graciousness involves more risk than others. The COVID-19 pandemic precipitated a wave of skepticism about expertise that arguably has not yet fully abated.¹³⁵ Perhaps even more now than ever, we can imagine and oftentimes identify what I will call ‘non-ideal epistemic agents.’ Examples of agents who fall into this category come readily to mind. These are the flat-earthers and anti-vaxxers. Now, before we proceed, it should be noted that there may be some doubt about the very category of “non-ideal epistemic agents.” Already, I’ve identified non-ideal epistemic agents as those who hold beliefs that are widely considered false. But one can be an ideal epistemic agent and still hold false beliefs,¹³⁶ so it is not enough that someone

¹³⁴ C. Thi Nguyen, “Escape the Echo Chamber,” *Aeon*.

¹³⁵ Rose Jacobs, “The Downfall (and Possible Salvation) of Expertise: Can experts win back the public’s trust?” November 30, 2020: <https://www.chicagobooth.edu/review/downfall-and-possible-salvation-expertise>

¹³⁶ A range of examples may suffice here, but among the most interesting cases are the Catholic scholars who attempted to discredit Galileo’s heliocentric model of the solar system. While hindsight

holds a false belief for them to be a non-ideal epistemic agent. Furthermore, Rachel Fraser argues in the context of her discussion of “intellectual virtues” that “[t]here are traits that are sometimes conducive to knowledge, and traits that are sometimes not. But there are no general rules about which traits are which, and so there is no way to classify, for all times and temperaments, our intellectual traits as ‘good’ or ‘bad’.”¹³⁷ Fraser’s view almost seems to imply a certain kind of epistemic particularism, where certain traits and dispositions (what others may call “virtues”) are knowledge conducive in some cases but not in others. But a person’s character is not the only reason – and perhaps not the primary reason – why someone may become a non-ideal epistemic agent. Increasingly, both epistemic bubbles and echo chambers have played an important role in the dissemination of knowledge and information in the internet age. Nguyen distinguishes between epistemic bubbles and echo chambers in this way: “[a]n epistemic bubble is when you don’t *hear* people from the other side,” while “[a]n echo chamber is what happens when you don’t *trust* people from the other side.”¹³⁸ Both epistemic bubbles and echo chambers are the consequence of an increasingly polarized online culture. But at least in the case of epistemic bubbles, it cannot be said that those who fall victim do so in virtue of the presence or absence of a certain intellectual trait, unless we fault them for a lack of curiosity. What is at fault is the individual’s *epistemic environment*, as it were.

vindicates Galileo, it should be remembered that at the time Galileo’s system was new and still unproven. By suppressing Galileo’s work, the scholars were arguably attempting to limit the influence of what would have been considered a fringe theory at the time. The overwhelming consensus, in Galileo’s day, was in favor of a geocentric solar system.

¹³⁷ Fraser, “Against Humility,” *Aeon*.

¹³⁸ Nguyen, “Escape the Echo Chamber,” *Aeon*. (Emphasis in the original.)

Can graciousness help us ameliorate this situation? I would argue that it can. While Nguyen recognizes that “[b]oth [epistemic bubbles and echo chambers] are social structures that systematically exclude sources of information,” and that they “[b]oth exaggerate their members’ confidence in their beliefs... they work in entirely different ways, and they require very different modes of intervention.”¹³⁹ Nguyen borrows from Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Frank Cappella in comparing echo chambers (but not epistemic bubbles) to cults.¹⁴⁰ While providing factual information and reducing barriers between intellectual and non-intellectual communities may help in the case of epistemic bubbles,¹⁴¹ reducing the influence of echo chambers requires that we “repair that broken trust” between those inside and those outside the echo chamber.¹⁴² So of the two phenomena, echo chambers appear more troublesome, but are also more promising areas for utilizing graciousness. Naturally, where there is distrust, suspicion and interpersonal discomfort abound. Recall that graciousness here functions to reduce any discomfort that may arise as a consequence of a supposed disparity in status or worth between two parties. Of all the populations skeptical of the COVID-19 vaccine, the reasons for skepticism among the African American population are among the most interesting. In a nation where researchers voluntarily conducted the unethical Tuskegee Syphilis Study, reasons for skepticism of expertise are unfortunately not always unfounded. Considering the Tuskegee Study, skepticism of the vaccine among African

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ See Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Frank Cappella, *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment*.

¹⁴¹ Nguyen claims that: “[w]e can pop an epistemic bubble simply by exposing its members to the information and arguments that they’ve missed.”

¹⁴² Ibid.

Americans seems more reasonable, perhaps even a responsible response to this nation's history of maligning their trust.¹⁴³ So, whereas we had initially classified anti-vaxxers as non-ideal epistemic agents, we see that their reasons for skepticism are not altogether poor.

Nguyen agrees that epistemic agents who find themselves “trapped” in echo chambers are not always epistemically vicious or altogether lacking in epistemic virtue. So, by employing the term “non-ideal epistemic agent,” one need not point to any character trait or habit on the part of the agent, but rather to the epistemic environment in which they are a part, or the epistemic environment in which they grew up. Nguyen gives the helpful example of a conscientious teenager who, while generally conscientious and not prone to bad-faith reasoning, nevertheless finds herself in an echo chamber through no fault of her own. A person's upbringing, especially in their formative years, often plays a critical role in determining whether someone finds themselves in an echo chamber. Nguyen insightfully reminds us that, in our childhood years, we usually have no choice but to trust our parents and many other adult figures in our lives, such as teachers and (where applicable) clergy. A child is constantly absorbing information and still figuring out for themselves how the world works – and much of this information comes from the testimony of the adults with whom they are surrounded, and often their basic worldview, including their ideas about who is worthy of trust, is molded by adults who themselves may be trapped inside echo chambers. To

¹⁴³ Savoia E, Masterson E, Olander DR, Anderson E, Mohamed Farah A, Pirrotta L. “Determinants of Vaccine Hesitancy among African American and Black Individuals in the United States of America: A Systematic Literature Review.” *Vaccines* (Basel). 2024 Mar 7;12(3):277. doi: 10.3390/vaccines12030277. PMID: 38543911; PMCID: PMC10974955

escape such an echo chamber, Nguyen recommends what he calls a *social-epistemic reboot*. Nguyen draws a parallel here with the Cartesian method of doubt, where, after discovering that one's foundational beliefs may be mistaken, one undertakes to build a new epistemic system with firmer foundations. He writes: "For the social reboot, [the teenager] can proceed, after throwing everything away, in an utterly mundane way – trusting her senses, trusting others. But she must begin afresh *socially* – she must reconsider all possible sources of information with a presumptively equanimous eye."¹⁴⁴ It may be argued that this picture is too rosy, and that turning a "presumptively equanimous eye" to those whom one has mistrusted in the past is an overly optimistic expectation, for most people. While I agree that this may be the case – perhaps the teenager in Nguyen's example is particularly epistemically virtuous – I do not find this to be a strong objection to Nguyen's view. With the prevalence of echo chambers on the rise, most people may not be properly equipped to break free of them. There are many environments where the sorts of epistemic virtues advocated for by Nguyen and me are not encouraged, where epistemic *vices* (such as the deliberate fostering of mistrust in outside sources that is the hallmark of many echo chambers) may be encouraged instead. However, I would argue that the rarity of the virtues displayed by the teenager in Nguyen's example is not an argument against these virtues but rather suggests that such virtues ought to be encouraged and become more common.

But how do we encourage such behavior? For Nguyen, reducing the impact of echo chambers is not simply a matter of disseminating better information. In fact, research

¹⁴⁴ Thi Nguyen, "Escaping the Echo Chamber," *Aeon*.

suggests that polarization is not merely a function of being exposed to certain sources of information and not others.¹⁴⁵ So while we may imagine that, for example, anti-vaxxers hold the views they do because they are not exposed to the relevant counterevidence, data suggests otherwise. Those who are trapped in echo chambers retain their beliefs even in the face of conflicting evidence. So, what is needed is not simply a means of communicating information to the public. Rather, information must be communicated to the public *differently*, in a way in which a shared trust may be established. And Nguyen, ultimately, recommends such a procedure. He writes: “[A]ccounts of people leaving [echo chambers] rarely involve them encountering some institutionally reported fact. Rather, they tend to revolve around personal encounters – a child, a family member, a close friend... These encounters matter because a personal connection comes with a substantial store of trust.”¹⁴⁶ So Nguyen recommends tapping into a store of *trust* to reduce barriers to escaping echo chambers. At first blush, this may seem easy enough, especially for those who have spent time in the academy, where sources must be cited, papers must be peer-reviewed, etc. Nguyen raises a similar point about how experts must rely on each other for their research: “Even the experts depend on vast networks of other experts. A climate scientist analysing core samples depends on the lab technician who runs the air-extraction machine, the engineers who made all those machines, the statisticians who developed the underlying methodology, and on

¹⁴⁵ Nelson, J. L., & Webster, J. G. (2017). The Myth of Partisan Selective Exposure: A Portrait of the Online Political News Audience. *Social Media + Society*, 3(3).
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305117729314> (Original work published 2017)

¹⁴⁶ Nguyen, “Escape the Echo Chamber,” *Aeon*.

and on.”¹⁴⁷ Academics, it may be imagined, are trained to be *reliable* and are therefore well-positioned to earn the public’s trust. But Nguyen distinguishes between reliability and a person’s *goodwill*, and this distinction is crucial.¹⁴⁸ Reliability isn’t enough to establish trust. The news anchor for the news network with which we disagree may reliably give the news at a set time, or may reliably fall back on a handful of select talking points, etc. Likewise, in Nguyen’s example, your mechanic may be reliable, but this isn’t to say that you’d find him fully trustworthy in a political discussion. So, a measure of goodwill is necessary to rebuild that damaged trust, which is at the root of all echo chambers.

The specifics of addressing each echo chamber will probably vary from case to case. Anti-vaxxers may have at least slightly different reasons for mistrust than, say, flat earthers. Furthermore, different subsets of anti-vaxxers may have different reasons for mistrust than others, as we have arguably seen in the case of African Americans skeptical of the COVID-19 vaccine. However, I believe that the example of vaccine hesitancy among African Americans serves as an illustrative case where graciousness has the potential to repair the trust necessary to begin dismantling the echo chamber to which they are arguably subject. Recall that vaccine hesitancy among African Americans arose at least in part in response to an unequal power dynamic – suggestive of a disparity in status or worth. On Giannini’s view, graciousness is well-positioned to ameliorate the mistrust this demographic may have in the vaccine by reducing this

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

suggested disparity in status or worth. One may wonder what the *absence* of graciousness might look like in these sorts of contexts, since it is not always entirely clear what practicing public philosophy more or less graciously might mean. I would argue that we've already seen the sorts of cases where graciousness is *not* displayed. The temptation to treat echo chambers as epistemic bubbles, in other words, to provide the relevant party with evidence in support of the view you wish to promote, would be ungracious, particularly in this context. This is because our reasoning is ultimately circular and does little to divest our target demographic of their original concern. African Americans historically have been hesitant about the vaccine because of earlier historical cases, including the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, where American scientists and researchers have betrayed their trust. To appeal to the "facts" would be an appeal to that very source that is no longer trusted, namely, American scientists and the American scientific community. Furthermore, we have already seen how wealth inequality within academia more generally has resulted in a professoriate and body of researchers that disproportionately represent the most privileged members of American society. So, if we wish to reach members of echo chambers who have lost faith in institutionalized forms of knowledge formation and dissemination, then it behooves us to intentionally reduce suggested disparities in value or worth. This establishes the sense of goodwill necessary for healthy political and philosophical discussion and invites otherwise recalcitrant members of echo chambers to participate in discussions where each voice is deemed worthy of consideration and respect. So, the gracious public philosopher's immediate goal will not be to convince members of echo chambers that they are

misguided, but rather to establish a renewed sense of goodwill and trust through discussion that emphasizes the equal status and worth of all of its members.

Chapter 3: Murdochian Charity and Public Philosophy:

An Ameliorative Virtue of Ignorance?

1. Introduction

Public philosophy, as an area of interest for philosophers, encompasses a diverse range of activities and poses numerous philosophical challenges for the profession. One such difficulty is how philosophers ought to engage with students¹⁴⁹ and members of the broader public. Public philosophy has the unique feature of introducing *both* philosophy and philosophers to a far more diverse range of students and interlocutors than standard academic philosophy does. In a typical university setting, students have mastered the rudimentary essentials necessary to get started doing philosophy. They have written essays in high school and in their college writing courses, and they have some understanding of history, math, and science, either from high school or their general education requirements. Add to this the idea that at more prestigious institutions, professors are at least ostensibly dealing with the “best” and “brightest” students, who more than others can be expected to bring a wealth of knowledge to the classroom. Serious teaching, and with luck, so-called “serious” philosophical work might even be done in these university-level classes and seminars. High-achieving undergraduates might publish essays in undergraduate philosophy journals and present at conferences. These early forays into research activity are often

¹⁴⁹ As we’ll see below, public philosophy doesn’t just include cases of philosophy outside of educational contexts, but in those contexts as well. In brief, what makes public philosophy *public* is that it happens outside of academia, specifically. Evelyn Brister characterizes public philosophy as for an “intended audience of non-philosophers.” See Brister, “The Value of Public Philosophy,” in *A Companion to Public Philosophy*.

encouraged by university professors who see their role as that of introducing students to the profession, and in many cases, inviting those students to participate in the profession's activities, either in the short term or in the long term. Public philosophy, by contrast, usually does not make such demands of its students and members of the public more generally. Public philosophers typically engage with students and interlocutors *as non-philosophers*.¹⁵⁰ Those with whom we work often have little to no philosophical background or training, and public philosophers usually are not interested in discovering or training the next highly successful philosopher in the research or publishing sense.

The goals of the public philosopher *qua* public philosopher, then, are often very different from the goals of the philosophy professor *qua* philosophy professor. Public philosophers generally are not interested in training their students and interlocutors to conduct research. Instead, they are interested in engaging with the public in their capacity as the public. That is, public philosophy is explicitly interested in non-researching individuals who will never publish in *The Journal of Philosophy* or in *The Philosophical Review*. One narrow view of public philosophy is that its goals are simply educational or informative, that “public philosophy yields direct routes for disseminating the knowledge and techniques of academic philosophical investigation.”¹⁵¹ To suggest this, however, would be to reduce public philosophy to an extension of what happens in the classroom, and to force an equivocation between the

¹⁵⁰ See Jack Russel Weinstein, “The Case Against Public Philosophy,” p. 26; Evelyn Brister, “The Value of Public Philosophy,” p. 41.

¹⁵¹ Evelyn Brister, “The Value of Public Philosophy,” p. 41.

goals of public philosophy and the goals of academic philosophy. Evelyn Brister borrows from John Dewey in pushing back on this assumption, writing: “public philosophy... generates new knowledge and acts as a corrective to the inwardness and hyper-specialization that characterize some academic philosophy.”¹⁵² In other words, public philosophy acts as a means by which both public philosophers and their audiences can *depart* from the limitations of academic spaces. So, at the outset, we can expect public philosophy to look different from academic philosophy. Brister continues: “[P]ublic philosophy is not merely a means of transferring the highlights of philosophical thought to the public; it often contains an implicit critique of academic philosophy and its topics and methods.”¹⁵³ But how might this critique look in practice? And how does the virtue of Murdochian charity¹⁵⁴ in the title of this chapter bear on specific cases? I will begin by considering the work of Julia Driver and Iris Murdoch to give an account of what I understand Murdochian charity to be, as a virtue, before offering examples specific to public philosophy and public philosophical contexts. I will conclude this chapter by considering several important counterarguments to my view.

2. Murdochian charity’s Relevance to Public Philosophy as a Virtue: Two Accounts

The suggestion that Murdochian charity has an important role to play in public philosophy might seem an odd one. Among the various reasons for this, lack of

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 42.

¹⁵⁴ I have borrowed this term directly from Julia Driver’s influential 1989 paper “The Virtues of Ignorance”.

familiarity with the term ‘Murdochian charity’ may be the most common. And this should not surprise us – outside of Julia Driver’s brief treatment of the virtue in 1989, very little has been written about this specific virtue. The virtue of *charity*, as a virtue in the intellectual sense as opposed to the financial or material one, has earned much greater attention. These two virtues are distinct, although very closely related. They share the same root, which is at its basis charity, which involves hearing, reading, or understanding another’s argument in, as it were, the ‘best light’. The term ‘light’ is apt, because as will become clear in the paragraphs below, the metaphor of *seeing* is often used to describe a phenomenon very closely related, if not identical to, Murdochian charity. But what is the distinction between Murdochian charity and charity? According to Driver, charity involves interpreting another’s arguments, utterances, etc., favorably “*in spite of* perceived defects or lack of desert.”¹⁵⁵ *Murdochian charity*, on the other hand, is not attentive to the limitations or faults of the other. In Driver’s own words, a blindly charitable person “sees the good [in others,] but does not see the bad.”¹⁵⁶ She identifies Murdochian charity as a virtue of ignorance, along with modesty, which is, in her usage, a synonym for humility. Murdochian charity’s being a virtue of ignorance requires “that one be unknowing about something,” and involves “ignorance about what is bad in other people.”¹⁵⁷ Whereas Driver uses the term “Murdochian charity” to denote this sense of ignorance of the bad in others, Murdoch frames a very similar phenomenon in terms of love and perception. But in her paradigmatic example,

¹⁵⁵ Julia Driver, “The Virtues of Ignorance,” p. 381 (1989).

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 382.

ignorance is not the driving force behind the virtue, but rather a deliberate effort to see the other differently, replacing negatively valenced descriptive terms or perceptions with “just and loving” ones.¹⁵⁸ So while Driver emphasizes not seeing the bad in others by being “blind” to their defects, as it were, Murdoch emphasizes a deliberate effort to see others differently through love. In each case, however, we are dealing with “a disposition not to see the defects, and to focus on the virtues of persons.”¹⁵⁹ Both Murdochian charity and loving perception allow us to see the good in others without being distracted by their faults.

But of all the problems public philosophy faces, a lack of love¹⁶⁰ and Murdochian charity usually do not appear to be the most pressing – after all, public philosophy already faces two major sets of challenges, one institutional,¹⁶¹ the other philosophical or theoretical.¹⁶² Other questions arise concerning the nature of the philosophical canon, whether public philosophy provides any demonstrable benefits, and even if public philosophy can cause harm in some cases, or if carried out in the wrong way.¹⁶³ As we have already seen, work has been done outside of public philosophy to show that love and Murdochian charity, as virtues, have important ethical

¹⁵⁸ Murdoch, “The Idea of Perfection.” <https://yalereview.org/article/iris-murdoch-perfection>

¹⁵⁹ Driver, “Virtues of Ignorance,” 381.

¹⁶⁰ An earlier draft of this paper was entitled “Seeing Lovingly in Public Philosophy,” originally taking Murdoch’s virtue as the focus of this paper. I have chosen to instead frame this discussion in terms of Murdochian charity for at least three reasons: 1.) seeing lovingly does not roll off the tongue, 2.) the virtue Driver identifies seems to include the kinds of cases Murdoch discusses, and 3.) the virtue Driver describes seems somewhat narrower than seeing lovingly more generally, while also seeming broad enough to include the mode of attention discussed by Murdoch.

¹⁶¹ See Michael D. Burroughs, “Institutional Challenges to Public Philosophy,” in *A Companion to Public Philosophy*.

¹⁶² Agnes Callard, Jack Russel Weinstein, and others have highlighted the metaphilosophical challenges inherent in public philosophy. See Weinstein’s “The Case Against Public Philosophy.”

¹⁶³ See *Growing Up with Philosophy*, p. 58; *A Companion to Public Philosophy*.

and even epistemic dimensions.¹⁶⁴ Murdoch, in 1962, noted that “an unexamined life can be virtuous and... love is a central concept in morals. Contemporary philosophers frequently connect consciousness with virtue, and although they constantly talk of freedom, they rarely talk of love.”¹⁶⁵ Love, for Murdoch, has much to do with our perceptions of those around us,¹⁶⁶ and my focus will be on the *act of seeing lovingly*, explicitly highlighted by Murdoch, rather than on love more generally. Again, I take what Murdoch describes to be in line with what Driver describes, so the virtue of Murdochian charity is expected to overlap with that of loving perception. To illustrate her view, Murdoch employs the example of a mother-in-law who may perceive her daughter-in-law in two distinct ways. In the first case, the mother-in-law, dubbed by Murdoch ‘M’, sees her daughter-in-law – ‘D’ – as “unpolished and lacking in dignity and refinement,”¹⁶⁷ and while Murdoch invented this example with no concept of public philosophy in mind (as it is understood today), it also happens to serve as a plausible perception many academic philosophers engaged in public philosophy may – not unjustifiably – have of members of the wider public more generally. And I write this, if I’m able, within the spirit of Murdochian charity. It is not my intention to claim that any particular philosopher *actually does* see members of the public in this way, if for no other reason than for the fact that I do not have immediate privileged access to

¹⁶⁴ See bell hooks, *All About Love*; Iris Murdoch, “The Idea of Perfection;” Cathy Mason, “Why Love Matters Most.”

¹⁶⁵ Murdoch, “The Idea of Perfection,” <https://yalereview.org/article/iris-murdoch-perfection>

¹⁶⁶ Interestingly, debates surrounding “cognitive penetration” frequently discuss the opposite sorts of cases – where racism, perhaps, can alter our perceptions to make an otherwise innocuous object appear to be a firearm in the hands of a black man or a person of color.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

the thoughts and feelings of others,¹⁶⁸ including my colleagues and collaborators. But rather, as we'll see in section 3, I draw from my own experiences, some of which have aroused suspicion or discomfort in me, especially when discussing philosophical topics that intersect with the political.¹⁶⁹ By utilizing Murdoch's example, my claim is not that public philosophers see members of the public in the exact same way in which M sees D,¹⁷⁰ but rather that there is the potential for us, at times, to lose sight of their virtues and see them negatively, and perhaps not unjustifiably so. Even if nowhere else, public philosophers may face this temptation when working with inmates in prisons.

In an increasingly polarized, digitized, and more generally disconnected age, we may come to see our fellow human beings as potentially threatening.¹⁷¹ The effect is a general breakdown in trust, in line with how Thi Nguyen describes echo chambers.¹⁷² When dealing with strangers, we never know who may turn out to be a conspiracy theorist, an anti-vaxxer, or a climate change denier. Furthermore, Laura Callahan suggests that we have reason to care about the rightness or wrongness of the beliefs of those with whom we live in community, regardless of whether those beliefs

¹⁶⁸ As we'll see later, this is a strong *epistemic* reason to embrace Murdochian charity. "Mind reading" is a common cognitive distortion, but it has little place in public philosophy, where we ought to listen to our interlocutors rather than attribute to them unverified thoughts or beliefs. See:

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/you-are-enough/202405/you-cant-read-minds>

¹⁶⁹ Specifically, I felt this sense of discomfort and suspicion while working with Iris Oved's "The Paradox Lab" at the Exploratorium. The Paradox Lab's website can be found here:

<https://www.paradoxlab.org>

¹⁷⁰ Here I am tempted to point the reader to Wittgenstein's lament that "A *picture* held us captive" and his implied warning against allowing language to restrict or put limits on our thought. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §115.

¹⁷¹ Patrick Verel, "'Extreme Polarization and Fear of 'the Other Side' Poisons Political Discourse, Panelists Say,'" <https://now.fordham.edu/politics-and-society/extreme-polarization-and-fear-of-the-other-side-poisons-political-discourse-panelists-say/>

¹⁷² Thi Nguyen, "Escape the Echo Chamber,"

have a direct impact on us or any impact on anyone at all.¹⁷³ Murdoch argues that even if M, described as “intelligent and well-intentioned” and “who is a very ‘correct’ person,”¹⁷⁴ treats D well, her perceptions of D still hold moral weight. If M were to come to see D differently, say, as “not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on,”¹⁷⁵ then M could reasonably be said to have made progress. Our thoughts and perceptions of others hold moral weight and epistemic weight, not just our publicly observable actions. Furthermore, it is often difficult for us to change our thoughts and perceptions of others, let alone our thoughts and perceptions about anything. Jon Ellis and Eric Schwitzgebel warn us of the dangers – and the intractability – of rationalization in philosophical discourse.¹⁷⁶ But an important feature of public philosophy, one that is often overlooked, is the two-way exchange of knowledge or opportunity for growth. While it’s true that we expect to be able to offer something to the public, we should also expect to be able to receive something from that public.¹⁷⁷

Murdoch’s insight raises questions about our ethical obligations in our roles not only as friends or family members, but as public philosophers. Here, it may be helpful to identify common contexts in which public philosophy is done, to illustrate how our perceptions become relevant to our activity as philosophers. One common and

¹⁷³ Laura Callahan, “Why are Epistemic Reasons Normative?”

¹⁷⁴ Murdoch, “Idea of Perfection.”

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Jon Ellis and Eric Schwitzgebel, “Why Moral and Philosophical Disagreements Are Especially Fertile Grounds for Rationalization,” *Imperfect Cognitions*, (February 20, 2018), <https://imperfectcognitions.blogspot.com/2018/02/why-moral-and-philosophical.html>

¹⁷⁷ Jose Medina, “Philosophy of Protest and Epistemic Activism,” p. 129.

seemingly “introductory” context in which academic philosophers are introduced to the practice of public philosophy is at the so-called “ask-a-philosopher” table. “Ask-a-philosopher” tables represent a low-investment, low-stakes way to get the public interested in philosophy. A table can be set up on the street or in a public dining area, or, perhaps somewhat more commonly or appropriately, it can serve as an “exhibit” at an organized event such as the “Night of Ideas”.¹⁷⁸ In each case, however, the thought is that the philosopher will be engaging with non-philosophers, and it is highly unlikely that these members of the public will share the conceptual repertoire or hold the same beliefs about the world as the academic philosopher. This, in and of itself, poses a challenge. Both parties must navigate disagreement and may even find that terms mean one thing for the philosopher and another for the non-philosopher. For example, “accidental,” for the philosopher, may mean “nonessential,” whereas for the non-philosopher it may mean “by mistake.” Of course, a certain degree of tact and social grace may help to navigate such disagreements or misunderstandings, but it is not my goal to suggest these here. In Murdoch’s example, tact and good manners are assumed of M, and yet her thoughts and beliefs about D still hold moral weight. But if we are behaving properly and explaining philosophical concepts to members of the public well, why should we say this is the case?

Murdoch suggests an answer. While she at first concedes that we may conclude “that *if* M were to speak her mind about D now she would say different things from the

¹⁷⁸ Since 2016, Night of Ideas is an international event hosted in dozens of cities in countries, designed to facilitate thoughtful discussion and give presenters the opportunity to share their ideas. More information can be found here: <https://nightofideas.org/>

things she would have said” before the moral relevance of M’s shift in perspective is not ultimately reducible to what utterances M would make about D.¹⁷⁹ In other words, the moral relevance of M’s perspective does not solely depend upon her behavior, on Murdoch’s view. Murdoch speaks of M attempting to *see* D in a better way, specifically, “to see her justly or lovingly,” as well as more accurately.¹⁸⁰ Here we have three distinct goals relevant to our discussion. The goals are: 1) to see more *justly*, 2) to see more *lovingly*, and 3) to see more *accurately*. Murdoch suggests that these three goals can be achieved through a shift in perspective, but the question arises: Is there a necessary connection between these three ends? Surely, if it were possible to see more accurately without also seeing more justly or lovingly, then the philosopher interested merely in accuracy or truth would have no reason to accept the relevance of Murdoch’s argument, or to attempt more just and loving perception. In fact, one might even argue that something is lost in M’s change in perspective. Perhaps it *really is* the case that D is vulgar, undignified, noisy, and juvenile. By taking a rosier perspective on D, is M really moving toward the truth? This remains to be seen. We cannot assume, from the outset, that a perspective that is more ‘moral,’ ‘just,’ or ‘loving’ will necessarily be truth conducive. Driver herself admits this *overtly* in her discussion of Murdochian charity: “It may be that to cultivate these virtues one would need to practice self-deception.”¹⁸¹ The next step in our investigation will then be to more fully consider

¹⁷⁹ Murdoch, “The Idea of Perfection,” <https://yalereview.org/article/iris-murdoch-perfection>

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Driver, “Virtues of Ignorance,” 382.

how Murdoch's argument and Driver's concept can be applied to public philosophy and its unique challenges.

3. Murdochian charity in Public Philosophical Contexts

At the outset, I want to delineate two distinct ways in which public philosophy is done. In one set of contexts, the Public Philosopher has repeated exposure to their constituents. Note that the ask-a-philosopher table does *not* fall under this heading. Encounters in this context are generally one-offs. We do not have time – in the space of a single meeting – to sufficiently come to know our interlocutors in the way in which M knows D, but there are other contexts in which we do have repeated exposure to our constituents. P4C,¹⁸² High School Ethics Bowl,¹⁸³ and other initiatives provide space for repeated exposure to students or mentees. In these contexts, we get to know students' characters and dispositions, and there is often time to shift one's perspective and develop a more nuanced understanding of those with whom we are working. In some cases, our perspective may shift in the *opposite* direction to that discussed by Murdoch. We may come to see the talkative and engaged student as less passionate about the activity of philosophy and more passionate about being heard. We may come to see the "star student" as an attention seeker. This shift in perspective may motivate us to make more space for other voices and may even inspire us to seek out the voices

¹⁸² P4C, shorthand for Philosophy for Children, is a tradition of philosophical inquiry designed for students in elementary and middle school classrooms.

¹⁸³ The High School Ethics Bowl hosts "Ethics Bowls" where, unlike traditional debates, students are not assigned a position they will argue for but rather decide the ethical merits of each case for themselves. The goal is to promote philosophical reasoning and a more collaborative and less confrontational debate style where two teams present on and discuss cases which present ethical dilemmas.

of those who are shy or more reserved. At this point, I believe the work of Public philosophy is being done. In both P4C and High School Ethics Bowl, the facilitator's task is to guide a collective conversation, not primarily to impart information to our students. We can borrow from Ryle in describing the work of philosophical instruction to be more interested in imparting *knowledge how* rather than *knowledge that*.¹⁸⁴ I believe our efforts in these spaces should be thought of as a collective *exploration*, with our end goal being to discover well-reasoned answers to puzzling philosophical questions or ethical dilemmas. After all, if we lend any credence to Aristotle's claim that philosophy begins in wonder,¹⁸⁵ a key part of the job of the public philosopher is to instill wonder in their constituents, *not* to provide definitive answers to questions that may be puzzling them. This allows the facilitator to give more space for student voices, guiding their conversation in ways that allow for questions to be raised, insights or suggestions shared between students, and so on. Crucially, my hope is that all students' voices are treated with equity, and this will involve a certain monitoring of my own perspective. In the language of Murdoch, the act of "moral seeing" or seeing morally becomes relevant for the public philosopher. Murdoch emphasizes the role of love in the sort of moral perception she has in mind, but does not name a more specific virtue,¹⁸⁶ nor does she give a thorough account of what love means in the context in which she uses the term. Julia Driver, on the other hand, *does* provide a name for a

¹⁸⁴ Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*

¹⁸⁵ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*

¹⁸⁶ Unless we take love to be a virtue.

specific virtue that I believe fulfills the same function as the sort of “moral seeing” Murdoch describes, namely, Murdochian charity.

To illustrate how this might look “on the ground,” as it were, I would like to recall my experience working with 4th-grade students in the tradition of P4C. At the outset, I’d like to note that my successes in this context would not have been possible without the help of the class’s teacher, who skillfully handled many of the students’ behavioral tendencies and who, of course, had a much fuller sense of each student’s personality and character than I did.¹⁸⁷ I recall being impressed with one student who would frequently volunteer to speak during our sessions, and often seemed conflicted about whether to take a more lighthearted or a more serious approach to our philosophical conversations. She would oscillate between earnestness and silliness very rapidly, sometimes within the space of a single 30-minute session. In any case, she always seemed to have something to contribute to our conversations, and, as you may suspect, I was initially grateful for her active participation, as it made my role of facilitating discussion a lot easier. As I continued to engage with the students, however, I noticed the role privilege played in students’ levels of confidence. I recall a boy of Native American descent, whom I will here call “Moore,” who, though interested in our conversations, often struggled to interject or share his opinion. In fact, very often he would seem altogether uninterested in our discussions, either looking around the room distractedly or spinning on his stool. And of course, the teacher would often

¹⁸⁷ My involvement with this class was limited to one hour-long session each Friday afternoon over the course of an academic year.

implore him to direct his attention to our conversation rather than whatever else may have been distracting him at any given time. During one session, the teacher suggested an activity involving Legos, and I got the opportunity to chat with students one-on-one as they worked on their creations. I gravitated toward Moore, probably out of curiosity about this student who so rarely spoke during group discussions. Whereas Moore had been reserved in the larger group setting, he soon became talkative and seemed to enjoy the attention I gave him. It was clear that he felt more comfortable engaging with me without the eyes and ears of the whole class, and I realized that students who are less confident engaging in a group setting may be no less interested in philosophical ways of thinking and conversing. In fact, in some cases, they may be practicing a certain kind of philosophical virtue – the ability to listen to the ideas of others – that reflects positively on their critical thinking and reasoning skills. Just because the student is not often heard does not mean that their thoughts and perspective are not of great value, or that they are inherently less philosophically capable. Societal factors, such as a relative lack of privilege, may be hindering such students. I believe it is part of the role of the Public Philosopher to disentangle unjust social structures from a seeming lack of philosophical insight on the part of certain students. And a first step toward doing this is reassessing *the way* in which we *see* students or other members of the public. Both the teacher and I initially chalked Moore's behavior up to a lack of engagement, unwillingness to engage, lack of interest, or some other negative factor. Murdochian charity would seem to require us not to see anything negative at all, or at least nothing negative about Moore's *character*, even if his actions or utterances (or lack thereof)

show room for improvement. In other words, I believe it is the role of the public philosopher to assess utterances made by students and members of the public, not persons.

Here, I must address two important questions. How, exactly, does “seeing lovingly” factor into the example from P4C? Murdoch’s example, involving family members who have a lot of time to get to know one another, is importantly distinct from the case that I have described, which affords less time to get to know students. Additionally, why is seeing lovingly of distinct value in explicitly philosophical contexts? One may wonder whether this isn’t a virtue for all educators of various subjects. Matthew Lipman and Ann Margaret Sharp point out that children are uniquely positioned in a way that carries both advantages and disadvantages. “The disadvantages may show up in a lack of tact or astuteness in dealing with delicate interpersonal matters... the advantages are qualities such as the child’s openness to those enigmatic and perplexing aspects of existence that most adults have rationalized away, a natural openness... due to lack of experience rather than a deliberate, hard-won openness gained by temporary suspension of learned assumptions.”¹⁸⁸ In the classroom, I had more or less approached the students with the implicit assumption that the more they behaved like adult philosophers, the more impressive they were as “child philosophers”. At an academic conference, colloquium talk, or in a seminar, there’s often an assumption that those who speak have something to say, and that those who are heard are at least ostensibly more “impressive” than those who merely listen. At

¹⁸⁸ Matthew Lipman and Ann Margaret Sharp, *Growing Up with Philosophy*, p. 55.

the very least, speaking up in these contexts demonstrates an interest in the topic of discussion and shows a willingness to contribute to the conversation, activities rewarded within academic philosophy. In an elementary school classroom, however, it cannot necessarily be assumed that those who speak most are the most praiseworthy students. In successive sessions with the class, I came to see that the talkative and engaged student was more disposed toward the disadvantage identified by Lipman and Sharp. She was interested in getting attention from her teachers and other students in the class and would often give answers to questions that seemed calculated to provoke a reaction. Eventually, she fell into the habit of raising her hand to speak before she had decided what she would like to say, and would attempt to think up an answer to a question or a response to someone else's comment after she had been called upon, slowing the natural pace of the conversation. By contrast, many other students, including Moore, would watch and listen in rapt attention to whoever was speaking at any given moment. With the guidance of me and their teacher, students developed the habit of responding to other students' contributions, displaying the skill of listening to someone else's point of view, which is so valuable in philosophy.

My initial mistake was assuming that an activity that earns praise in adult philosophical contexts would carry over into the elementary school classroom. While it's true that those students who spoke up in class were contributing to the collaborative spirit of the discussion, it became clear that moderation was necessary and that the most commonly heard voices were not necessarily those with the best grasp of what doing philosophy should look like. Moore and other students were displaying a virtue of great

value for doing philosophy, namely, the virtue of being able to listen to the views and perspectives of others, which was not immediately apparent to me as a virtue. I had allowed myself to fall into the talkative student's scheme, as it were, and come to believe that she was impressive simply because she demanded the most attention. And yet the goal of our group discussions had been to inculcate skills in *exchanging* ideas, which she was interested in only if it involved others hearing *her* ideas. It took a change in my perspective to see that the less visible students were also developing habits foundational for doing good philosophy in a group setting.

One important objection to Murdoch's account of loving perception or Murdochian charity is the worry that, in this case, it may ultimately be an epistemic demerit. We can concede Murdoch's point that it may be *possible* for M to see D in a better light without then making the inference that we *ought* to do this. After all, one may argue that D really did deserve to be perceived in the way in which M originally saw her, and that M's efforts to see her in a new light were merely an exercise in self-delusion. If this intuition is correct, then we cannot reasonably say that M's perception of D is closer to the truth after she begins seeing D differently. And what is precisely at issue here is whether Murdochian charity is truth-conducive or has epistemic value as a virtue for public philosophers. To better illustrate the strength of this objection for our discussion of this virtue in public philosophical contexts, it may be helpful to employ an example better suited to the sorts of situations public philosophers face. Let's say that at the "ask-a-philosopher" table or in a group discussion with elementary school students – the exact setting doesn't matter – we notice that a student is

employing faulty reasoning. Perhaps they are affirming the consequent, a common error in reasoning. Murdochian charity or loving perception should not require us to call this faulty reasoning good, and we are under no obligation to praise students or members of the public for errors in reasoning. Quite to the contrary, if we are able, we should gently correct such errors in reasoning as they arise. Julia Driver characterizes Murdochian charity as “charity in thought rather than charity in deed,”¹⁸⁹ suggesting that to practice Murdochian charity, what is relevant are our thoughts or perceptions, and that our actions are relevant only insofar as they serve as evidence for “charity of thought” or charity of perception. She writes that “[a] person who is in Murdochian charity with others is a person who sees the good in them, but does not see the bad.”¹⁹⁰ Now, how should a blindly charitable public philosopher engage with someone who makes an error in reasoning, such as affirming the consequent? Correcting such errors in reasoning, of course, becomes even more important if a substantive conclusion is drawn from those errors.

Note, however, that on Driver’s account of Murdochian charity, the good and the bad are framed as being *in the person*. Seeing the bad *in* someone is an altogether different kind of thought than recognizing that someone has made an error in reasoning. Moreover, it would seem odd to treat errors in reasoning as though they were moral faults, although this is often done in our daily lives.¹⁹¹ To catch someone in a lie, for example, would seem to suggest a disposition for, capacity for, or otherwise general

¹⁸⁹ Driver, “The Virtues of Ignorance,” 381.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ For a fuller discussion of epistemic normativity, see Callahan: “Why are Epistemic Reasons Normative?”

willingness to lie. Moreover, assuming that this person has lied *voluntarily*, as is the case with many acts of lying, then we can say that the person's will is involved in some way. But a person generally doesn't voluntarily make an error in reasoning. In fact, what they *will* is generally the opposite: to make good inferences and formulate strong arguments. They would have liked to have been correct, but they came up short. The distinction between a person's actions and a person's character becomes especially relevant here. If someone commits a morally bad action, such as, for example, lying, we generally take that to say something negative about their character. But it isn't clear to me that epistemic faults should function the same way. We can correct a person's error in reasoning while affirming the goodness of their character – in fact, we may even praise the individual for making the effort, even if the execution was not ultimately successful. Perhaps their taking the risk to reason publicly in the first place could be seen as a display of courage or honesty. And if we did see them in this way, then we would arguably be practicing the sort of virtue Driver describes, even while recognizing that the reasoning of the individual in question ought to be corrected. In fact, the failure to do so may itself constitute or otherwise indicate a lack of Murdochian charity.

To see this, it will be helpful to more thoroughly compare Murdochian charity to charity. Driver writes that when one is being “merely charitable toward another, one favors that person in some respect, *in spite of* perceived defects or lack of desert.”¹⁹² In a situation where one is blindly charitable, they have put the perceived defects of the

¹⁹² Driver, “The Virtues of Ignorance,” 381.

other, or lack of desert on their part, entirely out of their mind. Note that when one is merely charitable, this is not the case. If one were to only see the good in someone who is making an error of reasoning, one would expect them to be receptive to correction or otherwise constructive feedback. To doubt this would seem to imply a perceived defect or lack of desert on the part of the person who has made an error in reasoning, potentially manifesting as a perceived inability to understand, an unwillingness to be receptive to criticism, or some other fault. To correct another's error, Murdochian charity is sometimes necessary, because we must be willing to assume they are willing and able to accept the correction. Moreover, we are in effect putting trust in their ability to change, grow, and learn. This kind of trust is essential for epistemically healthy interactions across disagreement. Thi Nguyen insightfully points out that echo chambers are not reinforced by a lack of information, but by a lack of trust.¹⁹³ And too often, a lack of trust can manifest as an unwillingness to offer constructive criticism to the other on account of a perceived unwillingness or inability to change, on their part. So Murdochian charity then goes some way towards reestablishing the kind of trust that is necessary for dismantling the echo chambers that are all too pervasive in contemporary American epistemic life.

But we do not need to rely on Driver's account of Murdochian charity to see the issue at play. Murdoch herself points out that, in her example of M and D, "it might be very hard to decide whether what M was doing was proper or not, and opinions

¹⁹³ Nguyen, "Escape the Echo Chamber,"

might differ.”¹⁹⁴ Among the considerations Murdoch cites as a plausible objection to M’s change is the idea that M “deludes herself,” a worry toward which I have already alluded.¹⁹⁵ Essentially, the objection is that, by seeing M differently or by practicing Murdochian charity, we may suffer negative epistemic consequences. After all, recall that D, in Murdoch’s example, *really is* “inclined to be pert and familiar, insufficiently ceremonious, brusque, sometimes positively rude, always tirelessly juvenile.”¹⁹⁶ Moreover, Murdoch explicitly stipulates that D’s behavior does not change – M reappraises her character traits without D meriting the reappraisal in any way. However, one clear difficulty here is articulating what change has actually occurred in M. This is Murdoch’s central metaphysical difficulty,¹⁹⁷ and giving these metaphysical difficulties proper weight is beyond the scope of this chapter. It will be important, however, to specify which process or processes I am referring to when I describe Murdochian charity as a way of seeing or perceiving, even if I cannot give them the substantive metaphysical argumentation they require. I will accept Murdoch’s claim that M, after she has revised her perception of D, “has in the interim been *active*, she has been *doing* something, something which we approve of, something which is somehow worth doing in itself.”¹⁹⁸ In opposition to Murdoch’s account is the view that “M’s introspectabilia are likely on examination to prove hazy and hard to describe; and

¹⁹⁴ Murdoch, “The Idea of Perfection,” <https://yalereview.org/article/iris-murdoch-perfection>

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 13.

¹⁹⁷ Murdoch pits herself in opposition to what she calls the “existentialist-behaviorist view”, which is the view that the sorts of changes of perception which M underwent are not morally relevant and logically cannot be morally relevant, because they do not happen in the public sphere. I touch on the features of this view in more detail in what follows.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 15.

even if (at best) we imagine M as making clear verbal statements to herself, the identity and meaning of these statements is a function of the public world.”¹⁹⁹ This view represents what Murdoch calls the “existentialist-behaviorist view.” On the existentialist-behaviorist view, the central worry introduced at the beginning of this paragraph is ostensibly that if M deludes herself, then her self-delusion will have negative epistemic consequences in the so-called “public sphere.” But if there is no discernible change in behavior on M’s part, as is the case in Murdoch’s example, then this worry seems toothless. Callahan addresses a similar concern (while departing from the existentialist-behaviorists) in her forthcoming discussion of epistemic normativity.²⁰⁰ A false belief – in this case, that D is refreshingly simple, spontaneous, gay, and youthful – would only have relevance here if it results in action of some kind. M may be mistaken about D – but if her behavior remains consistent, then there’s no real difference between M before and M after her transformation, epistemic, moral, or otherwise. And yet *we do* often want to say that M – or anyone – holding a false belief matters in some way, and that we disapprove of this.²⁰¹ In this paragraph, I’ve done two things: I’ve introduced an intuitive objection to Murdoch’s view, one that gets at the *epistemic* rather than the moral relevance of Murdochian charity. And the objection is a powerful one – we would like Murdochian charity to be in epistemic virtue in public philosophical contexts, not an epistemic vice. Secondly, I’ve shown what *something like* Murdochian charity means for Murdoch, though of course she does not use this

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Callahan: “Why are Epistemic Reasons Normative?”

²⁰¹ Ibid.

term. What Murdoch describes is what I mean by Murdochian charity, though what she describes is fully consistent with other accounts of Murdochian charity, such as Driver's.²⁰² In the next paragraph, I'll show how Murdoch's view survives this objection, and why Murdochian charity promises to be, not only *not* an epistemic vice, but an epistemic virtue in public philosophical contexts.

To see this, let's recall our earlier example. Massimo Pigliucci insightfully articulates the sort of problem I encountered in P4C. While one student speaks often, sometimes without really having much to say, another student never speaks, despite the fact that I believe anyone can meaningfully contribute to a philosophical conversation. And Pigliucci, like me at the beginning of my P4C experience, seems to have a not-unjustified bias toward the former sort of person. He writes, "there will be a small number of people who have a lot to say and are not shy about it, and a larger number of people who have not processed the notion that philosophical discussions are a participatory sport."²⁰³ I think Pigliucci is right to think, especially in contexts involving adults like those he describes, that, on the whole, a too-talkative interlocutor is more desirable than a mute one. One who speaks gives you something to work with, at least, whereas there is only so much you can do with silence. This would also help explain why the homeroom teacher seemed far more partial to Sage than to Moore. Sage at least seems to be actively fulfilling her role, if imperfectly, whereas Moore appears to be totally passive and non-participatory. Pigliucci drives this point home:

²⁰² See Julia Driver, "The Virtues of Ignorance," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 1989

²⁰³ Pigliucci, "Public Reasoning about the Good Life," p. 111.

“You can’t just sit back, relax, and listen to others. Or, to put it otherwise, discussions are not lectures.”²⁰⁴ Of course, I agree with Pigliucci, a profitable philosophical discussion requires participation from its members. But in more educational contexts like the P4C example, non-participation isn’t nearly as much a sin as it is the sort of philosophical café cases Pigliucci describes. In fact, both my doctoral advisor and I spent our *undergraduate* years, let alone our elementary school ones, largely quiet during class. Sometimes, and in some contexts, it *may* be appropriate to treat a discussion like a lecture, especially when one thinks one has more to learn from it than one has to contribute. I believe that Moore falls into this category. Whereas the homeroom teacher and Pigliucci may see a failure to engage properly with philosophy as a student, I would like to practice Murdochian charity by seeing an attentive listener, not unlike a younger version of myself and other philosophers I admire.

As promised, let’s consider another case, one where the public philosophers are *not* afforded the opportunity to get to know their constituents over an extended period of time. Again, I draw on this example from my personal experience. In the summer of 2025, I had the chance to work with Iris Oved and others in a somewhat unusual context – a museum, specifically, the Exploratorium on San Francisco’s Embarcadero. I had never done public philosophy in an unfamiliar museum setting such as this one,²⁰⁵ and as you may expect, my first foray into “public philosophy at the museum,” as it were,

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ One might count my experiences doing public philosophy at the Institute of the Arts and Sciences on the west side of Santa Cruz, though 1.) the space strikes me more as a gallery than a museum, and 2.) the space was not being used in its capacity as a museum while we were there, but rather as a venue for the philosophy event organized by Jeanne Proust. Night of Ideas: <https://nightofideas.org/santa-cruz/>.

had its hang-ups and rough spots. To fully grasp the tenor of the experience, a number of things should be noted from the outset. Oved had asked me and several others, many of whom are UC Santa Cruz affiliates, if they would be willing to volunteer almost as “philosophical docents” – though I do not believe our roles were given a specific title. Our task was to engage the museum-going public during an exhibit on AI, raising questions and sparking philosophical conversations. One seemingly unimportant detail feels relevant – on my drive to the museum, I saw a large pro-Israeli billboard, plausibly Zionist, in the heart of San Francisco, one which not so subtly implied that pro-Palestinian movements are anti-Semitic. I realized, or at least I thought I did, that this was not the same unambiguously deep blue San Francisco I had come to expect over the last several years I had spent in Northern California. Add to this the prevalence of Waymo vehicles, and one collaborator’s excitement that she had travelled to the museum, to discuss AI, in a Waymo. (“The ride was very smooth... I felt very safe...” etc.) And of course, as a bleeding-heart liberal matriculating at one of the most ostensibly liberal public universities in the country, I was already disheartened by what I had been seeing over the last several months in the news. AI and the tech industry more generally²⁰⁶ had come to represent, for me, political trends that I did and still do believe to be deeply harmful for this country.

So, we have here a portrait of the setting, my role, and my emotional state going into the museum. As you might expect, I was on edge. Iris Oved provided us with whiteboards so that we could write out our interlocutors’ suggestions and track the

²⁰⁶ The actions of Elon Musk and Tim Cook serve as powerful examples, here.

development of our conversations. But overeagerness, perhaps, quickly took hold of me, and so I began seeking out interlocutors rather than waiting for them to come to me. Intentionally or not, I was playing into Callard's vision of Socrates, with his "abnormally invasive conversational agenda."²⁰⁷ Unsuspecting museum goers soon found themselves at the mercy of my inquiries. Recall that the Exploratorium was then currently giving an exhibit on AI, and that a variety of physical displays were used to explain concepts related to the technology. My Socratic method found early, albeit short-lived, success when I engaged a young child, likely 8 or 9, about an exhibit that had been absorbing his attention. A collection of blocks had been set up near a rectangular wooden box of a specified length and width, and, according to the instructions of the exhibit, one's task was to use a ruler to measure the blocks to get them to fit into the wooden rectangle. The child was absorbed in this task, although there was a problem – the blocks wouldn't fit. I asked him why he thought that was the case. He had no idea, and I didn't blame him. Earlier, before the museum opened in the morning, I had had the opportunity to read and examine each exhibit, so I already knew this one's secret – the ruler provided was incorrect. To my understanding, the exhibit's lesson was humble but important, and obliquely related to AI, namely: when performing a task, it's important that we aren't using flawed tools to do so. As I often find to be the case, the child's next question was instinctively philosophical. "How do you know the ruler is wrong?" I told him it was a great question, before turning the question on its head and asking him how we might possibly come to know that the ruler

²⁰⁷ Agnes Callard, "Persuade or be Persuaded," 2019. *The Point*.

is incorrect. After some back and forth, however, his father pulled him away with a gentle “thank you” and a smile. So far, so good – hope was not lost, San Francisco’s public could still be philosophical, after all.

My luck, however, would quickly turn for the worse, especially as I engaged older and more ‘accomplished’ museum goers. One digital exhibit explained the way in which AI constructs sentences, and I asked the older gentleman examining it if he’d like to discuss it. His answer was curt: “I’m okay, I’m not very confused about AI.” I wasn’t quite convinced. I questioned him a little further, and he soon revealed that he believed AI “runs on a series of ‘If... then...’ statements.”

“Are you a programmer?” I asked. It sounded to me like he had some expertise in the field.

“No, but I know Python. I’m a CFO at a major company.”

I told him he must be aware of the economic impacts of AI, in that case. He was refreshingly honest, if not overly optimistic. “Yes,” he said, “it’ll put a lot of people out of work in the short term, but in the long run, these technological changes always balance out.” Notice here that *he* had introduced the thorny ethical implications of AI’s economic impacts, not me. For all he knew, I may have been angling to discuss its potential to eradicate poverty and turn the United States into an even *more* powerful economic powerhouse. He seemed defensive, and as we spoke, he seemed to be making an effort to back away, slowly. As he gained some distance from me, I said it was nice chatting and asked him where he was from, as a gesture of curiosity and goodwill. “Maine,” he said, and I told him we shared a home on the East Coast. “I’m from

Florida.” With that, he escaped into the crowd. But what do these two encounters at the Exploratorium suggest about the relationship between Murdochian charity and public philosophy? Contrary to what one might expect, my conversation with the young child was far richer, philosophically, than with the wizened older gentleman. And it’s not because I was practicing Murdochian charity by thinking that a young child is capable of a philosophical conversation – I already know that they are, having observed this in my experience with P4C. Rather, I suspect that one or both of us in the second conversation was displaying a distinct lack of Murdochian charity, in part by assuming that they already knew what the other was thinking, or what they were about to say. In the CFO’s mind, certain lines of questioning invariably lead to certain conclusions, and those conclusions are often negative. So, his guard went up right away. Now, was the CFO entirely wrong? The preceding paragraphs have shown that he wasn’t – I *am*, in fact, an AI nay-sayer, by and large. So, while he wasn’t wrong to suspect I may be critical of AI, his focus on my potentially critical tone soured the interaction from the start. He wasn’t wrong to think that I might have a negative perception of AI, but by focusing solely on this possibility, he abdicated any chance of a profitable conversation.

Another available objection to my argument here is an empirical one. One might say, ‘I always feel as though I’m seeing my students and audience members well – I certainly don’t treat them poorly, make disparaging comments, or think unsavory or unkind thoughts about them.’ And all of this may be the case – it is not my task here to deny that. I certainly hope this is the case. But Murdoch makes the crucial point that

“[w]e can be mistaken about what we think and feel,”²⁰⁸ so while we *may* avoid *behaviors* that suggest a lack of Murdochian charity,²⁰⁹ it’s a tough task to gauge for Murdochian charity as a mental state or way of perceiving, even in ourselves. And Murdoch rejects both the ‘eye of God’ and the ‘inner eye’ as metrics whereby we can determine our success in seeing with Murdochian charity.²¹⁰ In short, Murdoch is discussing what I take to be Murdochian charity as “*activity* in a sense which does not mean privileged activity.”²¹¹ So, the retort – ‘I don’t see people in that way’ is, unfortunately, toothless, however much we may wish for this to be true, or even believe it to be true. In recent years, growing attention has been given to *attention* as an important component of our moral lives. Here, I’m suggesting that attention is an important component of our epistemic lives, as well. And this claim in and of itself should not be too surprising. Anybody can tell you that if you do not pay attention in class, you’ll do poorly on the test. Murdoch, on the other hand, emphasizes the moral dimensions of M’s so-called ‘action’: “M’s activity is hard to characterize not because it is hazy but *precisely because it is moral*.”²¹² But she does not neglect the epistemic dimensions. For her, “[w]hat M is *ex hypothesi* attempting to do is not just see D accurately but to see her justly or lovingly,” adding that “[f]reedom is... a function of

²⁰⁸ Murdoch, “Perfection,” 16.

²⁰⁹ Although, of course, this is not a guarantee, being much easier said than done. I recall Agnes Callard retelling a story about how she – through no intended malice of her own – inadvertently made a student feel bullied: “I said something like... it seems to you that you have an idea, but you don’t have an idea... there’s no idea in your head where you think there is one.” Of course, the philosophical nuance of Callard’s point was lost on the student, and “there’s no beautiful reconciliation story, this person just hated me from that day on.” <https://thi.ucsc.edu/agnes-callard-inquisitive-politics/> Minute mark: 1:25:49

²¹⁰ Ibid., 14.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Murdoch, “Perfection,” 17.

the progressive attempt to see a particular object clearly.”²¹³ So neither Murdoch nor I will wish to say that Murdochian charity or seeing lovingly involves self-deception, but rather the contrary – we expect these to help us see more accurately and more clearly.

Elsewhere, I have used the term “constituents” to refer to those whom public philosophy and public philosophers serve. This term is appealing because it reflects the sense of a public trust inherent in public philosophy. After all, public academic institutions and universities derive much of their funding from the state, so we should expect taxpayers to want to see a return on investment. So in an important sense, many if not most public philosophers are financially and politically obligated to serve the public, whatever this may mean. A paradox of democracy, however, is that this very same public not only can, but is also entitled to turn against those who have served them in the past. There are countless cases of this throughout the history of democracy, perhaps two of the most infamous early examples being those of Themistocles and Alcibiades.²¹⁴ If we take Socrates as a public philosopher, then he may serve as another example, though of course, he subsisted on the support of his friends, not the support of the state. It is clear from Plato’s dialogues more generally, but also from the *Apology* in particular, that Socrates believed his actions served the public good. And yet, something must have been miscommunicated, because a jury of his peers²¹⁵ would later convict him for those very actions that he sincerely believed²¹⁶ served them. And I

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ John R. Hale, *Lords of the Sea*

²¹⁵ Which, moreover, was much larger than today’s juries.

²¹⁶ At least according to Plato, if not Nietzsche. See *Twilight of Idols* for Nietzsche’s critique of Socrates.

believe his actions did serve them (and Plato's readers today), even if he had "an abnormally invasive conversational agenda,"²¹⁷ and even if he and his contemporaries could not ultimately prevent the decline of the Athenian city-state.

On the other hand, however, nobody voted for Socrates, and nobody votes for public philosophers, either. So, in this sense, public philosophers hold unelected positions within our society. This does not mean, however, that their obligations to the public are not just as real. Public philosophy initiatives are usually intended to serve the public good, and I believe that in ideal conditions they succeed. However, these initiatives are not without the potential for catastrophe. To see this, let's continue this analogy between public philosophy and politics, to see precisely *why* Murdochian charity is so important, especially in our current political climate.

In 2016, Hillary Clinton tried her hand at the kind of "honesty" that was then taking U.S. politics by storm. On September 9th of that year, she described "half" of her opponents' supporters as being "racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, [and] Islamophobic," famously claiming that they belong to a "basket of deplorables."²¹⁸ Fortunately, most public philosophers do not use this kind of language to describe those with whom they work, nor do they even think such things about them.²¹⁹ However, there is always the potential for miscommunication, especially when emotions are running high, as they often do in the sorts of conversations in which public philosophers commonly find

²¹⁷ Agnes Callard, "Persuade or be Persuaded," 2019. *The Point*.

²¹⁸ <https://time.com/4486502/hillary-clinton-basket-of-deplorables-transcript/>

²¹⁹ As far as I am aware.

themselves, including ethical and axiological debates.²²⁰ Furthermore, there is the potential for philosophers to be misunderstood by – and to *misunderstand* – the public more generally. In his introduction to Simone Weil’s *Gravity and Grace*, Gustave Thibon recounts an episode that illustrates this. One day, while working in the vineyards near the banks of the Rhone, Weil met a young working-class Lorraine woman “in whom she thought she had detected signs of an intellectual vocation,” and so Weil expounded upon the Upanishads at great length. Can you imagine the young woman’s boredom? She had no interest in Weil’s “magnificent commentaries” on these ancient Sanskrit texts.²²¹ Instances of philosophers misunderstanding the public are of special interest to me, and the potential for this, exacerbated by our polarized political climate, is currently high. While the example from Weil is benign and generally reflects well on her character, it does represent the potential for members of the public *to be misunderstood*. After all, they’re strangers, even if we’re experts in philosophy.

How does this anecdote from the life of Simone Weil relate to Hillary Clinton’s comments? Each represents a case of too hastily affixing a label to those about whom we know little. Ultimately, it does not matter much whether the label is negative (as in Clinton’s case) or positive (as in Weil’s case). What matters is that the label is wrong. Here, one may push back – history seems to have vindicated Clinton. Half of her opponent’s supporters really were “racist,

²²⁰ Ellis and Schwitzgebel.

²²¹ Gustave Thibon, Introduction to *Gravity and Grace*.

sexist, homophobic,” etc., and belong to a “basket of deplorables.” Note that this objection is the same as the objection to Murdoch – perhaps D really does have the qualities M initially believed she had.

Of course, knowledge in and of itself is not always a good. Knowledge of certain things, or perhaps too much knowledge of some things and too little knowledge of others, may be harmful. Just imagine someone who has accumulated, for whatever reason, a vast amount of knowledge about both accidental and nonaccidental deaths and the various means by which they may come about. They know all about inadvertent midnight strangulation by bedsheets, the statistical hazards of driving to work each morning, and the increased risk of dying by the hand of a loved one. Sure, they’re *knowledgeable*, but this knowledge isn’t at all enviable. Ultimately, it diminishes their quality of life rather than improving it. In the same way, public philosophy’s goals may not be purely, or perhaps even primarily, epistemic.

All too often, philosophers (and, by extension, public philosophers) mistake a statement for an argument. Take Emily Robertson’s... where she frames the belief, a simple statement that ‘strikes harm students’, as an argument: “UC leadership has tried – and so far failed – to end the strike by claiming it is unlawful, but what interests me more is an argument some people make against continuing, supporting or participating in strikes like this. They argue that strikes harm

undergraduates by disrupting their learning.”²²² Of course, we all know that an argument does not consist of a single premise, however true or false that premise may be. Not only is it possible, but it is perfectly reasonable to believe that strikes harm undergraduates *and* that an academic worker’s strike is both morally permitted and justified. Much conflict throughout history has had this “both/and” character – consider the commonwealth of Virginia’s motto, *Sic semper tyrannis*, or Thomas Jefferson’s famous claim that “[t]he tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants.”²²³ Neither the Virginians nor Jefferson imagined that they were in the moral right because they were not harming anyone – they were candid about the fact that revolution results in harm, at least to some. But the point I am making is not that Robertson is mistaken. In fact, she goes on to make a compelling argument. The great danger here, and the moral of the story for public philosophers, is not that philosophers sometimes make poor objections to the views of others. Rather, it is the risk of too quickly attributing a view to others that they do not in fact hold. Where one says, “strikes harm undergraduates,” a public philosopher hears: “I oppose the strike.” Of course, these are two very different claims. What happens is a kind of mental heuristic whereby a piece of an argument is mistaken for that argument itself. This is a classic case of what Daniel Kahneman calls “WYSIATI” – “What You

²²² Emily Robertson, “UCSC strike: How much should we worry about lost learning?” <https://lookout.co/ucsc-strike-how-much-should-we-worry-about-lost-learning/story>

²²³ Thomas Jefferson, “Thomas Jefferson to William Stephens Smith, 13 November 1787” <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-12-02-0348>

See Is All There Is”²²⁴ We know they think that strikes harm students, but what we don’t know is if they believe we should go on strike anyways, or not.

As we’ve seen in the preceding section, it’s all too easy to judge someone’s beliefs based on too little evidence. Take, for example, many men’s persistent habit of maligning one another, to their collective detriment.²²⁵ ‘Most American men today hold politically and morally pernicious views, but not me,’²²⁶ seems to be our motto. And this may in fact be true.²²⁷ But what is at issue is not the truth or falsity of such claims, but whether these claims are politically or socially *ameliorative*. I recall one telling instance of this, which still haunts me to this day. On Thursday, June 19, 2025, Hande Tuna invited Dominic McIver Lopes to attend their aesthetics reading group via Zoom to discuss his recent book, *Aesthetic Injustice*. Our conversation was amicable, we all enjoyed the book, and we were happy to have Lopes with us. But several of us (including myself) were curious about how the book informs our outlook on contemporary political and social issues.²²⁸ One fellow graduate student asked about

²²⁴ Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*.

²²⁵ A friend and colleague objects – aren’t it only “chronically online men” who we (perhaps rightfully) malign? I ask – who except blue collar workers are not habitually and daily online, in today’s workplace? In academia, our careers today are almost entirely online. So, if chronically online men are the problem, we’re the problem.

²²⁶ I should make clear that this does *not* represent a quotation anyone I know (or anyone I know of) has literally said but rather attempts to get at the underlying tenor of much discourse that relates to the intersection between gender and politics, especially within the United States’ ‘political left’ as it is understood today. In an important sense I *hope* I am mistaken here – though the conversations I have had have led me to believe otherwise. Again, the jury is still out, and this claim relies more on my subjective perspective as someone engaged in political discourse relating to gender and contemporary political issues.

²²⁷ The evidence does lean in favor of political polarization along gender lines, especially in the United States. See The Survey Center on American Life’s “The Gender Divide in Youth Political Affiliation” <https://www.americansurveycenter.org/short-reads/gender-partisan-divide/>

²²⁸ I had asked Lopes how our political commitments shape our perception of objects which might otherwise be considered beautiful, using Mar-a-Lago as an example. Again, his answer was true

the prevalence of online hate from [certain chronically online] men directed toward women, particularly in response to women who take pride in their physical appearance and consider themselves physically beautiful. Lopes attributed this attitude on the part of the men to their probable political commitments – rising misogyny on the political right was responsible for their written attacks against these women. I, on the other hand, suggested a different interpretation. I wondered whether the men were envious of these beautiful women. I thank Lopes for responding to my suggestion in good faith,²²⁹ while recognizing that the spirit of my suggestion – that contemporary political issues call for ameliorative framings rather than combative ones – likely went largely unnoticed, at least judging by his response, which was, to paraphrase, essentially this: Statistics do show that there is a political divide between contemporary American men and American women, and we should be cognizant of that fact rather than make an effort to ignore it.²³⁰ Lopes did concede, however, that the situation is complicated and calls for nuance. But what is the relevance of this anecdote? I have already said that Lopes is not factually mistaken – there is, statistically, an unfortunate political divide along gender lines – so my point is not that Lopes is incorrect. But where I had been tempted to assign an *emotion* to these men, one which may be conceivably alleviated, Lopes sought to assign them an *identity*. In brief, my impulse was to say that they *feel* a certain way, whereas Lopes was inclined to claim that they *are* a certain way. Here again,

enough. To paraphrase: Bad political associations do not by necessity prevent an object from being beautiful.

²²⁹ As we'll see below, there may be no other way to respond. Callard has rightly called the notion of "bad faith" into doubt. See my section below on "The Challenge of Bad Faith" for a fuller discussion.

²³⁰ The Survey Center on American Life's "The Gender Divide in Youth Political Affiliation"

<https://www.americansurveycenter.org/short-reads/gender-partisan-divide/>

Lopes is not incorrect from the standpoint of data and statistics – “‘Data and analysis’ [reveal] two ‘calcified’ parties,” writes Jason Blakely, quoting Jonathan Rauch.²³¹ Most Republican voters remain Republican voters, while most Democratic voters continue to vote Democratic. My question here is, how do we get people to change when we expect that they won’t? If we give a large subset of the population a certain label, it should be no surprise to us that they will continue to play into that label.²³² The first step toward social change is to entertain the possibility of change in others. This, of course, includes members of the public with whom we disagree, who may even hold views that repel us – the point is to offer them honey instead of vinegar. So, say they *feel* a certain way, and can change, rather than that they *are* a certain way. It is much easier, after all, to change how you feel than to change who you are.

There’s also a much more self-interested reason to be concerned with Lopes’ framing. When you’re navigating your way through the world, meeting new people, attempting to form relationships, these new connections have no idea which category you fall under: the unenlightened majority, or the enlightened few who can recognize and point out flaws in their fellow men and in their voting behavior. My personal experience since January 20, 2025 has been one of increased anxiety – I am wearing a uniform I did not ask to wear and cannot easily remove, one which symbolizes ideas, beliefs, behaviors and political trends that not only do I not approve of, but that actively

²³¹ Jason Blakely, “In the Land of the Data Blind: Why political science can’t grasp Trumpism,” in *Harper’s Magazine*, 2026. <https://harpers.org/archive/2026/01/in-the-land-of-the-data-blind-jason-blakely-political-science-trumpism/>

²³² Jaysson T. Brooks, “Defining Stereotype Threat and Why It Matters,” *Journal of JPOSNA*, Vol. 5, No. S1, February 2023.

harm me and my prospects of living a good life in the remainder of the 21st century. It is my belief that whatever problems men may face in contemporary American life,²³³ they were (and will continue to be) greatly exacerbated and amplified by the outcome of the 2024 election. In other words, I believe that young men – likely due to a combination of naivety and anger – hindered their own social and political development in 2024 and in the years that will follow. They shot themselves in the foot, as it were. I recall a recent experience placing an American flag in the philosophy department’s grad lab, only to encounter the objection that “People might think we’re Republicans.” While I ultimately ignored the objection, I do understand the fear expressed by that statement. For me, the American flag represents our best ideals, those of inclusivity and an aspiration toward freedom and liberty for those who live here, and our best historical moments, such as our rebuttal of fascism and our aspiration toward scientific progress in the Space Race. But I also understand it represents our failures as well, past, present, and future. Just as my fellow graduate student feared that others might see in the American flag its worst associations, I fear that others might see in my gender – and identity more generally – only its worst associations. Whether this fear is rational, morally justified, or appropriate in any other way, I am not sure. My point is only that I and at least some others feel it.

First Objection: The Challenge of Bad Faith

²³³ Jessica Winter, “What Did Men Do to Deserve This?” <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-weekend-essay/what-did-men-do-to-deserve-this>

One challenge to Murdochian charity would seem to be that, sometimes, we ought not to be blindly charitable to others, because those with whom we are dealing may be bad actors or dealing in “bad faith”. Here I follow Agnes Callard in rejecting the notion of “bad faith,” at least as it is commonly understood. She says: “There’s a reason not to believe in bad faith... I think everyone desires the good, and everyone wants to know what’s true... They want the good, and they want to know what’s true. Um, but we screw up all the time.”²³⁴ I follow Callard in thinking that almost no one deliberately *wants to operate in bad faith* or wants to operate in a way that reliably results in falsehood. Murdoch, on the other hand, would seem to disagree with Callard. She writes: “[o]f course... energy flows, and more readily flows, into building up convincingly coherent but false pictures of the world, complete with systematic vocabulary. (M seeing D as pert-common-juvenile etc.) Attention is the effort to counteract such states of illusion.”²³⁵ So if anything qualifies as “bad faith,” it would seem to be what Murdoch describes here. And yet, Murdoch is clearly not concerned about the apparent threat of others engaging with her in bad faith, as we often worry. Rather, her concern is with herself engaging in bad faith, and she is looking for ways to engage in good faith through a training of the attention. This very effort, this very desire, would itself seem to qualify as good faith, confirming Callard’s intuition.

²³⁴ Agnes Callard: <https://thi.ucsc.edu/agnes-callard-inquisitive-politics/> Minute mark: 1:18:55

²³⁵ Murdoch, “The Idea of Perfection,” <https://yalereview.org/article/iris-murdoch-perfection>

Chapter 4: Creativity, Courage, and Public Philosophy

“Coming out of the shade is not easy. It will require courage – the courage to speak our truth and spread our ideas for the public to hear despite not being in control of how others will spin it.”

- Myisha Cherry²³⁶

Introduction

As promised in the introduction of this work, the present chapter will not give a thorough account of “creativity” and “courage,” – which have been written on at length already – but will instead examine a case in point, namely, the dialogue form and the role creativity and courage play in publicly philosophical writing. But at the outset, I should note that I’ve used the word “courage” in contrast to other words like “bravery” or “daring” deliberately. Etymologically, the word “courage” is derived from the Latin *cor*, meaning heart.²³⁷ While the word “bravery,” for example, carries an embodied tone that appeals to me, the “heart” at the heart of courage is the relevant factor. Courage does not require immense strength or some flashy display. Rather, it often requires a quiet, daily resolve to continue that has much more to do with one’s ability to *care* than it does one’s muscles or one’s voice. Ultimately, the connection between courage and caring is a very close one. So close, in fact, that it would seem that anyone who dares put a feminist care ethics, for example, into practice had better be prepared to hold courage as an important and ultimately

²³⁶ Cherry, M. Coming out of the shade. 2017. In *Philosophy's Future: The Problem of Philosophical Progress*, eds. R. Blackford & D. Broderick. Wiley-Blackwell, p29.

²³⁷ “Courage,” Merriam-Webster, 2026. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/courage>

necessary regulative ideal. There is no caring without a heart. There is no care without courage.

It's common, when people hear that someone studies philosophy, for them to innocently ask: "What is your philosophy?" Likely, they want a quick answer or a term that explains what kind of life the philosophy student thinks one should live. Sometimes, though not always, such questions may be driven by sectarian motives. Is this so-called "philosopher" in my group? Many academics cringe at such questions—today, philosophy is more about how to think than what to believe. However, these two focus areas are not completely separate. Increasingly, public intellectuals—many of whom use the label "philosophy"—actively promote certain ways of living, like Stoicism and Epicureanism, which are among the most popular. Public figures like Ryan Holiday²³⁸ and Robert Greene²³⁹ promote what many call philosophy, even though they lack formal training in the field. In fact, Holiday, in particular, faced criticism from Massimo Pigliucci and Gabriele Galluzzo, who argued there's a difference between what Holiday promotes and the true essence of Stoicism.²⁴⁰ As interest in public philosophy grows among academically credentialed philosophers, including Pigliucci, there is understandable discomfort over many non-credentialed individuals possibly misrepresenting philosophy. This is certainly not to say, however, that Holiday misrepresents philosophy insofar as he promotes a

²³⁸ See Ryan Holiday, *The Daily Stoic*.

²³⁹ See Robert Greene, *The 48 Laws of Power*.

²⁴⁰ Alexandra Alter, "Ryan Holiday Sells Stoicism as a Life Hack, Without Apology," *The New York Times*, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/06/fashion/ryan-holiday-stoicism-american-apparel.html>

specific way of life, or a set of beliefs about how one ought to live, provided they have particular goals and desires to satisfy. Often, schools of thought such as Stoicism, Epicureanism, Ethical Egoism, and so on aim at the good life or the much vaguer goal of “happiness.” Pigliucci sees this as a valuable feature of philosophy’s public reputation rather than as a limitation. He openly lives by Stoic principles and has found that there is a “hunger” among the public for discussions about, and schools of thought that relate to, the good life.²⁴¹ In some ways, this departs radically from many if not most philosophy classes, where the emphasis is often on norms of reasoning and argumentation rather than on promoting or suggesting a variety of “schools of life” to choose from. When topics like Stoicism, Absurdism, Existentialism, and so forth *are* discussed, they are usually presented as train stops along the history of philosophy, or as foils against which students are expected to formulate their own arguments. When a professor *does* promote their own views in the classroom, this is often met with disapproval both from colleagues and students, and perhaps a few Rate My Professor reviews advising others to write essays aligned with the instructor’s perspective. The risks, then, of engaging the public as academic philosophers are real and multifaceted, because that public is often looking for a subtle mixture of vulnerability from the philosopher *and* a space in which they can formulate their own views, unimpeded by the influence of the philosopher. And as we have seen, many approach philosophers with the assumption that they, in fact, *do* have a philosophy of life which they abide by, and which they may attempt to impose

²⁴¹ Massimo Pigliucci, “Public Philosophy and the Good Life,” p.

on others, if given the opportunity. Given the fact that we are usually strangers to them,²⁴² and they are often strangers to us, overcoming these risks takes courage.

Why a Dialogue?

In recent years, Barry Lam and others have called attention to the value of doing and teaching philosophy through narrative or storytelling. Lam argues that, in contrast to other methods of teaching and expressing philosophy, whether through the written word or in the classroom, narrative has an advantage at least insofar as it “creates the need to know.”²⁴³ Stories capture our imagination in ways more traditional modes of expression in philosophy cannot, leading to a desire on the part of the listener to know how the story ends. If done successfully, storytelling in philosophy can lead to a desire to know something of philosophical importance. So, we end up with a situation where philosophy teachers can create a desire to know more about philosophy simply by rethinking *how* philosophy should be expressed. For the non-academic philosopher (which constitutes the vast majority of people, i.e., everyone *not* employed in or involved with academic philosophy), philosophy through narrative and storytelling promises to create a desire for philosophical knowledge and philosophical understanding in ways in which a journal abstract, textbook chapter, PowerPoint presentation, etc., often cannot.²⁴⁴ If our goal, as philosophers, is to broaden the reach of philosophy’s influence on both the public and in the lives of our students, then it seems there is a case to be made for the value of narrative in philosophy. But why

²⁴² Except in cases where fame has allowed our “reputation to precede” us among the public, so to speak, a situation in which hardly any formally trained philosophers find themselves.

²⁴³ Barry Lam, “Public Philosophy Through Narrative,” in *A Companion to Public Philosophy*, p. 250.

²⁴⁴ I expect there will be exceptions here, including and especially cases of creative non-fiction is employed to present an engaging narrative.

should we be so concerned with broadening the reach of philosophy? More specifically, one question worth asking here is, What does public philosophy and more creative ways of teaching philosophy do *for philosophy*? In this chapter, I'll argue that there are a range of advantages both to 1.) employing narrative and storytelling in philosophy, and to 2.) broadening our horizons when it comes to who we take our philosophical audience to be.

Public philosophy, perhaps more so than related phenomena in other fields, such as “citizen science” or the so-called “naïve art” of Frida Kahlo and others, begs the question – What is philosophy? A key challenge public philosophers face – and one which I myself have faced working in a variety of contexts including philosophy for children (P4C), high school ethics bowl, and other projects with UC Santa Cruz’s Center for Public Philosophy – is marking a line, if such a line is to be found, between what counts as philosophy and what doesn’t. Another way of presenting this question is by asking: In what way are the sorts of questions I’ve discussed with 4th graders recognizable as the sorts of questions asked in a field to which Kant, Descartes, and Aristotle have contributed, and which contemporary philosophers like Jerry Fodor and Judith Jarvis Thomson write often inaccessible essays about? In one sense, this question oversimplifies – one may know a thing or two about astronomy without finding an academic text in astronomy accessible. This issue is not so much the issue under discussion. Of course, one may take complicated and inaccessible academic material and present it in a more simplified form. The issue at hand, rather, is the apparent disconnect between public philosophy and what might appear at first glance to be

analogous cases, for example, citizen science and naïve art. It's clear that in each of these other cases, members of the public who often have not received a formal education in their respective fields are *contributing* to science and art, respectively.²⁴⁵ A core theme in citizen science is that members of the public collect data that is recognizable as valuable from a scientific perspective. The US government uses the term “crowdsourcing” to describe the act of obtaining data from citizen scientists, as is reflected in the [Crowdsourcing and Citizen Science Act of 2016 \(15 USC 3724\)](#). In this case, citizens are engaging in something recognizable as science, and they contribute to scientific research. It's less often the case, however, that public philosophers or their students or audiences are said to contribute to philosophy, particularly analytic philosophy. Most philosophers of perception, for example, would not go to a fourth grader to get their understanding of the way perception works, whereas if a fourth grader is able to collect data that may contribute in some way to scientific research, there would be no *prima facie* reason to reject this data. Data, on the citizen science model, is data, whether collected by a 4th grader or by someone else.

I take it that, in broad strokes, the whole issue under discussion in my *dialogue* has been raised. The problem (and with it my critique of the current philosophical climate) is essentially that in academic philosophy the genetic fallacy feels rife. But

²⁴⁵ I've already mentioned Frida Kahlo as an example of a naïve artist who has contributed to art and the artworld. An objection may be raised here, pointing to cases like Socrates and others, to show that philosophers without formal education in philosophy can and do contribute to academic philosophy. To this my reply is that these are examples of good public philosophers, but Socrates clearly was not an academic philosopher in the usual sense of that term. So, it's not so much that Socrates contributed to academic philosophy, and more so that academic philosophy has appropriated the thought of a lifelong public philosopher.

just because it *feels* rife doesn't mean it actually is, so establishing this will take some work. Moreover, the work of establishing this doesn't strike me as being work for philosophers. Sociologists could put statistics to use showing a bias in favor of prestige in philosophy, and, as we are well aware, there has been a strong historical bias in Western philosophy toward white heteronormative men. A key component in my thinking is informed by the view that the genetic fallacy underlies much of this, including an ongoing bias toward prestige. So, the burden of proof will be on me to show that a similar fallacious way of thinking about what philosophy is underlies these phenomena. Others have framed similar issues in different conceptual terms, as is arguably the case when Miranda Fricker speaks of testimonial and hermeneutical injustices.²⁴⁶ Later on, I'll go into more detail about the usefulness of these terms, but at the outset an issue I'd like to flag is that related phenomena are not always *injustices*, per se. In particular, a hermeneutic injustice seems to require ignorance, or even necessitate it. Often, they are the result of sheer ignorance,²⁴⁷ a thought which arguably lends itself to a concept which employs the term "fallacy". Also, the term "injustice" may invite a stronger defensive response on the part of whomever it is who is guilty of the injustice. Fallacious thinking, however, requires merely an adjustment in thought patterns without an implication of guilt (apart from perhaps, an *epistemic guilt*, whatever this may mean, which I'll explore later). There's much to be said on this topic, and giving a coherent introduction to my views on the interplay between notions of

²⁴⁶ Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*.

²⁴⁷ Socrates' frequent comparison of ignorance with evil or moral badness does inform by thinking here, and it's my view that what we often perceive as malice really is in fact mere ignorance.

privilege and oppression, identity, and guilt is not a straightforward task, but in brief these considerations too are at the core of my project. The genetic fallacy is highly relevant here, and my hope is that the future of philosophy provides more space for a plurality of voices and perspectives, irrespective of their source. What this means and what this looks like are of course difficult challenges, especially since I take it that the source of a thought does in fact influence the content of that thought. So, source is relevant, but it is the thought that is assessed. Just as, for example, a piece of information might only be presented on either CNN or Fox News, but one should not accept or reject that thought on the basis of its coming from either CNN or Fox News.

The distinction between form and content is also relevant, and it contributes to a fallacious way of thinking common in academic philosophy. Others and I have found that, at least as a teaching device, Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" is highly useful for illustrating an important challenge to utilitarianism. While one could write an academic essay outlining the challenge which Le Guin presents, the form of Le Guin's piece is in many ways itself the content. At no point does the text strike the reader as a critique. Rather, Le Guin invites us to look and see for ourselves, and some forms, particularly the short story and the dialogue, lend themselves better to this than academic essays often do. So, by overtly and almost exclusively relying on a certain form, academic philosophy has limited itself – perhaps unknowingly – to a particular kind of content. Here too the genetic fallacy becomes relevant – if certain content has the wrong form, that is, if it comes from the wrong source, then this limits its influence within certain academic spaces. And yet, when

students come to me in office hours interested in philosophy, it's often the novels and creative works of Camus, Nietzsche, and others whom they gravitate toward, and I sometimes have had to tell them that these works are not often read in analytic philosophy departments. I have missed out on being exposed to certain philosophical content, due in part to a prejudice²⁴⁸ against the form of these works. Rarely does one open *The Journal of Philosophy* or most other major philosophical journals in analytic philosophy to find a short story or a dialogue printed there.

At this point one may object that the fallacies and prejudices so far mentioned are instead well-reasoned conclusions reached through the progress of philosophy during the last century. The rejection of more creative works of philosophy is thought to be instead a move to a more rigorously analytical philosophy, and the influence of the logical positivists is thought to account for a certain turning away from certain threads in the history of philosophy. To the question, for example, of why stoicism and stoic philosophers have earned little attention among contemporary philosophers,²⁴⁹ a reply that makes reference to logical empiricism is reasonable. A respect for facts and logical argumentation seems to limit the extent to which we can engage with philosophies which place the relevant "facts" beyond the realm of empirical experience, and stoicism as it happens is a vivid example of one such philosophical system. The religious element in much of stoic thought is perhaps enough to serve as

²⁴⁸ Pernicious or otherwise.

²⁴⁹ Discounting, of course, those who work on these topics as studies in the history of philosophy.

an illustration of this point, but the apparently non-empirical character of stoicism runs even deeper. Take the following passage from Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*:

Dig inside yourself. Inside there is a spring of goodness ready to gush at any moment, if you keep digging.²⁵⁰

Surely this claim doesn't fit the criteria for good philosophy as conceived in a discipline shaped by the standards of the logical positivists. What fact could correspond to this "spring of goodness" mentioned? And what could prove or disprove this statement? It seems that nothing can, for if no goodness is found in this effort the reply can always be made that one has not dug well enough into oneself. Or what counts as "goodness," e.g., peace of mind, serenity, tranquility, etc., can just as easily be cast as the opposite of goodness, i.e., a resignation to one's present circumstance, a kind of "giving up" or an unwillingness to change one's material²⁵¹ conditions. It would seem then that there is little to be said for stoic projects in analytic philosophy, despite the influence stoicism has in more public, and less academic, spaces.²⁵² This said, stoic philosophy still garners much interest among lay people, and many "philosophy" sections in bookstores, podcasts on philosophy, and so on give space to stoic philosophers. So, a reconciliation of some kind seems called for, especially if we are to continue to advance

²⁵⁰ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, Book VII. 59.

²⁵¹ And thus, presumably, empirically verifiable.

²⁵² A case in point here is James Stockdale's account of stoicism in "A Stoic Warrior's Triad," given as a lecture at The Marine Amphibious Warfare School. Stoicism may be good enough for the Marines, but it hardly stands up to the standards of analytic philosophical research current in many academic spaces today. Note also that there seems to be something of a spectrum between "public" and "academic" philosophy – Stockdale's lecture couldn't properly be construed as "public philosophy," but neither is it academic philosophy. It falls somewhere in between.

the work of public philosophy. A few ameliorative strategies come to mind, some, all or none of which may actually prove helpful:

1. Communicate to the public the reasons why analytic philosophy does not hold stoic thought (and other supposed non-empirical philosophies²⁵³) in high repute.
2. Teach and practice public philosophy in such a way that only the issues currently considered relevant to analytic philosophy are discussed.
3. Set up an articulated division between academic philosophy and public philosophy that allows these to function independently.
4. Through public philosophy, apply the standards of analytic philosophy to the philosophical systems lay people are most interested in, whether these standards prove amicable to those systems or not.

While I won't necessarily advocate for any of these strategies, I would more than welcome efforts made by public philosophers to implement these strategies. My reasoning can be illustrated by analogy with efforts to popularize other fields such as physics. A science popularizer who wishes to communicate about physics does not typically restrict his or herself to the physics laypeople are most familiar with or interested in – Newtonian physics may be easier to grasp and more intuitive than developments that have been made in physics over the last century or so, but rarely do science popularizers take this as reason to teach only classical physics. So, a

²⁵³ Examples may include Buddhist ethics, Epicureanism, Platonism, Taoism, and Confucianism, but this is by no means a rigid or exhaustive list.

commitment to the principles and standards extant in analytic philosophy would seem to have a good deal of relevance to efforts in public philosophy. Bridging the gap between the philosophical interests of the public and the philosophical commitments of academics is one area where there remains work to be done.

My strategy, however, will largely be the reverse of the strategies listed in the previous paragraph. While it's true that the logical positivists and others have given very good reason for suspicion of many philosophical traditions that comprise the history of philosophy, both East and West, it's not clear to me that the theoretical front represented by analytic philosophy is unified enough to discount public philosophical interest out of hand. In the latter half of the 20th century, perhaps represented most vividly by Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, a shift has emerged in analytic philosophy toward less systematized thought which arguably can account for those areas of philosophy previously rejected by the logical positivists. Remember Wittgenstein²⁵⁴ and logical positivists like A.J. Ayer placed ethics and aesthetics outside the realm of that to which philosophy could meaningfully apply. And yet, there seems to be no shortage of demand for experts on ethics. It's doubtful, for instance, that a hospital's ethics board, or an organization's ethics committee, and so on, would be dissolved on account of the logical positivist's influence in academic philosophy. We still ask ethical questions, and it still matters to us that we take time to think about, discuss, and write about ethics. And this is to say nothing of analytic philosophers'

²⁵⁴ Wittgenstein writes in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, §6.421: "It is clear that ethics cannot be expressed. Ethics is transcendental. (Ethics and aesthetics are one.)"

continued work in ethics and aesthetics, which should be enough to suggest that there's merit to work in these areas. A rejection of stoicism, then, which appeals to the influence of logical positivism in analytic philosophy, also applies to ethics and aesthetics more broadly,²⁵⁵ but as we see in academic philosophy today, this has not resulted in expunging these areas from academic philosophical study.

I've used stoicism as an example so far to show a seeming distinction between what lay people apparently find philosophically interesting and what academic philosophers find philosophically interesting. Of course, there are exceptions on both sides, and the weight of the example is not absolute. Additionally, stoicism has long wrestled with a religious element in its thought, which would seem to raise questions about its place in a secular academic environment. Ameliorating this concern looks simple enough – talking about stoicism, with its religious elements, is not at all the same thing as promoting those religious elements, in the same way that a college course might cover the history of Islam, Hinduism or Christianity without promoting those religions. However, if we take one of the goals of public philosophy to be getting the public to see the value of philosophy, then the situation becomes less clear. Should we try to express the value of each philosophical tradition, no matter how well-suited that philosophy is to secular, public spaces? We can imagine a stronger case, perhaps were a member of the public feels that astrology has a firm philosophical basis. Does this require us to take astrological thinking seriously, if only for the sake of our interlocutor? My inclination, and I'm sure the inclination of many of my readers, is to say it doesn't,

²⁵⁵ See Wittgenstein's "Lecture on Ethics."

but this doesn't disbar us from giving arguments against astrology, which is in itself engagement with these ideas. The same idea is applicable to Stoicism, Epicureanism, Taoism, Platonism, and so on – while we as contemporary philosophers may not feel particularly beholden to these philosophical traditions, public philosophy may often require us to engagement them, if only for the sake for attempting to refute them. But notice that this requires dialogue, and it requires argumentation rather than a simple dismissal out of hand. On, I think, an important level, a public philosopher must see their task less as lecturing or a “sharing of what one has learned” as if they are merely to report on their experiences within academia, but rather an exchange with the public, which may often result in taking members of the public seriously enough to debate with them. A key motivation behind this dialogue is to suggest how this might be done, and an important part of its intended function is to *show* what a dialogue with non-philosophers may look like.

To avoid the temptation to straw man or caricature my interlocutors, this dialogue will take a largely autobiographical tone. I will be the first to point out that there are strong limitations, in addition to the expected advantages, to this strategy. In part because this work is a dissertation and serves as my own research, I would like to limit as far as possible the temptation to speak for others. So rather than adopting a Socratic figure as either a model or a spokesperson for my own views, both my characters will be based – more or less loosely – on myself, and will resemble myself in many respects. My hope is that by being careful to construct a dialogue which explores the epistemic virtues requisite for public philosophy, including a hesitancy to

speak for others, other dialogues – both lived conversations in the world and, perhaps, other works of a similar format to mine – will benefit, which themselves will have other casts of characters, each given the kind of respect and consideration I hope my interlocutors display. So, the idea is not to limit my dialogue to a specific set of instantiations of what it is to be human, but rather to open up philosophy more generally to the broad spectrum of human identity and experience, and at the outset that requires that I engage with my own experience. In a successful public philosophical setting, however, my aspiration is always to know a little more about the experience of whomever it is I am doing philosophy with.

Ian Olosov has convincingly argued that the space in which philosophy is done carries philosophical significance.²⁵⁶ Among many public philosophers, this is a part of their lived experience doing public philosophy. For example, a classroom in which the chairs can be arranged so that participants can see and communicate directly with one another is often better for philosophical discussion than a large lecture auditorium in which the chairs are fastened to the floor. Olosov takes this insight further and highlights, among other factors, the *mood* conveyed by various spaces.

One advantage of the dialogue over a prose academic essay is the author's ability to play with various spaces, at least through the imaginative features of the work. By having characters hold discussions in different settings and locations, the dialogue itself can serve to call attention to the influence those spaces have on the dialogue itself, and by extension the philosophical content of the dialogue. Plato's works are full of

²⁵⁶ Ian Olosov, "Philosophical Spaces," in *A Companion to Public Philosophy*, p. 266-279.

such examples. The philosophical content of the *Symposium* is responsive to the work's setting, and helps form the basis for the work's closing passages. Public philosophy is no less aware of the relationship between space and philosophy, and the dialogue has the potential to serve as a helpful tool for modeling not only certain norms, strategies, and attitudes that constitute good public philosophy, but also good – or bad – public philosophical spaces. Academic articles as they are generally written have little to no built-in way of commenting – overtly or covertly – on space. If anything, we might say that an academic article exists in a “space of reasons,” but metaphorical spaces are often of little value for those concerned with promoting philosophical discussion in spaces in our daily lives. Furthermore, as is often the case, an academic article often has the disadvantage of setting up an implicit divide between author and reader, if and when these pieces comment on space at all. Arthur Danto, for example, writes on the way in which space is used at the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in Washington, D.C., but there's a sense for those who have not visited the memorial that they might be missing out on the particular experience Danto has had.²⁵⁷ A dialogue, by explicitly grounding its characters in a shared space that is relatively accessible to the reader, goes some way toward dismantling divisions between voices that have a stake in the philosophical discussion.

Another major advantage of the dialogue is that it allows writers to model a gap in knowledge between two individuals. In our teaching practices, building this knowledge on the part of our students is one of our major goals, and imagining a non-

²⁵⁷ Arthur Danto, “The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art,” p. 100-101.

expert perspective allows philosophers an opportunity to practice forms of engaging with non-experts in philosophy. While a well-written academic philosophy article will take time to explain relatively new or obscure concepts, there are limits here, as not every term or concept unique to the discipline can be explained in each essay. Philosophers often use concepts as shorthand for ideas most academic philosophers are familiar with. For example, we often use the terms *a priori* or *a posteriori* without defining these terms because they act as shorthand for the ideas we want to express. The conceptual repertoire that comes with a philosophical education often allows us to communicate with other philosophers more efficiently than we would be able to without these concepts. But if we're interested in producing a more philosophical public, which I would argue would strengthen our democratic institutions and the civic life of a nation,²⁵⁸ then we must be willing to engage with those who do not have these concepts ready at hand. So while the use of philosophical jargon is helpful in philosophical research spaces, they're much less helpful – perhaps even counter-productive – in public philosophical spaces. The dialogue allows an opportunity to model such discourse in ways in which the academic research paper is less able to do. At the same time, one hopes that public philosophical spaces will not remain jargon-free indefinitely – if the terms *a priori* and *a posteriori* could become a part of our everyday vocabulary, so much the better, but these terms must be introduced and clarified to those who are not familiar with philosophical vocabulary.

²⁵⁸ Here I have in mind, among other things, the events of January 6th, which are arguably characterized by an almost blind subservience to authority, rather than critical reflection and philosophical thinking.

As a concluding thought, I'd also like to note that something akin to *non-fictional* dialogues have featured importantly – if not prominently – in the history of philosophy as a means whereby less privileged members of society could test and sometimes refute the ideas of leading theorists in their time. I have in mind here the cases of Elizabeth of Bohemia and Maria von Herbert, who exchanged letters with Descartes and Kant, respectively. In each case, these women raised important objections to their correspondent's views while taking on the attitude of being a student. But those who read the correspondence between Descartes and Elizabeth and between Herbert and Kant quickly discover that they have more to learn from the women here than the men. Due to the inequality and injustice at the time,²⁵⁹ these women's contributions to philosophy were under appreciated. Similarly, those who find themselves outside of the academy today may find that their insights are not easily appreciated by those in the academy. This is not to suggest that those outside the academy are more insightful than those in the academic sphere, but merely that if we are to be impartial thinkers, we need to do the work of listening to those who are often our students, and take their contributions seriously, as Kant and Descartes arguably failed to do.

A Response to the Dialogue “Why Do Philosophy PhD Programs Even Exist?” by

Barry Lam

²⁵⁹ Which, though ameliorated somewhat, remains on-going.

1) Introduction

Barry Lam recently undertook an interesting exercise in philosophy on the *Daily Nous*. Employing the dialogue form, he asks what might be to some of us a familiar question: “Why Do Philosophy PhD Programs Even Exist?” The question is not unfounded. At the time the “first” philosophers lived, there were no philosophy PhD programs. Socrates and Plato, Mencius and Nagarjuna did not demonstrate their research prowess by writing a dissertation or by publishing in academic journals. Questions arise, as they have for some time now, about what “progress” means in philosophy²⁶⁰ and about how “research” ought to look. But Lam’s focus in his short dialogue is elsewhere. He brings to life the voice and perspective of ‘Jordan’, a “distinguished senior philosopher at a “top” analytic research department, Sterlington,” that has been competing for the best graduate students and faculty internationally for over fifty years.”²⁶¹ Jordan here represents the philosopher for whom prestige is important, and throughout the dialogue, he defends the view that “we’re here to find and cultivate true philosophers, people who are going to change the field and be read for 50 years, 100 years, 200 years.”²⁶² In what I take to be a masterful display of comedic irony, Lam has Jordan declare – presumably with a tone of exasperation – that “Thirty years ago we still had people on the brink of being Parfit, Lewis, Williamson, or Nussbaum, and they were solving very serious and ambitious problems.”²⁶³ Of

²⁶⁰ See the early portions of Murdoch’s “The Idea of Perfection” for an interesting take on this question.

²⁶¹ Barry Lam, “Why Do Philosophy PhD Programs Even Exist?,” *Daily Nous* (June 3, 2025).

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Ibid.

course, thirty years ago, Parfit was fifty-two years old, Lewis was fifty-three, Williamson was thirty-nine, and Nussbaum was forty-eight. In each case, these philosophers would go on to publish and continue working after 1995.²⁶⁴ So, at the outset, we get the sense that our most esteemed character in this dialogue may be wrestling less with legitimate concerns about the newest “crop” of philosophers and more with a sense of nostalgia for a bygone era. Namely, the mid-90s.

But it is my view that the concerns raised by Lam remain legitimate, even if his characters are somewhat comical in their approach to the central question. One site for both risks and rewards in the dialogue structure is the multiplicity of voices, which can make the author’s voice difficult – if not impossible – to track. What answer will *Lam* give to our central question? This is not for me to say, and I will not attempt to assess the way in which he might answer the question, but rather to examine his dialogue on its own merits. In addition to Jordan, there are three other characters, gathered (in the spirit of the *Symposium*) “at a casual dinner after having had a bit too much wine... their inhibitions... gone, so that semi-joking but somewhat honest opinions are now being expressed.”²⁶⁵ *Kerr* represents a junior philosopher at a PhD-granting department,

“Prairieview State,” which attracts students who are not considered competitive at top, internationally ranked programs. *Lin* represents a senior philosopher at a university with aspirations to transform a small master’s program into a PhD program. *Blam*

²⁶⁴ Examples include Parfit’s *On What Matters*, vol. 1-3 (2011-17); Lewis’ *Papers in Metaphysics and Epistemology* (1999); Williamson’s *The Philosophy of Philosophy* (2007); and Nussbaum’s *Upheavals of Thought* (2001).

²⁶⁵ Lam, “Why Do Philosophy PhD Programs Even Exist?”

represents a new faculty member at a research institution with a PhD program, but who has previously worked at a liberal arts college.²⁶⁶ Their conversation is admittedly less existential than the title question suggests, and they are not looking for a causal or historical explanation. They are searching for a *justification* for contemporary PhD programs. In fact, their conversation begins when Jordan, at the prestigious “Sterlington,”²⁶⁷ seems to lash out at the *continued* existence of PhD programs. “I think we need to end our graduate program,” he says, “maybe permanently or at least until I see evidence that good people are coming back to philosophy.”²⁶⁸ Jordan’s concern is that philosophy is running out of *good people*. The Parfits and Nussbaums of the academic philosophical world are on the decline, and something else is on the ascendency.²⁶⁹ And recall that this shift has taken place only within the last thirty years. Of the philosophers Jordan mentions, only two – just half of them – have survived. Jordan is wrestling with change. The old guard is being replaced with the new.

2) Jordan, Blam, and the Teacher/Philosopher Tension

Where, exactly, is the point of contention? Jordan seems concerned with training ostensibly very capable and successful philosophers. At the outset, there’s arguably nothing wrong with this desire. Moreover, this attitude is not new. Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, writes: “happiness is coextensive with study, and the

²⁶⁶ Of the four characters in this dialogue, Blam is most obviously meant to represent Barry Lam, yet Blam seems to raise more questions than answers, and, true to the Platonic dialogue form, the conversation ends with a sense of aporia.

²⁶⁷ Presumably roughly equivalent to such institutions as Harvard, Princeton, Oxford, Cambridge, Stanford, Columbia, Pittsburgh, and so on.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Perhaps this “something else” is publishing dialogues between fictional philosophers on *Daily Nous*.

greater the opportunity for studying, the greater the happiness, not as inherent in study; for study is in itself worthy of honor.”²⁷⁰ With unspoken deference to Aristotle, Jordan seems to assume that the activity of doing philosophical research – reading academic Philosophy journals and publishing in them – constitutes the goal of philosophy, and by extension, the goal of Philosophy PhD programs. Reading and writing, on Jordan’s view, are the ideal mode by which philosophy is done, if not the only one. Teaching philosophy, by contrast, is not *doing* philosophy. In Lam’s dialogue, Jordan’s position goes essentially unargued, another irony considering the value Jordan places on the activity of doing philosophy. It would seem that doing philosophy in this context would involve more self-reflection on Jordan’s part. Instead, he seems to be engaged in associative thinking. *I associate Sterlington and publishing in highly ranked research journals with good philosophy; therefore, this is what good philosophy is.* Lam puts another comically tautological statement into Jordan’s mouth. “[F]orgive me for wanting only the best possible philosophers around to engage with. That makes me and them better philosophers. And to the extent that that ends, then philosophy itself deserves to end.”²⁷¹ Here, Lam has Jordan speak in defense of the view that the primary role of faculty and advisors at highly ranked PhD programs is to “model good philosophy” and that accordingly, only the best graduate students should be selected to matriculate at the program. Note that Jordan does not believe that faculty at these institutions have an obligation to *teach* good philosophy. “We are not teaching or

²⁷⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1178b28-31.

²⁷¹ Lam, (2025).

educating aspiring philosophers,” according to Jordan, “we are being philosophers, people who aspire to the deepest knowledge in the universe.”²⁷²

This view opens up a couple of mysteries, neither of which is explored in much depth by Lam, although the first is alluded to. Blam argues that there’s value in “a place for the kind of continuing philosophical education that develops erudite generalists who are good at teaching and inspiring kids to pass on what they love.”²⁷³ In other words, there’s value in keeping the philosophical tradition alive, and there’s value in teaching philosophy without the expectation of fame or renown. Lam (and Blam) uses an analogy with tennis to make his point. If there’s value in tennis, either as a competitive sport or as a recreational activity, then we would not expect to see only Bollettieri academies in the world. We would expect to see local tennis coaches as much as we see Roger Federer and Serena Williams. Moreover, we would not be particularly nonplussed if one day, as we drove by the local park, we saw some amateurish neighbors of ours playing a round of tennis for exercise or amusement. Our first thought would certainly not be that the local tennis court ought to be “closed down” on account of the one-handed backhands and continental forehands we see there.²⁷⁴ The first mystery, then, raised by Jordan’s thought is how anyone should expect to be taught philosophy in the first place, if the responsibility of the philosopher is primarily to do philosophy. Blam’s reply is that one can expect to be taught philosophy by recognizing that philosophy is done at a wide range of institutions with a wide range of levels of

²⁷² Ibid.

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ These methods, by Lam’s account, are not accepted among professional tennis players.

prestige. Despite the primacy the profession places on research, it should not strike us as unusual to see career philosophers who aim to teach much more than they publish. And why should this strike us as odd? Socrates had far fewer writings than he had students. The same can be said of Confucius and Nagarjuna. The second mystery is this: What is the value of aspiring to “the deepest knowledge in the universe,” even if we take that knowledge to exist?

3) Framing Lam’s Question in a Broader Historical Context

I’ll address each of these questions by taking a much broader perspective on the central question than Lam. As it turns out, both Plato and Aristotle can furnish, if not answers, at least helpful contributions to the central problem, namely, the tension between *teaching* philosophy and *doing* philosophy. And as we would expect, at several points these thinkers conflict. But each perspective – the Platonic as well as the Aristotelian – offers some degree of legitimacy to ways of understanding the discipline as it currently stands. I will characterize the Platonic approach to philosophy as conceptually exploratory, somewhat more democratic, and more speculative than the Aristotelian approach. Aristotle, by contrast, prioritizes empirical evidence, the material conditions under which philosophy is done, and a kind of habituation that brings about certain virtues that not only arise from the habituated activity of philosophy but are also conducive to it. On the Aristotelian view, philosophy becomes a sort of feedback loop by which we become more contemplative and incline toward eudaimonia, all the while paying heed to the pragmatic features of philosophy, on his view. Famously, Aristotle conceives happiness, or *eudaimonia*, as virtuous rational

activity, which by definition is not a static or passive state. So, there is reason to suspect, *prima facie*, that Jordan's claim that philosophers are "people who aspire to the deepest knowledge in the universe" is inconsistent with the Aristotelian view. We need more than mere knowledge, according to Aristotle. We need rational activity in accordance with virtue. We need to be *doing* something. Why shouldn't this *something* be teaching? Here, it will be helpful to turn to Socrates and Plato to examine the manner in which they did philosophy.

Two features of the Platonic dialogues are clear to those familiar with them: *elenchus* and *aporia*. In fact, these two features are nearly inseparable. Plato has Socrates arrive at *aporia* by means of *elenchus*. In other words, Socrates employs refutation to highlight gaps in our knowledge. These lacunae have captivated the West ever since and have inspired the likes of Whitehead to hyperbolically characterize Western Philosophy as a "series of footnotes to Plato."²⁷⁵ Murdoch insightfully recognizes the seeming contradictions of philosophy implicit even in Plato's day, namely "a two-way movement in philosophy, a movement toward the building of elaborate theories, and a movement back again toward the consideration of simple and obvious facts."²⁷⁶ Socrates' method is in league with Descartes', as both thinkers employed doubt and skepticism in an effort to discover something certain. Whereas Socrates would doubt the beliefs and theories of his interlocutors, Descartes more radically doubted his own sense perceptions, but the basic dichotomy is there – when

²⁷⁵ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, (1929).

²⁷⁶ Iris Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," <https://yalereview.org/article/iris-murdoch-perfection>

building elaborate theories in an effort to establish certainty and avoid doubt, both thinkers often had to return to “simple and obvious facts,” and this is no less philosophy than the elaborate theories. This is precisely where Socrates waxes democratic, despite the reservations about democracy that Plato has him voice in the *Republic*.²⁷⁷ Laches suggests the seeming truism that courage is standing one’s ground in battle,²⁷⁸ while Critias tells Socrates that temperance is modesty or a sense of shame.²⁷⁹ While Socrates quickly rejects these notions in search of “elaborate theories,” he is at the same time doing something remarkable by today’s standards – or at least by Jordan’s. He is asking non-philosophers what they think. And while Socrates rejects Laches and Critias’ answers in search of better ones, it’s not so much that they are simply wrong – they’re arguably not – but that they’re not *right enough*. In other words, they have not given a comprehensive account of courage or temperance in a satisfactory philosophical way. Laches’ definition is merely ostensive, whereas Critias’ needs refining. In other words, we see the interplay between the elaborate and the simple, between the obvious and the non-obvious.

I mentioned Descartes earlier because he passes from the obvious through the elaborate back to the obvious much more impressively than most other thinkers. He begins by recognizing the reality of the objects of his sensory impressions – “I am here by the fire with these papers”²⁸⁰ – something ostensibly obvious, even by modern philosophical standards, before utilizing doubt and argumentation to construct

²⁷⁷ See *Republic*

²⁷⁸ See *Laches*

²⁷⁹ See *Charmides*

²⁸⁰ Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*.

an elaborate theory by which he can with certainty resume his earlier, obvious belief, that he has a body, and that his senses usually do not deceive him, though they are capable of doing so. If Jordan were alive in the 17th Century, Descartes would certainly be the sort of student and philosopher he would like to matriculate at his program. Descartes is the sort of philosopher people read for hundreds of years, satisfying a core desideratum for Jordan, and Descartes is certainly one “who, when other people read them, think, this is it, this is philosophy worth thinking about, worth putting on a syllabus.”²⁸¹ Yet, the conclusion Descartes draws²⁸² is really not at all radical by the standards of his own day. He reaffirmed the existence of a “soul” or something analogous to one, he provides an argument for God with traditional Catholic attributes, and perhaps most importantly, he assuages his doubt about his sensory data. The question can rightly be asked: Is this really “the deepest knowledge in the universe”? What makes Descartes such an impressive philosopher, by the same metrics Jordan employs?²⁸³ The question even more obviously applies to Socrates, whose day-to-day and way of “doing philosophy” differ greatly from Jordan’s. Surely, it would be unwise to argue that Socrates and Descartes were not doing philosophy – their influence is strongly felt on many, if not most, philosophy syllabi throughout the West. And yet they bear little resemblance to the kind of philosopher Jordan is looking for in his PhD program.

²⁸¹ Lam, (2025).

²⁸² If not the method by which he draws that conclusion.

²⁸³ Fame and staying power on the syllabus.

It is here that I would like to argue that the kind of philosopher Jordan is looking for is unlikely to be a “good philosopher” in a sense that is consistent with the history of philosophy. Socrates, as we already know, was engaging with, if not the underprivileged classes of Athenian society, at least non-philosophers. He would arguably deny Jordan’s (circular) argument that we become the best philosophers by attracting the best philosophers to our programs. While this can certainly help with notoriety and prestige – few among us will deny the allure of a big name on a CV – leading to fame, it’s doubtful that there’s any connection here with “good people” or good philosophers. Suppose both Jordan and the discipline are mistaken, and that, in the proverbial “eye of God,” those best at teaching are in fact the best philosophers? Why shouldn’t this be the case? The West already has a tradition of teacher-philosophers. Most philosophers in the Western philosophical canon were themselves teachers, beginning in Ancient Greece, though of course, the teachers of Athens in the 5th Century B.C.E. were very different from those in the university model, with its PhD programs. In fact, one plausible objection to my view – that good teachers make good philosophers and vice versa – is that the Sophists, despite their renown as teachers, were not considered by Plato the best philosophers. This objection, however, is unfounded in virtue of the asymmetry between Lam’s area of concern – the process of training philosophers by other philosophers – and the goals of the Sophists, which were not so much to train other Sophists, but to provide an education in argumentation and rhetoric which could be of use in pursuits such as politics and oratory.²⁸⁴ The Sophists,

²⁸⁴ See *Gorgias*, *Apology*.

as they are often either imagined or understood, would be more akin to the LSAT prep services of today, or the debate coaches. Their goals were more explicitly pragmatic than those of Socrates and his circle. If an aspiring politician wanted training in persuasion and argumentation, skills useful for swaying public opinion and gaining power, then education from the Sophists could prove to be a sound investment. But this is not philosophy. Philosophy consists of the search for truth, not the use of persuasion to make others accept what one already takes to be true. This is why there is a difference between Ethics Bowl and Debate Club. To conclude our discussion of the problem posed by Lam, it's helpful now to turn to some of the practical issues raised by the characters Kerr and Lin, issues that are institutional and financial. We'll conclude with a statement of what seems to be the plausible solution to the practical problems raised by Lam.

4) Kerr, Lin, and Next Steps

Kerr and Lin represent the most marginalized philosophers of the four. They, not Jordan nor Blam, are the ones who seem to be in a tough spot. Kerr arguably faces a moral problem – Prairieview State accepts PhD students, but there is a worry that these students will not be competitive on the job market for research positions that are valued by the profession. Moreover, Kerr accepts this with a tone of stark realism: “We’re looking to teach people to make an original, publishable contribution to a literature, so that their career as a researcher can be established.”²⁸⁵ If anything, Kerr’s

²⁸⁵ Lam, (2025).

recognition of the primacy of research seems responsible and even magnanimous. He shows a concern for the future career prospects of his students that is laudable. However, Blam reminds Kerr of another reality: That there are “people at teaching institutions, who are happy there and have great jobs, but were forced to have three publications or so, and whose publications clearly show they are not interested in being an original contributor to a literature so as to be invited to conferences and what not. Those papers just go through the motions of looking and sounding like a piece of philosophy.”²⁸⁶ Blam has observed something I have as well (and presumably Lam, too), that there are people who see more value in teaching philosophy than they do in publishing papers and presenting at conferences. One way “teaching philosophy” is understood is as “perpetuating and sustaining a tradition of ideas, writing, and thinking of high value,” or by serving as “temporary custodians of that tradition.”²⁸⁷ By my understanding, serving as a temporary custodian of the tradition includes the activity of teaching and studying philosophy. In brief, by offering a class entitled “Introduction to Philosophy” or “Ethical Theory” or “Symbolic Logic,” we are already serving as custodians of a tradition dating back to Thales, which, at least in theory, includes many of the most meaningful contributions to philosophy, ethics, and logic over the last 26 centuries. So, while Kerr’s TAs and PhD students may not become the next Parfit or Nussbaum, let alone the next Aristotle, Descartes, or Kant, we do not need this to be their goal. In fact, there is historical precedent for the idea that ambition for

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

philosophical renown can be a barrier to good, or at least accessible, philosophy. We might argue Hegel is but one example, where the pressures of the academy and the prestige of a certain style of writing conduced to inspire philosophical works that strike many as hopelessly inaccessible if not painfully pedantic today. I myself have heard undergraduates bemoan the difficult style of his writing, and professors dismiss his thought as beholden to an invented system that is ineliminably *Hegelian* – that is, of dubious value for the contemporary thinker interested in truth or reality. This is all to say that PhD students and TAs at Prairieview State need not emulate Hegel, or Kant, or Nussbaum, or any well-known thinker from the history of philosophy. Surely Jordan wouldn't encourage Socratic behavior on the part of his students (nothing would get published), so why should he encourage Nussbaumian behavior? Serving as a custodian of the tradition includes more than those things the academy values at its highest ranks. While focusing on researching and publishing does not necessarily make one a bad philosopher, there is more to the role than merely researching and publishing. Teaching, which in a real sense means engaging with non-philosophers just as Socrates and others from the history of philosophy did, not only counts as doing philosophy, but as meaningful philosophy. Without those non-philosophers, who are in many cases our students, the philosophical enterprise would be even more cloistered in its so-called ivory tower, and our concerns would become much less “serious or pressing” because they would be the concerns only of a select few specialists instead of the concerns relevant to our communities and the broader public more generally.

Lin's concerns are probably the most pitiable of the four, but also the most easily understood. Recall that she teaches at an institution with a master's program, and she has the ambition of starting a PhD program. Why? Primarily for the money. She summarizes her position as follows: "Yes, I want more prestige in my life. Yes, I want important people to think about me once in a while. Yes, I want more money and resources for my department."²⁸⁸ While she mentions prestige and important people thinking about her once in a while, I'll assume that these two desires are closely bound up with the desire for resources. Now, I am in no position to suggest a solution to a problem involving university resources. In the eyes of Jordan and even Blam, Lin's desires are misguided primarily because they recognize that starting a PhD program is not a fast track to gaining prestige and getting important people to think about you. But her concerns are valid with regard to resources. With TAs, professors would be able to teach their classes better and ease their grading workloads. Students would benefit from more involvement from the university in their learning, and the university may be incentivized to allocate more funds to the department for research purposes. Ultimately, it is this that Lin longs for. Better working conditions. But Lin and Kerr must grapple with the same problem: What about our obligations to their TAs and PhD students? What will their career prospects be like? The view promoted by Jordan is that PhD students at Kerr and Lin's institutions would be wasting their time. They will ostensibly have no hope of being the next Parfit, and their job prospects (within academic philosophy) would be tenuous. The implication is that these students may be *harmed*

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

by Kerr and Lin's departments, on account of the opportunity cost. To this, I will restate my view that teaching philosophy can and should rightly be considered *doing* philosophy, and that a teaching-oriented career should not be seen as inferior to a research-oriented career. That research is in some way superior to teaching is often assumed within the academy, and Lam makes Jordan's assumption here almost satirically obvious. Blam's suggestion, toward the closing passages of the dialogue, strikes me as the right one, namely that "Lin should consider designing a program that is nothing like Sterlington. Maybe there is a place for the kind of continuing philosophical education that develops erudite generalists who are good at teaching and inspiring kids to pass on what they love, even if they're never a contender."²⁸⁹ In other words, perhaps there is a place for programs that focus more on the educational work that philosophers do, one where the proverbial "local philosopher" can teach students interested in gaining a general education. After all, it is unreasonable to expect the faculty at community colleges to compete with the likes of Nussbaum. And with some luck, we cannot rule out the possibility that one of those students will go on someday to make their own contribution. There's no reason to think that students of Prairieview State graduates may not one day go on to attend Sterlington, if that is their ambition.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

Conclusion

I conclude this work with a reminder that this has not been armchair philosophy, as we have seen, but rather has arisen as a natural consequence of my many varied experiences serving in publicly philosophical capacities, almost exclusively in professional contexts. But my esteemed colleague Christophe Davis once reminded me during a Works-in-Progress talk I delivered on April 28th, 2026, that public philosophy is really much broader than this. Under ideal conditions, we may be public philosophers in nearly any context or setting – except, by definition, academic contexts. I do not take public philosophy to be an exercise in receiving pay or credit for philosophical work in non-academic contexts for the purposes of careerism. Philosophy is always the way I live my life, and only sometimes the way I earn a paycheck.

I will now give a fuller albeit brief defense of “Dayya,” which is intended to indirectly carry over to the other five appendices as well, though I’ll leave the fun of uncovering the five virtues in each case to the reader. We’ve seen an analytic philosophical analysis of the preceding five virtues as they relate to public philosophical contexts, usually understood as contexts where trained professional philosophers such as myself enter public spaces, broadly construed. But what happens when a public philosopher enters another space?

Here’s what happens. He certainly won’t be fixated on himself. Instead, he’ll make an effort to understand and learn from those around him. He’ll be *curious*²⁹⁰ about

²⁹⁰ Thank you, Emily Robertson, for being a constant and shining example of an individual always *healthily curious* about other individuals.

those around him, and he'll speak with others with a view toward understanding *them*, not himself. In this, he practices self-forgetfulness. He'll want to know how she has found herself in this space, and while he'll know exactly why he himself is in this space, he won't make it the center of attention. He wants to learn from Dayya, and he achieves this through self-forgetfulness.

Next, you won't see any effort to reduce others to something beneath him, though some may find this tempting. One area among many where graciousness can show up is between age gaps. In "Dayya," our unnamed male observer is twenty-five, and Dayya is twenty. Furthermore, Dayya is still an undergrad, and our observer has earned two bachelor's degrees and a master's degree. These two discrepancies alone – age and education – would more than justify a lack of graciousness, for many people. Add to this any sense of moral superiority that could have been felt by our unnamed observer at the time as a consequence of national identity – in the summer of '24, we still had a First Lady with a doctorate, and Russia had Putin, as it still has. And yet there is no condescension. He sees Dayya as ambitious, as strong, and is willing to reason with her philosophically in community, as when his colleague raised ethical concerns about immortality. Any perceived discrepancy between status or worth is reduced by the observer through the way he sees Dayya.

He'll be blindly charitable. There's a lot that can and has been seen in Dayya that is unsavory. The mere thought of her arms has made at least one friend of his wince. How could a young woman like that do something so cruel to herself? How could she so flippantly ignore the ethical implications of her scientific ambition? If

she's serious about her ambition and her recovery, shouldn't she be stretching in the morning with the others? Our observer doesn't ask these questions – they're all loaded against Dayya. Instead, he wants to know what's noble and admirable about her. He wants to understand how her pain can be a consequence of something as good and beautiful as love. And, as we'll soon see, his looking for something good has resulted in him finding something good. He has learned something – he has acquired knowledge.

Finally, he'll be creative and courageous, and he'll include "Dayya" here.

Appendix 1: An Incomplete Dialogue on Philosophy:

Teaching and Research in the Discipline

Chapter 1 – Aporia

Interlocutor A: So, you're working on your PhD?

Interlocutor B: That's right.

A: And what does "PhD" stand for?

B: It comes from the Latin, *philosophiae doctor*, but in English we would say "doctor of philosophy".²⁹¹

A: But a doctor of philosophy isn't like a regular doctor – they can't cure illnesses, or prescribe medication, or perform a general health examination, and so on.

B: That's correct – a medical doctor is only one kind of doctor! There are also ThD's, doctors of theology, and JD's, that is, doctors of law, to name a few.

A: What do all these doctors have in common? What makes them all *doctors*?

B: To answer that, it could be helpful to think about the meaning of the word *doctor*. Originally, being a *doctor* meant that one is able to *teach*. The word doctor is derived from the Latin verb *docēre*, meaning "to teach".²⁹²

A: When I think of a doctor I don't usually think of teaching.

²⁹¹ Douglas Harper, "Ph.D." *Online Etymology Dictionary*, www.etymonline.com/word/ph.d. Accessed 16 June 2023.

²⁹² Abdul-Fattah A Asfour, and James P Winter. "Whom Should We Really Call a 'Doctor'?" *CMAJ: Canadian Medical Association Journal = Journal de l'Association Medicale Canadienne*, 28 May 2018 www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5973890/#:~:text=The%20word%20doctor%20is%20derived,normally%20teach%20at%20a%20university .

B: Same here. Of course, MD's, ThD's, and JD's are all unique cases, and some of these do teach and others arguably don't teach at all.

A: Yes, it seems that the main goal of an MD is usually to help people become healthier rather than to teach.

B: That's often the case. And other languages reflect this – in French we say that someone is a *médecin*, not that they are a doctor. But you had originally asked about PhD's, and I think they deserve further consideration.

A: Why's that?

B: Because it's often unclear what their primary role is, especially as professors.²⁹³ Professors often do research, service work, *and* teaching – all three – and yet the credential for most professorships is a PhD, that is, *Doctor of Philosophy*, which again amounts to a “teacher of philosophy”.

A: But to get a PhD you have to do a lot of research – *not* a lot of teaching.

B: That's true, and I can't tell you exactly why that is.

A: I don't think that matters. Explaining why things are the way they are is a job for historians, sociologists, and so on. As philosophers, however, I think it behooves us to think about what *should* be the case.

²⁹³ It will become important to keep in mind the distinction between a PhD, i.e., understood as a holder of a degree, and a professor, i.e., someone employed at an institution for the purposes of teaching and/or research. While a professor's job usually includes teaching as condition of employment, this on its own does not imply anything about what the training for a PhD involves or should involve. It should also be noted that the concepts of “PhD” and “Professor” can function independently of one another; in rare cases someone can be a professor without holding a PhD, and more commonly someone can be a PhD holder without being employed as a professor.

B: What are you saying? Are you asking whether it should be the case that PhD's be focused primarily on research rather than teaching?

A: Well, that's tough for a number of reasons. How should we determine which considerations have the most normative weight?

B: Are you saying we should add up all the reasons for having PhDs focus on research and compare them with all the reasons for having them focus on teaching?

A: I'm not sure about all this. As of now our discussion seems a bit vague.

B: How so?

A: Well, what do you mean by "focus"? What are we really discussing here? Are we talking about the function of a PhD? The intentions of PhD holders? The consequences of having research-focused PhDs vs. teaching-focused PhDs?

B: To my ears, you've hit on three major ethical theories currently discussed in the discipline.

A: What are they?

B: Well, thinking of things in terms of their function gets us closer to an Aristotelian Virtue ethics, or perhaps something like Foot's *Natural Goodness*.

A: I want to hear more about that – how can a PhD student be like the sorts of cases Foot considers? Doesn't she write about a creature's natural condition? Does a PhD student have a natural condition?

B: Yes, you ask an intriguing question, but I'm not quite sure I understand it yet. Perhaps we'll circle back to this?

A: Yes, I'd like to hear the two other theories you were about to mention.

B: Well, looking at the PhD student's intentions reminds me of deontological theories, particularly Kantian ethics, and looking at the consequences of having PhD students focus on one area rather than another reminds me of consequentialist theories.

A: Earlier you had mentioned three theories, but it turns out what you meant is "three broad classifications of theories". Consequentialism, for example, is broad and can include theories as disparate as egoism and altruism.

B: That's true – in the case of consequentialism perhaps I meant to gesture toward utilitarianism, which is arguably the most well-regarded form of consequentialism in the profession today.

A: There's a lot that's been said already, and perhaps more that still needs to be sorted out, but I do want to flag your mentioning the *profession*. Philosophy as a profession is to be taken as something separate from philosophy more generally, I presume?

B: Yes, or at least as I'd like to understand it. Socrates, for instance, never earned a PhD in philosophy and yet he's one of the greatest philosophers out there.

A: I'm not sure what the Socrates example is supposed to show – Aristotle never earned a PhD in philosophy, and neither did Diogenes. But these three are so distinct, and Aristotle arguably so much more in-line with what a professional philosopher does today that it seems more reasonable to explain Aristotle's lack of a PhD in virtue of the degree's not having been yet been invented. There were no engineering degrees in ancient Greece either, but that doesn't show that there's an

essential difference between ancient Greek engineers and modern engineers, or that engineering wasn't seen as a "profession".

B: Your point is well taken. Before we move on, let's decide what it is that we want to discuss, and which questions we want to answer. From what's been said so far, it seems we're willing to question just about anything.

A: I'd like to know whether a PhD ought to teach or do research.

B: But your question oversimplifies – I've already said most professors do both, so at bottom it's not a question of one or the other.

A: Sure, but the present situation strikes me as somewhat absurd. Imagine a special kind of athlete called a "Footarcher" who's responsibilities include playing football *and* doing archery.

B: I see the analogy, but I'm not convinced it's a good one, even if we *can* say there's such a thing as a good analogy. Plus, the term "footarcher" strikes me as unserious. Can you offer me something stronger?²⁹⁴

A: What I'm saying is, wouldn't it make more sense to have professors focus on one or the other? Both teaching and research are very difficult pursuits, and it seems difficult if not impossible to do both without sacrificing one or the other in some way.

B: Ah, I see that more clearly now. But isn't this the case with most professions? Being a good lawyer might require someone to be good at, for example, oratory in addition to being good at studying and writing about the law.

²⁹⁴ What exactly the term "stronger" might mean in this context remains unclear.

A: Well, we don't have to turn to a discussion of the law profession to see the point. In fact, the same point could be made using my original example of sports. I invented a fictitious case, but there is in fact at least one sporting event very similar to the sorts of cases we're considering, namely, the triathlon. Triathletes are expected to swim, run and cycle – and being passionate about one of these, or being much better at one of these than the other two, is no excuse when competing in a triathlon.

B: True – if a triathlete voluntarily enters into a triathlon knowing full well that they'll be expected to swim, run, and cycle, and then complains about it during the event or once it is over, then they have no valid grounds for complaint. But can the same thing be said of PhDs?

A: Well, one question would be, what motivates a person to earn a PhD?

B: This is perhaps one of the great mysteries of the universe.

A: Humor aside, your answer has me thinking that getting a clear answer to that question isn't necessary. The facts are liable to fluctuate from case to case. One person might pursue a PhD because they're interested in teaching, while another might pursue a PhD because they're interested in research.

B: Yes, but remember we can't derive an 'ought' from an 'is'.²⁹⁵ Just because someone pursues a PhD because they're interested in teaching doesn't mean they're justified in doing so. Also, we should remember that we had originally said that most professors who hold PhDs are expected to do *three* things in the course of their duties,

²⁹⁵ Whether this is true is debatable, and the author of this dialogue wishes to make no claims one way or the other.

the third thing being service work. If we're to take what you say seriously, we'd have to admit that a third class of PhD students might be pursuing their PhD because they're passionate about service.

A: You say "service," but what you have in mind is more specific than what that word implies. We can imagine service being the sort of service typically performed at a research institution, namely, sitting on committees, attending faculty meetings, fulfilling departmental roles, and so on.

B: Yes, service as understood in that narrower way. But to drive my point home – I think it would be ridiculous to see a PhD student who is working on their PhD because what they'd really like to do, and what they're really passionate about, is service work. In the same way, I think it's naïve of PhD students to enter into a PhD program with their primary passion being a passion for teaching. A PhD program is intended to train students to do research, and anything other than a research-focused PhD student is misguided PhD student.

A: This may be the case – we'd have to think more about this to see – but I do want to remind you that we had started our discussion by noting that the word "doctor" in the phrase "doctor of philosophy" means "to teach".

B: Two things: First, just because a word has a certain etymology doesn't mean that the etymology is preserved in the meaning of the word. Second, even if it were the case that the word "doctor" means without a doubt "teacher" or "to teach", this is hardly any reason to have doctors focus on teaching. We've already discussed medical doctors, and I think we can agree that they have no special obligation to

focus on teaching just because they're called doctors. Again, most doctors are interested in helping their patients become healthier, *not* in teaching their patients something.

A: I see both of your points. I'll address your second point before returning to your first. You say that a doctor isn't interested in teaching because they have some other practical end they're trying to achieve, namely, the health of their patients. But what does it mean to teach, here? Surely a doctor's job would be near-impossible if they didn't teach their patients anything. Even something as simple as writing a prescription could be seen as a form of teaching. The patient learns from the doctor that they need to take a certain medication, and the doctor has taught them this.

B: I think you're stretching the use of the word "teach" to include this case. In ordinary language we don't think of doctors as teachers.

A: But is ordinary language a good guide for philosophy?

B: It would depend on who you ask. The late Wittgenstein would say so, by my reading.

A: You seem to be well-read in philosophy, which befits a PhD student in that field, but isn't it a fallacy to make appeals to authority? I mean Wittgenstein might be right, or he might not. What are some good reasons for thinking that Wittgenstein is right?²⁹⁶

²⁹⁶ Note on the dialogue – interlocutor A is participating in a good practice by asking interlocutor B for their *reasons*, rather than taking their appeal to authority at face value.

B: Well, when we think about what language *is*, isn't it nothing more than its use? We use language to do all sorts of things – it has no independent truth values outside of the use we've attached to our words and phrases. If I say, "two plus two equals five," I can expect someone to use their words to correct me. This doesn't mean there's some sort of special link connecting our words to certain objective truth values. It isn't because the phrase "two plus two equals five" has a special connection with falsehood that I can expect to be corrected. It's just because this is the way language is used.

A: So, are you denying objective truth?

B: I mean, I just said that I can expect to be corrected, didn't I?

A: Ah, I think I see your point. But what's its application to our previous discussion?

B: Namely, that we use the word *doctor* in a certain way, and our concern should be with its *use*, not with any specific meaning we intend to attach to it.

A: So, what you're saying is that we should follow the majority?

B: I'm not saying that at all. I'm not making any claims about the majority. I'm suggesting we should approach this issue *descriptively*, not normatively, as you seem inclined to do.

A: But you fall into your own trap! You just said that we *should* approach this issue descriptively.

B: Are you going to hold a discussion in good faith, or not?

A: Okay, let's try and arrive at a shared basis from which our discussion may proceed.

B: Your question, as you phrased it earlier, was "whether a PhD ought to teach or do research." But we run into a snag from the get-go – you use the word 'ought'.

A: And what's wrong with this word?

B: The problem is essentially the same as in the *Republic* – when we say 'ought', who is it we take to be speaking? Is it that the powerful, or the strong, should decide what ought to be done? And if not, whom?

A: And Plato's conclusion won't help us, will it? Gone are the days when we could appeal to a myth or to an ideal form.

B: It might surprise you, but I'm not willing to deny these possibilities quite yet. Let's consider the facts, and then proceed from there.

A: And what are the facts?

B: Looking at the context of our discussion seems like a good start. Let's see if we can get the "lay of the land". Where is a PhD student usually to be found?

A: At a university.

B: Good. And are there any facts to be considered when thinking about the function of a university?

A: What do you mean?

B: Well, we might want the university to do one thing, or we may want it to do another, but what is it that a university *does*, apart from what we might wish to be the case?

A: Well, it does what we have already said – universities teach students, but they also conduct research.

B: Have we said this? I believe what we had said is that professors teach and conduct research.

A: Does the university do something outside of and apart from what the professors who work there do?

B: Of course it does. But this is hardly relevant to our discussion. At least, I'm not sure that we're looking for some "higher order" function of universities quite yet.

A: So, are you suggesting that we begin with the more basic functions of a university?

B: That's correct.

A: I'm no expert, and I'm no student of history either, but when you phrase the question like that, one thing that comes to mind is the perseveration of knowledge. Surely, going back to Medieval times, it must be part of a university's basic function to preserve knowledge.

B: Good, and I'm glad you take into account how universities *used* to be, not just how they are now. This will be helpful for thinking about what it is that all universities have in common. Although one worry here is that we're not quite

prepared to hold a discussion about the history of the university. I know this isn't my area of expertise.

A: I would enlist the help of an expert, but I'm not sure where to find one on short notice.

B: Then the best we can do is provide a rough sketch, and hopefully this will suffice to help us do what philosophical work there is to be done.

A: This sounds like a good way of proceeding, and perhaps this is how all philosophy proceeds.

B: I should say so. Given what we've said, it seems that a university need not be understood primarily as a teaching institution. In fact, a good library on its own does a significant portion of the work a university is supposed to do.

A: How do you figure that?

B: If we take what you've said to have some truth to it, namely, that the function of the university involves the preservation of knowledge, then the library seems to be doing most of the work.

A: I think you've made a category mistake – the library preserves *books*, not knowledge.

B: Once again I'm not entirely sure you're arguing in good faith.²⁹⁷ What difference does it make other than to a pedant?

²⁹⁷ Interlocutor B's frequent injunctions to have their interlocutor argue in good faith is not the best philosophical practice. What we often perceive as failures to make good faith efforts are often the result of philosophical differences. Making space for difference, whether that includes philosophical differences more narrowly construed, differences in the form in which philosophy is done (of which this work is an example), differences in *who* it is that is doing philosophy (philosophy remains a comparatively white/male dominated space), etc., is itself philosophical work that has been left largely

A: That's a twenty-five-cent word, to use my father's old phrase. And I'm not sure it's a nice word, either. But in any case, we've established that you're the one working on your PhD, so in my mind you fit the description better than I do. Almost every fact about my life or who I am remains unestablished – but we'll circle back to this.

To answer the question, it makes a tremendous difference, though my suspicion is we'd often like to forget it. A book is an easily identifiable thing. With any luck on the author's part, you hold a book in your hands, and this is plain enough. It's also clearly a physical thing. Who's ever seen the ghost of a book? Knowledge on the other hand is much more ephemeral and difficult to pin down. Is it in our heads? Are there any clear examples of knowledge? Perhaps "one plus one equals two" strikes us as an obvious case, but what is it that's known here other than the proposition itself? Does it tell us about the world? The jury's still out on this one – in any case the confusion surrounding the concept "knowledge" and the relative lack of confusion surrounding the concept "book" should be some indication that these concepts are different.

B: Ah! But Descartes would have you question whether the book *really is* in your hand, and the same goes for mathematical propositions. So, it looks like we can be just as confused about both.

undone in the contemporary academy. While good faith in philosophy is something we should strive for, it arguably cannot be enforced without resorting to bad faith tactics involving socio-cultural power differentials.

A: I like your point! One question is, how does the point you're making help us proceed? Is it still unclear to you whether there's a difference between books and knowledge?

B: On one level I see the philosophical difference, sure. I'm not going to pretend that I think that epistemology, for instance, is the study of books. All my colleagues would laugh at me!

A: And that sometimes is the goal in philosophy, isn't it? Whatever we can say to avoid being laughed at.

In any case, now that we admit the distinction, we can see that the university can't function with just a library and its staff.

B: You're right – and precisely because a university needs people who are willing and able to write the books that we put in the libraries.

A: You're moving much too quickly. There's no good place to begin to respond to what you've said, so I'll start based on the order of the words you've used. You mention "people" and you mention "books". Really my criticism here falls under these two headings.

Why can't the university just collect the books of "people" who happen to be writing those books? Plenty of people write books who not only are not affiliated with a university, but also never wish to be. So, it's not clear to me why we'd suddenly need people who work for a university writing books that are intended to be collected by the university, apart from some vague and seemingly aimless desire to have the university contain as many books as possible.

Secondly, you refer to the “books that we put in the [university] libraries,” and it seems there are two ways of thinking about whatever set of objects this description refers to, i.e., descriptively, and normatively. It’d be good for us to get clear on what we mean. As a matter of descriptive fact, I might find F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *Tender is the Night* in my university library, but it’s a wholly separate question whether this means that *Tender is the Night* should be in the university library.

B: This will depend on the conceptual groundwork we’ve laid so far, namely, that the university’s function is at least to preserve knowledge.

A: Yes, and remember we’ve said *knowledge*, not books. Does *Tender is the Night* contain knowledge?

B: What do you mean by “contain knowledge?”²⁹⁸ I’m not sure knowledge works the way you suggest. Knowledge strikes me as mind-dependent, and *Tender is the Night* is a book, not a mind.

A: Okay, let me rephrase the question. Is *Tender is the Night* instrumental in disseminating knowledge?

B: Woah, hold your horses. Let’s take a breather, shall we?

A: I’m sorry?

B: “...instrumental in disseminating knowledge...” That’s quite a phrase, and I’m not sure what it means.

A: Where exactly are you hung up?

²⁹⁸ Here we see the conversation shift away from an ultimately unresolved discussion about whether fiction can produce knowledge. *Aporia* is a natural and welcome part of the dialogue form.

B: On each of the words. You say “instrumental,” but is this to say you’re proposing an instrumentalist account of knowledge?

A: I’m not sure what an instrumentalist account of knowledge is.

B: Ah, so I take it *you’re* not working on your PhD in philosophy.

A: That’s right.

B: I’m sorry, I just remembered I have someplace to be.

A: Really?

B: That’s right.

A: Where?

B: I should probably get back to work.

A: Hang on a moment. What are you working on?

B: I really should get going.

A: Hang on just a moment.

B: Why should I?

A: Why not?

B: Well, to be frank, because you’re not a philosopher. I mean I’m not sure how productive this conversation will be. You and I have different conceptual toolkits, that’s all. I mean no disrespect, by the way. I’m sure there are great minds in the “history of consciousness” department or wherever it is you’re from!

A: I’m not sure I follow at all.

B: Come on now, I really must be going.

A: Well, I understood *that* plain enough, didn’t I?

B: Look, I...

A: Our concepts don't seem so different that you can't communicate to me that you have to leave, so why should you be prevented from staying? We seem to have been managing pretty well, so far.

B: Have we? We haven't conclusively established anything at all.

A: And is that the goal of philosophy? To conclusively establish things?

B: Well, of course it is! Philosophy is a body of knowledge, after all, and you'd be silly to think that truth isn't what we're after.

A: Perhaps I'm silly then. But tell me – in what way is philosophy a body of knowledge?

B: On the whole, humans have learned something from philosophy. The world and the people in it are more knowledgeable as a result of philosophy's influence.

A: That may be true. But tell me – did Berkeley contribute to human knowledge?

B: Don't be cute and arbitrarily pick a "philosopher" who happened to have gotten a lot wrong. Besides, Berkeley was a priest.

A: Okay, what about Kant or Descartes?

B: They each made valuable contributions to philosophy, despite their short comings. In some sense you could say scientists are the same way. Darwin was incredibly influential, even though he didn't know everything and probably ended up getting a lot wrong, too.

A: Yes, but we speak of scientific facts, don't we? Could you give me some examples of "philosophical facts"?

B: Easy. That there's a distinction between "is" and "ought", that no human being will ever have a perspective that's entirely objective, that we can imagine the mind being separate from the body...

A: Let's slow down and think about the examples you've mentioned.

B: Perhaps some other time? I really should be getting back to work, and to be honest, I don't even know your name.

A: Well, this is a dialogue after all, so it shouldn't be too hard to remember.

B: You started off as "Interlocutor A," but now you seem to be going by a nickname – "A".

A: That would seem to be the case.

B: The question is, what sort of name is "Interlocutor A"? Did your parents choose that name for its meaning, or because of the way it sounds?

A: First off, I could ask you the same question. But to be honest with you, I'm not even sure I have parents. But I *must* have parents, right?

B: We haven't established that, either.

A: Wait, so when you mentioned we haven't conclusively established anything, you really meant it, didn't you?

B: Well, we established one thing.

A: What's that?

B: That I'm working on my PhD.

A: Perhaps that's a start.

B: Tell you what. Let's say we meet again in chapter II and give ourselves some proper names?

A: Sounds good to me. Really what we need to do is establish an *identity* for ourselves.

B: Agreed. See you in chapter II!

A: Take care!

Chapter 2 – Identity

Interlocutor B: Interlocutor A, is that you?

Interlocutor A: Yes, it's me.

B: I didn't recognize you – but I suppose in some sense that's why we're here, to determine how we might be recognized.

A: That's right. Do you suppose we might say something about our *current* states?

B: Is there anything to be said?

A: Perhaps not – but I'm thinking of Kant now and his *noumena*.²⁹⁹ Perhaps the philosopher might be able to recognize something of us in that.

B: Yes, but that's a poor image for a literary work like a dialogue. Shouldn't we give our reader a picture?

²⁹⁹ Kant

A: Again, perhaps we could, but I worry that our reader may be held captive by that picture.³⁰⁰

B: That's fair, and I see the hesitation. But let's imagine our reader for a moment.

A: Okay.

B: This will prove difficult, as our reader could be just about anyone, but I think we can take a few things for granted.

A: And what are those things?

B: Well, unless this work has been read aloud either by a human or a machine, or translated into Braille, we can surmise that the reader has eyes. I would imagine that most folks reading this are doing so with their eyes.

A: Fair, but as you're aware there are cases where there may be exceptions. To the blind our dialogue may be presented differently, and to the deaf an audio recording of our dialogue won't be of much use. But suffice it to say our reader is probably being presented with this dialogue in one way or another, and that they are doing so with one or some of the senses.

B: Yes, they are either seeing the text on the page, or they are listening to it, or they are feeling it with their fingers.

A: Yes, it seems likely that they are using one or some of those three senses. Taste and smell seem unlikely to be relevant, unless someone devises a device for transmitting philosophical propositions via taste and smell.

³⁰⁰ Wittgenstein

B: Which, for my part, I'll say is possible but unlikely.

A: Agreed.

B: And I take it that the author could guess as to who their reader is and whether this work will in the near term be presented as an audio recording or in braille.

A: And the author, thank goodness, is letting me know that it's much more likely that the readers of this work, at least in its early formats, will be using their eyes to read and not one of the other two senses mentioned.

B: So, we can guess that the reader is accustomed to seeing?

A: But we shouldn't take it for granted.

B: Ah, yes, which is one of the limitations this author, and perhaps any author, runs up against. Who knows who their audience might be, and how knows what *they* are bringing to the table?

A: Right. So, when Wittgenstein warned us not to be held captive by a picture, it turns out this is a very tall order.

B: Yes, the sighted at least tend to organize their experience of the world at least in part by means of pictures, if what is presented to the mind via the eye can be said to be a picture.

A: And some would deny this, but the intuition here seems enough to get us where we want to go. In any case, it often *seems* like the world is often presented as a picture via the eye.

B: And what of the other senses? Are they in a fundamentally different position in relation to philosophy? Should we be relying on our mouths and ears, as we do when holding a conversation, to do philosophy? Could this be one way of avoiding being held captive by a picture?

A: I doubt it. I think Wittgenstein was probably remarking less on the dangers of sight as a means of sensory perception and more, though I say this with some trepidation, remarking on the dangers of what we're doing now.

B: What is that?

A: Well, we seem to be latching on to Wittgenstein's thought – we're almost paralyzed by it. It's like we feel as if we must address it finally and resolve it, or forever be doomed to do poor philosophy.

B: Maybe that's what Wittgenstein meant, though?

A: Perhaps, but if so, that puts folks who either haven't read or don't care about Wittgenstein in a strange position. There are plenty of folks today in philosophy who do not respect Wittgenstein, and don't wish to engage with his philosophy or do philosophy in a way that's remotely Wittgensteinian.

B: Yes, as a PhD candidate, I've encountered several of these characters.

A: But I'm inclined to accept them as philosophers – they are, after all, often employed in philosophy departments, and are invited by other philosophy departments to speak and participate in philosophy.

B: So perhaps we should forget about Wittgenstein for the time being.

A: I wouldn't say we should forget about him, just that we shouldn't get hung up on him. Let's move forward.

B: We can try – let's think about where we want to go and think about how to get there.

A: It still stands that we're in the rather awkward position of being unable to recognize one another, and that as characters in a dialogue, we aren't really characters at all.

B: Yes.

A: I'll give the reader something if you allow me.

B: Go ahead.

A: There's a painting by Henry Ossawa Tanner I admire greatly, entitled *The Annunciation*. It depicts Mary being visited by Gabriel to tell her she'll give birth to the Messiah.

B: Ah, a religious painting. Are you religious?

A: Remember, we haven't established much yet. Though I'll point out that it seems I must at least have eyes if I'm to have seen Tanner's painting.

B: Granted, but really you and I and the author know that at basis we're not much more than a spokesperson for the author.

A: Fair, and this is a worry, but again a worry I feel every author faces.

B: An author can't help but write from their own perspective.

A: That's it. And this is true of philosophy as well – in order for Kant's work to have been written or any other philosopher's work to have been written, for that

matter, there had to have been a Kant or some other particular philosopher – body and all.

B: But you mentioned Kant's *noumenon* earlier – an inspiring concept if I've ever heard one.

A: Yes, but again the *noumenon* isn't something that lends itself well to images. This is because Kant has the *noumenon* be a thing *as it is in itself*, as distinct from what it is presented as through the senses.

B: Such an esoteric concept seems only to be of use to philosophers – when one goes out into the world and attempts to live their lives, I doubt they'll feel the relevance of the *noumenon*.

A: Agreed, but an illustration might prove informative, even if it's far from perfect.

B: I don't know, there's disagreement on this. In any case, why did you mention *The Annunciation*?

A: I'd like to think that the reader can imagine us as Gabriel is presented in that painting – not as a human being or anything else easily identifiable as a thing, but rather as a pillar of light.

B: A pillar of light?

A: Exactly.

B: Come on.

A: What?

B: I mean that's ridiculous. That presents us in, well, a positive light.

A: Fair, but why shouldn't we present ourselves as such?

B: I mean, don't we run the risk of being, well, held captive by...

A: Don't say it. I know. But is there any real harm in giving the reader this image for now?

B: I mean, there *could be*. I'd have to think some more.

A: Come on, let's move forward, shall we?

B: I'd really rather think about this some more.

A: But you look radiant.

B: Geez, no one's ever said that to me before. Thank you.

A: In fact, you look just like a pillar of light.

B: In spite of myself, it feels good to hear myself described that way.

A: Well, of course it does – even Kant himself seems to have guessed as much. He likens the good will to a diamond or a jewel valuable in and of itself, but clearly, he wasn't trying to say anything at all about diamonds and jewels.

B: I mean, maybe he was...

A: Like it or not, I think these sorts of images, metaphors, etc., sometimes do more good than harm.

B: And if not?

A: Then perhaps harm will be done, at least for now.

B: Okay, okay. So, we're two pillars of light in communication with one another. Somehow and in some way, I seem to be a pillar of light who is working on their PhD.

A: And I'm a pillar of light with eyes – this image is beginning to become unflattering.

B: Yes, are your retinas hooked up in some way to the pillar of light? Are there nerve endings that plug right into the pillar? Wrap around the pillar? Are the eyes linked to the pillar via a pineal gland?

A: Yeah, I don't know. Is the pillar of light even a material object? Should we consult an expert on light about this?

B: Perhaps someone will go and consult them, but you keep reminding us we have work to do.

A: Wait one moment! Descartes would have us question whether we can really know we have eyes. Sure, it feels to me like I have eyes. I think, at least, that I've seen Tanner's painting. But what if this is all an illusion? A trick played on me by some kind of pillar of darkness?

B: You're starting to sound a lot like me – or the author. Hang on, is the author working on their PhD in philosophy?

A: I'm going to guess... Yes.

B: Gosh, you seem to know a lot about the author.

A: You do, too. Tell me, where is the author from, originally?

B: South Florida.

A: There you go.

B: Geez, we *do* have work to do. As a dialogue, this is turning out to be a rather strange one.

A: But the author hopes it'll still serve a function. And in the same way identifying ourselves as a pillar of light raised a philosophical question – an age old one which even Descartes himself asked, identifying ourselves with other things might raise other philosophical questions.

B: Yes, but it can't be just any old thing.

A: I imagine this is so – it probably wouldn't be too profitable to have you be a soup can and me a box of crayons.

B: Yeah, who ever heard of a soup can working on a PhD in philosophy?

A: And what box of crayons has ever seen Tanner's *The Annunciation*?

B: None that I know of – or that the author knows of.

A: So, when we identify ourselves we should probably be *humans*. Surely humans work on PhDs in philosophy and have seen Tanner's painting.

B: This has been my experience, but I think we've established only that *I* at least am a human. I can't think of an example of a non-human PhD candidate, but I'm sure a non-human animal of some kind either has seen Tanner's *The Annunciation*, or could see it.

A: I'll grant you that, but how many animals have you heard *talk* about Tanner's *The Annunciation*?

B: Very few, if any.

A: I'm going to say none. Is that okay?

B: I'm hesitant. Has a bird ever chirped in response to catching a glimpse of Tanner's painting? Could they be said to have had something to *say* about that painting? Perhaps it brought them joy.

A: Chirp chirp!

B: I'm sorry, what?

A: Too-tee tweet!

B: Okay, we'll have you be a human – for the purposes of this dialogue.

A: Thank you. Though I'm sad to have lost my feathers.

B: And a human who speaks English, too. The author – whomever they may be – doesn't feel like putting their French to the test.

A: That's also fair.

B: Okay, we're humans who speak English, and I'm working on my PhD.

A: From what we've said so far, it seems the author's position as a human being places limitations on what *we're* able to be – the limits of the authors' language are *our* limits as well.

B: I think this is right, but don't authors often use imagination to represent the experiences of characters very different from themselves? Couldn't that apply in this case? Perhaps I could be an 11th century Chinese fisherman, and you be Neil Armstrong. The author could *imagine* what it's like to be these people and have their perspectives.

A: I think this *could* work in some cases, but I worry about the purpose of this dialogue and whether that choice of characters would suit us. As a piece of

philosophical writing, truth seems to place some limits on our imagination here. Perhaps in a novel or a poem, even a novel or a poem with philosophical content, this could be appropriate, but at the outset we had set out to answer certain questions about the relationship between teaching and research in the academy. It might be better for the author to choose characters more familiar to the author, to minimize the chances that the author makes an imaginative misstep.

B: You might be right, but in doing so the author is likely to choose characters who are less familiar to the reader, or who have different identities than them. Also, these characters are likely to be the same sort of characters that have already overpopulated the annals of Western Philosophy. How could this be a step forward?

A: I hear your concern, and more. It troubles me greatly, as a matter of fact, almost such that it makes me regret the author's identity. But I still think truth should hold priority, and that it would be even *more* reckless for the author to speak on behalf of others. The author fully encourages and hopes for an exchange of voices of diverse viewpoints, but the purpose of this dialogue would be best served by speaking from what the author knows and is familiar with, with the hope that it might inspire the exchange of voices which this dialogue itself will never fully represent.

B: So, what would you propose?

A: That the author begins chapter 3 with new identities for us, identities that will be consistent with the author's reluctance to take the perspective of others, but which will at the same time create space for building a narrative that impresses upon the reader the relevance of our identities as they shape our engagement with

philosophy. The dialogue itself will not take itself as being self-contained but rather serves as a launching-off point for the kind of relationship between teaching and research in the discipline that it hopes to convey. In short, it will ask others – with very different identities from the author and the characters – to join the conversation, and I take it this will be our ultimate goal.

B: There's more that could be said, and I expect there are strong reasons to push back on this move, in addition to the ones we have already considered. However, I, for one, am willing to hear them when all is said and done, and begin a new chapter.

To be finished at another time, perhaps...

Appendix 2: What Can We Learn from Non-Figurative Art?

1. Introduction

In a large art museum like the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, one notices the incredible variety of artworks on display. To the right of the “Great Hall” – the main entrance from 82nd Street – one finds Egyptian Art on display, replete with the sarcophagi of mummies, the jewelry of princesses, and statues of pharaohs. To the left, one finds Greek and Roman art, from Athenian pottery to the busts of Roman nobles. Just these two spaces alone, to say nothing of the dozens of other rooms with artworks originating from a variety of times and regions, present the visitor with an opportunity to *learn*, in addition to the enjoyment of the beauty of these artifacts. Such learning in these spaces often takes place with the aid of placards. We may discover that a certain vase originated at a certain time or in a certain corner of the world, or that a certain art piece represents contemporaneous shifts in thought, whether it be in theology, philosophy, science, or the development of art history itself. Works meant to portray historic scenes, like *The Battle of Issus*, may clue us in on how a historical event may have unfolded, or at least as interpreted by those who created the artwork. Portraits like *The Portrait of Henry VIII* may preserve something of what it was like to stand in the presence of monarchs and the like. Other works inform us through their titles. The title of Gustave Courbet’s *L’Origine du monde* gives us a sense of what he meant to convey through his painting, and what he took it to signify. Of course, what we learn from artworks may vary in degrees of triviality. Some artworks strike us as more important than others, and what they have to teach us may come off as more or less profound. All that’s important for this paper, at least at the outset, is

that there's *something* to be learned from artwork. But this "something" can sometimes be very difficult to grasp, or may not seem to be present at all, as has sometimes been the opinion of viewers of non-figurative art such as Mark Rothko's color field paintings or Jackson Pollock's drip paintings. Often, such artworks provoke bitterness or confusion rather than anything we might call learning. "I don't get it," is a common reaction to abstract expressionist and many other kinds of non-figurative art, and viewers of these artworks often feel that they come away no more edified than before they had seen them.

The overarching goal of this paper will be to show that we can in fact learn from non-figurative art, and that what we can learn from these artworks include something more than the merely trivial. As a necessary extension of this project, I will also say something about what *form* this learning may take. It is often not the standard, propositional learning we are familiar with when we read a textbook or a newspaper. It is learning of a different sort, though it bears both similarities and dissimilarities to more conventional forms of learning. In broad strokes then, the aims of this project are threefold: 1.) to establish that we can learn from non-figurative art, 2.) to establish that this learning is often non-trivial,³⁰¹ and 3.) to make clear what sort of learning accompanies our appreciation of non-figurative art. The conclusion of this third aim will be that non-figurative art is marked by a distinctly phenomenological³⁰² sort of learning.

³⁰¹ More will be said about my notion of triviality in subsection 2.3.

³⁰² Or, perhaps in other language, "non-propositional". Throughout this piece I'll preserve the language "phenomenological" in order not to discount the view that some of the relevant phenomenological

These three aims correspond to the three major sections of this work. Each section, with the exception of section 4, will itself include three subsections, which will address 1.) how non-figurative art sits in relation to non-artistic vehicles for learning, 2.) how non-figurative art sits in relation to the learning that accompanies other artistic modes of expression, and 3.) a conclusory final part that more fully establishes the character of non-figurative art with regard to aim of each section. In each case, the third subsection will synthesize points established in the earlier two subsections in order to paint a more holistic picture of how they inform our thinking about non-figurative art.³⁰³

A few points of clarification are necessary here before moving on to the second section of this paper. First, by “non-artistic vehicles” for learning I have in mind non-fiction, so I will employ this term throughout the remainder of this piece. A discussion of non-fiction is relevant here in that non-fiction is, I take it, a relatively uncontentious case of a human artifact from which we can learn.³⁰⁴ It does not surprise us that we can learn something from Darwin’s *Origin of Species* or from a history textbook or a vehicle owner’s manual. If there are any relevant similarities to be found between non-figurative art and non-fiction, then this may help us better understand whether we can learn from non-figurative art, and if so, what sort of things we might learn. Second, it’s

modes of learning may in fact be expressed propositionally, though it remains plausible that the relevant modes of learning cannot be expressed through propositions.

³⁰³ Some readers may feel a sense of familiarity here. The structure of these subsections perhaps echoes a Hegelian *thesis-antithesis-synthesis* structure. This connection is unintended, though not unwelcome.

³⁰⁴ So, even if there remains some skepticism about the view that we can learn from artworks in general, let alone non-figurative artworks, non-fiction should suffice as a case in which most of us can agree that we learn.

important not to force an analogy between non-figurative artwork and non-fiction. So, remaining conscious of non-figurative art's similarities and dissimilarities to other types of art that are not non-fiction will be important here. For simplicity's sake, I will take fiction to be the relevant case in opposition to non-fiction. Many³⁰⁵ have noted important similarities between non-figurative art and fiction (for instance, they both seem to involve the imagination), so I'll consider my central question – what can we learn from non-figurative art? – with a view toward honoring the literature's tradition of drawing a comparison between non-figurative art and fiction. Finally, more ought to be said about the object under investigation – non-figurative art – and why this term is best for our discussion. By non-figurative art I mean non-figurative paintings.³⁰⁶ I'll exclude a discussion of music, sculpture, architecture, etc., all of which may be said to be non-figurative, but which may present unique characteristics which would only serve to complicate our investigation. It's my goal to avoid assuming that because one type of non-figurative artifact has certain qualities, all non-figurative artifacts possess those qualities as well. All this said, let's now turn to our discussion of non-figurative art and non-fiction.

2.1. Learning from Non-figurative Art and Non-Fiction

A natural starting point for our discussion will be learning in its more uncontroversial forms, particularly propositional learning as it accrues from human

³⁰⁵ Notably Kendall Walton (see *Mimesis as Make-Believe*) but also Richard Moran (see “The Expression of Feeling in Imagination.”)

³⁰⁶ Abstract expressionist works like Rothko's color field paintings and Pollock's drip paintings are two paradigm cases, though it should be noted that unclear cases abound (Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie* may be a borderline case).

artifacts such as textbooks, cookbooks, newspapers, podcasts, encyclopedia articles, and so on. Of course, this paper is not the appropriate place for a full account of these sources as vehicles for learning, but will take it as common ground that more or less reliable knowledge is often derived from these sources. I use *non-fiction* to describe many of these sources, but also recognize the existence of unclear cases.³⁰⁷

We may look at Darwin's *Origin of Species* as a more or less standard case of a human-made artifact from which we learn. A feature of works such as this is that they usually do not ask us to believe what they say just because they say it. Evidence, reasons, and logic are employed in the hope of demonstrating to the reader that the claims made in the work are in fact true. Faith and trust are minimized as far as possible, though it's often impossible to remove these factors altogether. It remains true, however, that non-fictional works often lack a prescriptive element which fiction has.³⁰⁸ When we read the opening line of Dickens' *Tale of Two Cities*, that it was "The best of times, it was the worst of times...", we do not look for evidence of this claim in the same way in which we expect Darwin to provide evidence that genetic mutations over time result in the gradual evolution of a species, or that an organism most suited to its environment is more likely to survive and reproduce. Similarly, non-fiction is distinct from fiction in that non-fiction is not often met with a suspension of disbelief. When we read, for example, in Lewis Carroll's novel that Alice shrunk to a height of ten inches after drinking a potion,³⁰⁹ we imagine this to be true *in the fictional world of*

³⁰⁷ E.g., Plato's *Republic*, or Herodotus' *Histories*.

³⁰⁸ Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, 39.

³⁰⁹ Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2004), 19.

the novel rather than questioning whether or such a thing could take place. This helps highlight an important feature of cookbooks, textbooks, scientific treatises, etc., namely, that they do not elicit belief simply as a prescription of the author.

A cookbook may be a less clear case. In what sense are evidence, reasons, and logic involved in a cookbook? We often read such texts as instruction manuals, placing trust in the author that they have provided a trustworthy set of instructions. But even here we do not trust wholeheartedly, and we are unlikely to suspend our disbelief. If a misprint calls for baking a cake at 3500 degrees Fahrenheit instead of 350, we are likely to say that what has been printed in the book is incorrect, even before we've put the instructions to the test. If a recipe calls for more sugar than we feel is appropriate, we feel at liberty to disagree with the author in our particular case, and use less sugar to suit our own ends. In each case we read the cookbook with a view to *reasons* – we may know that 3500 degrees is much too hot for baking food of any sort, and take our knowledge as a reason to doubt what is printed on the page. We may know that some people prefer sweeter foods than others, and therefore take our preference for less sweet food as reason to doubt the recipe in our particular case.

Rarely are we similarly at liberty in the case of fiction. The author prescribes certain beliefs that are not subject to doubt in the way in which non-fiction is subject to doubt. Upon reading that Alice's height changed to a height of ten inches, we are not afforded the opportunity to believe instead that Alice actually grew to a height of ten feet. Perhaps a reader may find it much more believable that Alice would grow to ten feet rather than shrink to ten inches, and alter their beliefs about what is happening in

the story on this basis. The reader quickly runs into trouble when having the correct belief about Alice's height in the story – i.e., the height prescribed by the author – is necessary for the plot to go forward.

Here it is necessary to address the important question of how these points relate to non-figurative art. We may concede the point that non-fiction doesn't ask us to believe what it says simply because it asks us to, but rather provides reasons and evidence for belief, but question the degree to which non-figurative art shares any of these features. This query is precisely the right one, and marks a crucial step in our inquiry. If we want to make the claim that we can learn from non-figurative art, it is important to show which ways it is similar to – and distinct from – human artifacts from which we already know we can learn. The contrast between works like *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and the *Origin of Species* may be instructive here.³¹⁰ The attitude with which we approach the *Origin of Species* is an epistemically critical attitude through which we weigh evidence, reasons, etc. The distinctive feature of fiction is the prescriptive license of the author – we generally imagine the story to unfold as it is described, regardless of whether we take any of these events to be capable of occurring.³¹¹ We play along with Carroll in his descriptions of various fantastical elements of the story, rather than weighing evidence and evaluating reasons in favor or against the plausibility of these events occurring. A clear case in non-fiction where this attitude on the part of the reader is usually absent is the case of Herodotus' *Histories*, a

³¹⁰ This contrast is not a contrast between works from which we can learn and works from which we cannot. More on this point will be said in the next section (2.2) of this paper.

³¹¹ Except, perhaps, in unique cases where we experience imaginative resistance. See Tamar Szabó Gendler, "The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance," *Journal of Philosophy* 97(2) (2000), 55–81.

text which otherwise purports to report the truth about the world, but which nevertheless claims the existence of cynocephali (dog-headed men) and other elements which merit skepticism.³¹² Rather than playing along with Herodotus here, many readers simply read these elements as false or inaccurate, an attitude which is appropriate to non-fiction but not to fiction. In the case of non-figurative art, the attitude with which the appreciator engages with the painting has more in common with non-fiction than it does with fiction, because we are not asked to imagine anything which does not correspond to some truth about the real world. It should be noted that John Brown³¹³ and Kendall Walton³¹⁴ have argued that certain features of non-figurative art do in fact prescribe imaginings. Brown points to Pollock as a case in which we are prescribed certain imaginings on the basis of particular features of the painting, Walton points to Malevich to make a similar point. I'm willing to concede both points that perhaps Pollock and Malevich prescribe imaginings. This concession, however, does no real harm to my view. A philosophical textbook, for example, may prescribe imaginings by way of inviting us to participate in a thought experiment – the *function* of the work remains to provide evidence and to make arguments, *not* to prescribe imaginings. I would also invite Brown and Walton to consider cases in non-figurative art where the prescription to imagine is absent – Rothko being a likely example here. In this case, a Rothko painting may strike us as analogous to a philosophical textbook which employs no thought experiments (does not prescribe imaginings), whereas

³¹² Herodotus, *Histories* (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2004), 191.

³¹³ John Brown, "Abstract Art," 2021.

³¹⁴ Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, 55.

Pollock and Malevich are analogous to ones that do. In any case, the function of the paintings remains the same, and the analogy with non-fiction holds. In fact, as I will discuss later in this paper, I will ultimately argue that most non-figurative art does not prescribe imaginings, though it should be noted that non-figurative art may serve as a vehicle for unprescribed imaginings.³¹⁵ If we take the prescription to imagine as a litmus test that reliably delineates between sources from which we can generally expect to learn (e.g., non-fiction) and those from which we cannot (e.g., fiction), then non-figurative art's commonalities with non-fiction seem to speak in favor of its potential effectiveness as a vehicle for learning.

But this picture oversimplifies things far too much. A mere analogy between non-fiction and non-figurative art – assuming this analogy holds – does not yet establish non-figurative art's status as a vehicle for learning, for at least two important reasons. First, there are too many examples of non-fiction from which there is either nothing or little to be learned. Take Ptolemy's writings on astronomy as an example – his geocentric conception of the solar system, despite its otherwise clear status as non-fiction, for centuries arguably did more to mislead its readers about the organization of the solar system than it did to instruct them. There are similarly clear examples where fiction can be a powerful source for learning. Not only do we often learn facts about the real world through fiction,³¹⁶ but there are arguably important things to learn from fiction that do not correlate well to the sorts of things we typically expect to learn from

³¹⁵ This was pointed out to me by Sarah Worth in her helpful comments on an early version of this paper.

³¹⁶ A helpful example may be the case where we learn, by reading *War and Peace*, that Russian aristocracy spoke French during the Napoleonic Age.

non-fiction.³¹⁷ So, a mere analogy with non-fiction is not enough to establish the character of learning through non-figurative art. That isn't to say, however, that this analogy will not prove instructive – we will see more in section 3 of this paper how an analogy with non-fiction helps us determine the non-trivial character of what can be learned from non-figurative art.

2.2. Learning from Non-figurative Art and Fiction

A full account of the challenges and opportunities presented by the literature on learning from fiction is impossible to summarize here. For now, it will be important to consider a few select cases, giving proper sensitivity to limitations of these cases. I will first consider a few relatively straightforward cases wherein we learn from fiction, that is, cases where we learn facts about the world through our engagement with fiction.³¹⁸ But in order to provide the necessary support for my account, I will have to go a step farther than this. Ultimately, I will show that there is an important *affective* sense in which we learn from fiction. Much of what we take to be of importance when we say we've *learned* from a novel or a play has to do with our emotional responses to these works. It is this sense of learning from fiction that will be most relevant to non-figurative art, as I take it that non-figurative art, unlike most fiction, does not involve representational contents in the usual sense, and so cannot be a source of empirically verifiable knowledge, in a more or less standard sense.³¹⁹ I'll draw from Richard Moran

³¹⁷ See Moran, “The Expression of Feeling in Imagination,” *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 103, No.1 (January 1994).

³¹⁸ The importance of the caveat that we “learn facts about the world” will be explored in more detail in section 2.3.

³¹⁹ I use the qualifier “in a... standard sense” with some trepidation here, as I do not mean to suggest that there is one “standard sense” in which the notion of empirical verifiability is used. I mean only to

in defense of the view that our emotional responses to fiction can be said to be a source of learning, while remaining sensitive to contrasting accounts.

Before launching into a discussion of learning from fiction through our emotional responses, it's important to establish that, *prima facie*, learning from fiction is possible. This proves to be a rather difficult task, as there is a long history of philosophers who resist this claim. One prominent example is Kendall Walton, who develops the notion of "fictional truths" to fill out his account of fiction as make-believe.³²⁰ On Walton's view, the mere act of prescribed imagining generates fictionality, which in the case of fiction gives rise to fictional truths which hold sway within fictional worlds. He describes a fictional truth as follows: "Propositions whose imaginings are mandated are *fictional*, and the fact that a given proposition is fictional is a *fictional truth*."³²¹ At first glance, then, it may seem difficult to construct an account of learning from fiction that is consistent with the Waltonian view. Whatever propositional imaginings are mandated in a work of fiction are fictional truths, not truths simpliciter. But the problem of learning from fiction turns out to be a more complicated issue. An important question here is whether some fictional truths may be said to be themselves truths simpliciter, or, to qualify the question somewhat, whether or not fictional truths may give rise to knowledge of truth outside of the fictional world in which the fictional truths are given. Walton himself is quick to point out that there

suggest something like a Wittgensteinian intuition, namely, that certain mental states may be private, as is the case with Wittgenstein's example of the "beetle in the box" (*Philosophical Investigations*, § 293). Of course, emotional states may be said to be empirically verifiable insofar as they manifest in behavior, but this seems to be of a different sort than historical or scientific facts.

³²⁰ Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, 69.

³²¹ Ibid.

is no strict dichotomy between “‘fiction’ as opposed to ‘reality,’” or “between ‘fiction’ and ‘fact’ or ‘truth.’”³²² But Walton’s admission does not in and of itself suggest that we can learn from fiction – he merely means to account for the fact that “[r]eality can be the subject of fantasy,” and that “Fact can be fiction and fiction fact.”³²³ But when the question of *learning* from fiction arises, Walton’s position is less clear. While learning and fictionality often go together, for Walton, he often qualifies these experiences by limiting what we learn to “fictional truths” or, in one telling example, by claiming that these learning experiences are themselves fictional, as is the case when we see a play based on the life of Emily Dickinson, and if we learn at all, we only learn as an extension of engaging with a game of make-believe. So, it’s important to turn elsewhere if we want a positive account of learning from fiction.

Stacie Friend helpfully points out, more as an empirical matter of fact than a philosophical claim, that when the subjects of empirical studies “thought they were reading a fictional story, they [still] incorporated many claims into their beliefs,”³²⁴ a somewhat unexpected outcome if one arrives at the debate surrounding fiction and non-fiction with the view that fiction ‘is for imagining’ and that non-fiction ‘is for learning,’ or for disseminating information. Friend’s philosophical insights account for these empirical results by pointing to genre conventions as a helpful guide for readers when engaging with fiction and non-fiction. She uses such examples as *In Cold Blood*, *The Jungle*, and *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* to illustrate cases in which we learn

³²² Ibid., 73.

³²³ Ibid., 74.

³²⁴ Stacie Friend, “Imagining Fact and Fiction,” 7.

from fiction.³²⁵ Notice, however, that these are handpicked cases are specifically selected for their clarity as cases in which we learn from fiction. It's much more difficult, in other cases, to say that we learn from fictional works. Can we learn facts about the world from works such as *Pinocchio* or the *Epic of Gilgamesh*? Note that in the latter case it's often taken to be true that a man named Gilgamesh really lived, but the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is not where we get this information from. We must look to historical and archeological evidence if we want to learn anything about the real Gilgamesh, not his eponymous epic. So, it looks as though we have one set of cases of fiction from which we can reasonably be said to learn, and another from which we arguably cannot. Friend would point to our genre conventions to explain the distinction, which "give us some idea of which... standards... we are supposed to apply in interpretation and criticism."³²⁶ The larger point here is that *The Jungle* and other novels fit under a certain subcategory of realism which reliably report truths about the world, and works like *Pinocchio* do not. So, in response to the question, "Can we learn from fiction?" the answer would seem to be that we can in some cases, but perhaps not in others. But this is enough to get us where we need to be. All that's necessary here is that there's at least some precedent for the view that we can learn from fiction in at least some cases. What's needed now is to take a closer look at the sort of learning most relevant to our discussion.

³²⁵ Ibid., 8.

³²⁶ Ibid., 15.

We might learn about the meatpacking industry in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries by reading *The Jungle*, but what can we possibly learn from non-figurative art? The text of a novel may be taken to “point to” or “represent” certain facts about the world, but it’s less clear that non-figurative art has any of these features. There’s an intuitive sense in which it would be very difficult to say that we might learn about the meat-packing industry, or about the Watergate scandal, from a non-figurative painting. And the reason is that there’s (usually) nothing in the painting itself that may be taken to “point to” any of these topics.³²⁷ So it seems doubtful that many, if any, non-figurative artworks can teach us facts about the world, at least as understood as *empirical* facts about the world such as “workers in the meat-packing industry around the year 1905 used chemicals and preservatives to change the color, flavor and odor of meat.” But there are other things to be learned besides empirical facts about the world.³²⁸ Richard Moran points to the emotions as a site where learning often takes place, using cases in both the visual arts and fiction to illustrate his view. He expresses a similar thought to my own view that non-figurative artworks are a unique case when he writes that non-figurative works of painting and music provide “no scenario for [people] to make-believe is true,”³²⁹ and yet they remain emotionally engaging in a manner similar to many standard works of fiction. His conclusion here is telling, and it too aligns with a key premise of this paper, “that it is the sense of fictionality that needs

³²⁷ *Broadway Boogie Woogie* may be an unclear case. Does the painting represent Broadway?

³²⁸ For example, what Mary learned when she saw red for the first time in Frank Jackson’s famous thought experiment (Frank Jackson, “What Mary didn’t know,” *The Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 83, No. 5 (May, 1986), p. 291). I will return to this point in more detail at the end of this paper.

³²⁹ Richard Moran, “The Expression of Feeling in Imagination,” p. 81.

to be overcome, or diminished, or distracted from, if we are to make sense of such responses.”³³⁰ The point I take Moran to be highlighting here is that there are important similarities between works of fiction and non-figurative artworks that reduce the importance of the labels fiction and non-fiction (or, perhaps, *not fiction*). What they have in common is that they both serve as vehicles that allow imagination to transmit knowledge. In the case of non-figurative art, this knowledge comes in the form of learning from our emotional responses. According to Moran, our emotional responses in these cases are not reducible to “fictional emotions” in the sense employed by Walton and others,³³¹ but rather they provide “one of the clearer cases in which imagination is not so much a peering into some other world, as a way of relating to this one.”³³² The remainder of this paper will be devoted to unpacking what and how it is that we can learn from non-figurative art. What’s important to note now is that fiction and non-figurative art have been flagged as vehicles for learning, especially as they relate to our emotional responses, and that any similarities non-figurative art has with fiction are not *prima facie* reasons to suspect that non-figurative art is deficient as a vehicle for knowledge.

2.3. Learning from Non-figurative Art

A major goal of this paper will be to establish that what can be learned through non-figurative art is non-trivial. I will not endeavor to establish the non-

³³⁰ Ibid., 82. While the concept of fictionality may be a helpful philosophical tool, it’s important to note the at boundaries of what counts as fiction, and any necessary and sufficient conditions for fiction, are unclear.

³³¹ Ibid., 75.

³³² Ibid., 106.

trivial character of learning³³³ through non-figurative art here, but will postpone an argument to this effect for section 3 of this paper. However, it will be helpful for our discussion here to distinguish what I take to be trivial vs. non-trivial learning in the relevant cases. Trivially, we are capable of learning from just about anything. A silver coin on a green table may teach us that *there is a silver coin on a green table*. This rightfully strikes us as an uninteresting case of learning from an object. But trivial cases do not always imply banality. In a novelty shop I may happen across an object I never knew existed. Let's call this object an OINKE.³³⁴ We may think to ourselves "How fascinating! I never knew this OINKE existed before – I've learned something new today." But this case is no less trivial than case of the coin on the table. In each case what we learn does not go beyond the object itself. Similarly, we may learn from discovering the *Origin of Species* on a bookshelf that a book entitled *Origin of Species* exists.³³⁵ Of course, what we are interested in is usually not the mere existence of such objects, but rather the contents of these works for informing our knowledge about the world beyond the object itself. So, that the *Origin of Species* can

³³³ Here *learning* should be read as a noun (as in, these types of learning are non-trivial, as opposed to the action of learning being non-trivial).

³³⁴ Object I Never Knew Existed.

³³⁵ Any reader who has derived pleasure from spending an afternoon browsing a bookstore may resist the claim that merely familiarizing ourselves with the existence of books is trivial. Real world cases like these are less clear than I've presented them in this discussion. Our interest in browsing in these cases often *does* arise from our having learned something about the world beyond the mere existence of a particular book. We may learn that Virginia Woolf wrote a book entitled *Orlando* or that there's a body of research on political epistemology. In each of these cases, we are not learning about the mere existence of an object, but only because we know how to place these books in the context of what we already know about the world. A clearer case where triviality arises is when we discover a book in a language we cannot read, in a script we do not recognize, and are unable to infer anything other than that this book exists.

teach us about the evolutionary development of life on this planet is something non-trivial we may learn from the book.

That we *can* learn from non-figurative art should be clear. At an art museum, we learn “That a painting entitled *Broadway Boogie Woogie* exists,” or we may even learn “What it is like to look at *Broadway Boogie Woogie*.”³³⁶ But claiming that we can learn these sorts of things is not what we are interested in here. The previous two subsections have established a rough sketch of the sorts of learning we may be interested in. In 2.1, we established that non-figurative art does not function to prescribe mere imaginings. This, in and of itself, is a limited defense against the claim that what we learn through non-figurative art is trivial. We may learn from fiction “What it is like to imagine Alice shrinking to a height of 10 inches,” or that an author has “Prescribed the imagining of Alice shrinking to a height of 10 inches,” but these are variants of the kinds of trivial cases mentioned earlier. So, ideally, the analogy with non-fiction will help us step beyond these merely trivial cases.³³⁷ Our emotional responses to non-figurative painting will serve as a promising site where non-trivial learning may take place, but it will remain to be seen whether the kind of learning at play here is of a trivial character or not. *Broadway Boogie Woogie* may make us feel energetic, and we may learn from this that “*Broadway Boogie Woogie* makes me feel

³³⁶ Thomas Nagel provides a helpful discussion on subjectivity and objectivity in *The View from Nowhere*, particularly in his chapter on “Knowledge”.

³³⁷ Though the mere analogy, on its own, does not establish this. We learn from Ptolemy’s astronomical writings that these writings exist, or that a man named Ptolemy held certain views, though arguably this does not reliably inform us about the world beyond the object itself. So, even some non-fictional works may only be sources of trivial learning.

energetic.”³³⁸ But all we’ve done, in this case, has learned about the relation between two particular objects, namely, the painting and ourselves. Trivial cases often seem to involve a similar sort learning, e.g., that there’s a silver coin on the table that *looks silver to me*, or that the OINKE is an object *previously unknown to me*. Ultimately, we’re interested in something more substantive than these kinds of cases, so while we may have established that we can learn from non-figurative art, it remains to be seen whether this learning is merely of a trivial sort.

3.1. Non-triviality in Non-figurative Art, Non-Fiction and Nature

Non-fiction involves representational or propositional contents which non-figurative art often lacks. The *Origin of Species* serves as a vehicle for learning by making reference to concepts outside of itself – i.e., it makes claims about species of organisms found in the Galapagos islands, the evolutionary history of species, and so on. There is no immediately clear sense in which non-figurative art performs a similar function.³³⁹ However, the claim that non-figurative art does not contribute to our knowledge about anything other than the mere existence or appearance of the object itself should be called into doubt. An analogous case in nature may be the tree rings

³³⁸ The shift here from the first-person plural to the first-person singular is telling. In section 4 I will give reason to suppose that a proposition like “*Broadway Boogie Woogie* makes us feel energetic” is less obviously non-trivial than the proposition that “*Broadway Boogie Woogie* makes me feel energetic” (because the plural makes reference to a class of referents beyond the mere relationship between the artwork and the observer).

³³⁹ The claim is sometimes made (one example being Sarah Worth’s comments at the 79th annual meeting of the ASA on an early draft of this paper) that non-figurative art serves as an *invitation* to imagine. We may be invited to think of the sunset or of a brush fire in response to a Rothko painting, for instance. However, these sorts of imagination are analogous to what Kant might call the freedom of imagination – our imaginings here are a consequence of our own volition, not prescribed by the work itself. The conceptual contents “sunset” or “brush fire” are not a feature of Rothko paintings, but rather a concept we ourselves may apply to the painting when appreciating it.

of tree stump. Jaegwon Kim has pointed out that such cases are unclear. To use one of his own examples, if “your nice new suntan “means” that you spent the weekend on the beach,” then this sense of “means” seems distinct from the sense in which any propositional phrase in a work of non-fiction “means” what it means.³⁴⁰ Moreover, it’s far from clear that the rings of a tree or a suntan “represent” anything about the world in the standard sense. Nevertheless, while it is arguable whether there is something that these tree rings represent, this example serves as a clear case in which we may non-trivially learn through the tree things. When a forester counts the rings of a tree, they are not interested in how the tree looks, or in the number of rings for its own sake – the goal is not to say, “this tree has 112 rings,” it’s to learn something else about the tree which the forester wouldn’t otherwise have access to, namely, how long the tree has been alive. To illustrate this point more clearly, the age of the tree helps the forester learn other things as well, including (when combined with prior knowledge about the orbits of the solar system), that the tree has made at least 111 complete trips around the sun. They can also learn about the severity of certain seasons in particular years (depending on the width of the darker and lighter regions of the tree rings). So, even if it turns out that non-figurative art lacks propositional or representational contents, this does not, on its own, give us any reason to think that we cannot learn from it. What’s important to note here is that when thinking about the non-triviality of what may be learned from non-fiction and non-figurative art, an explicit link between propositions or representations and non-triviality is doubtful.

³⁴⁰ Kim Jaegwon, *Philosophy of Mind* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998).

It's true that non-fiction gets us closer to non-triviality by means of propositions and representations, but this doesn't mean that non-figurative art has to as well. More will be said on the non-triviality of non-figurative art in subsection 3.3.

3.2. Non-Triviality in Non-figurative Art and Fiction

I want to reject the view, such as Walton's, that emotions evoked by fiction are trivial in that they are merely activities in "games of make-believe." If we take one of Walton's more vivid examples, that of playing a game of make-believe in which we imagine that tree stumps are bears,³⁴¹ there's no clear sense here in which there's room to *learn* anything about the world in a non-trivial sense. True, we may learn that, within the fictional world of the game, there's a "bear behind that bush" if we discover a tree stump there, but this falls under my criteria for triviality insofar as I learn that *I imagine there's a bear there within the context of the game*.³⁴² All I'm really learning then is that I'm imagining something, and nothing about the world beyond that. But Moran, Kind, Kung, Balcerak Jackson, and others have convincingly argued that imagination can serve as a vehicle for learning and knowledge formation.³⁴³ Balcerak Jackson points to thought experiments as a site where learning through imagination takes place – Moran, as we've seen earlier in this paper, points both to non-figurative art and fiction, by arguing that our emotional responses to

³⁴¹ Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, 21.

³⁴² I can also imagine unicorns existing, but this provides us no information about whether unicorns actually exist in the world.

³⁴³ Amy Kind and Peter Kung, "Introduction," in *Knowledge Through Imagination* ed. Amy Kind and Peter Kung. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 1.

fictional works inform our thinking about our daily lives and lived experiences.³⁴⁴

While it's unclear whether Balcerak Jackson would endorse the view that we can learn specifically from fiction and non-figurative art (the examples she uses involve philosophical thought experiments), there's nothing on her view that would explicitly discount learning from imagination through fiction or artworks, either. And if we accept Moran's claim cited earlier, that emotional engagement with fiction helps us develop ways of relating to the world,³⁴⁵ then this establishes the non-triviality of our emotional responses to literature and artworks by showing that what we learn in these cases goes beyond propositions like "*The Old Man and Sea* makes me feel melancholic" to propositions like "My relationship with my grandfather makes me feel melancholic" or "I am able to emotionally empathize with the experiences that my grandfather was going through." Our emotional responses to fiction non-trivially inform our lived human experiences and our understanding of how we sit in relation to others.

3.3. Non-Triviality in Non-figurative Art

Here I'll synthesize the claims made in the two earlier subsections to establish that 1.) non-figurative art lacks the kind of representational contents by which we make reference to objects in the case of non-fiction³⁴⁶ (i.e, non-figurative art cannot tell us about species of organisms on the Galapagos islands, for example). And 2.)

³⁴⁴ Magdalena Balcerak Jackson, "On the Epistemic Value of Imagining, Supposing, and Conceiving," in *Knowledge Through Imagination*, ed. Amy Kind and Peter Kung (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 50.

³⁴⁵ Moran, "The Expression of Feeling in Imagination," 106.

³⁴⁶ Though I won't rule out the possibility that non-figurative art has representational contents of other kinds.

that cases like the tree rings and the suntan nevertheless give us reason to suppose that explicit or intended referents of representations are not necessary in order to inform us non-trivially about the world. I'll take the case of fiction to show that our emotional responses to artworks are often non-trivial by virtue of the emotional responses they provoke.

If we take a Rothko painting as being representational in a sense analogous to non-fiction, or as prescribing imaginings, then we find ourselves in a tricky situation when we ask what may be learned from the artwork. We may take a Rothko painting to invite us to imagine a sunset, or a brush fire, or a rainy night. But can we learn anything about sunsets or brush fires or rainy nights from engaging with this work? It seems the answer must be no, for the painting doesn't report any truth about these things. It cannot tell us, for instance, what a particular sunset may have looked like, because even if the painting invites us to imagine a sunset or gives rise to unprescribed imaginings of a sunset, the painting does not actually depict a sunset. This is what makes non-figurative art distinct from a courtroom sketch or a photograph of a distant planet. We can learn from the sketch what a scene in a courtroom may have looked like, or from the photograph whether a planet has an atmosphere, whether it has large stable bodies of liquid, etc. But our imaginings about sunsets provide us no information about sunsets, in the case of non-figurative art. So, we must look somewhere else if we want to say that we can learn non-trivially from non-figurative art.

One question worth asking is whether there's a sense in which non-figurative art is like the rings of the tree (or a suntan). Non-figurative art doesn't rely on words or pictures of objects to convey information, but this doesn't rule out the possibility that it conveys information via some other means. As pointed out earlier, tree rings and suntans are unclear cases – we can learn in the first case how old a tree is, and from the second that someone spent too much time in the sun³⁴⁷ - I don't want to commit myself to any particular position on whether or not these things have representational contents, and committing either way is not necessary for this paper. However, I should at least entertain the possibility that they do, for this might help inform our thinking about whether we can learn from non-figurative art.³⁴⁸ What might this look like? One place to look would be at the emotional states that non-figurative art gives rise to. A certain painting might make me feel sad or melancholic. Or perhaps I've noticed that black and blue non-figurative artworks almost invariably make me feel melancholic – do the colors black and blue thereby “represent” melancholy? Perhaps they do, but that is a topic for another paper. It remains the case that, whether they do or not, in cases like this the viewer of the painting has picked up on a feature of the painting that reliably provokes certain emotional responses.³⁴⁹ And note that, because non-figurative art is analogous to non-fiction insofar as its function

³⁴⁷ Kim says that a suntan may “mean” that he spent the weekend at the beach, but we can't learn this from the suntan alone. Perhaps he got the tan from relaxing on his rooftop? But we can learn that he was exposed to UV radiation over a protracted period of time.

³⁴⁸ By now it may be clear why I've chosen the term “non-figurative art” as opposed to “non-representational art”. It remains an open question whether non-representational art may be said to have representational contents.

³⁴⁹ More will be said on the psychological relationship between color and emotion in section 4 of this paper.

is not to prescribe imaginings, there's nothing to suggest that our emotional responses to these colors are merely within a "game of make-believe" or a fictional world. But the mere fact that a non-figurative painting makes the viewer feel a certain way is not enough to establish non-trivial learning here. However, if we can draw a clear connection between a viewer's emotional response to a painting and the rest of the world, inclusive of other viewers of the painting, it seems that we find ourselves in a position to learn non-trivially from non-figurative art. The details of this connection will be laid out in more detail in the next section. For now, what's important to note is that it seems plausible that non-trivial learning arises from non-figurative art.

4. Conclusion: What Sort of Learning Arises from Non-figurative Art

The goal of this section will be to show a connection between our emotional responses to non-figurative art (specifically, *color* in non-figurative art) and a particular kind of learning, namely phenomenological learning. Moreover, I'll conclude that this sort of learning avoids non-triviality by giving us reason to believe that other human beings can have the same sorts of experiences that we do when we view a non-figurative artwork. In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant expresses an early version of the thought, which has today been refined by psychologists, that colors correspond to particular emotional responses. He writes that "the white color of the lily seems to dispose the mind to ideas of innocence, and the seven colors, in their order from red to violet, to the ideas 1) of sublimity, 2) of audacity, 3) of candor, 4) of friendliness, 5) of modesty, 6) of steadfastness, and 7) of

tenderness.”³⁵⁰ While this Kantian idea serves to position my view in a philosophical context, it’s important to develop an updated account that draws from empirical research on our emotional response to color. Neither I nor those writing in psychology endorse a strict parallel between the colors of the spectrum and these particular ideas listed by Kant, and it’s not clear that many of the ideas Kant lists, such as “sublimity” or “modesty,” can be described as emotions. However, Xiao-Ping Gao and John H. Xin write that those writing in the literature of psychology “agree that the conformity between different people about the general cognitive characteristic of colors is considerable.”³⁵¹ So there’s evidence to suggest that Kant’s intuition may have been tracking a psychological precept that today has been established in the literature, though it’s important to note that Gao and Xin are careful not to over-generalize. They recognize that studies suggest that color association may be influenced by culture. A categorical rule, however, linking particular colors to particular emotional responses, isn’t necessary for my view. A more or less well-established trend, such as that noted by Gao and Xin, is all that’s required to support the relevant component in my argument, which is that there is at least *some* connection between color and emotional response, and so these two factors are linked. It’s worth dwelling on this point because the opposite could very well turn out to be the case, which would present a serious obstacle to my argument. If there were

³⁵⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Trans. Paul Guyer. Ed. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews. (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 181.

³⁵¹ Xiao-Ping Gao, John H. Xin, “Investigation of Human’s Emotional Responses on Colors,” *Color Research & Application Color research & application*, 2006, Vol.31(5), p. 411.

no connection between the experience of color and our emotional responses, then whatever emotional responses we may have in response to a non-figurative artwork would be random or at best completely idiosyncratic. From there, we might plausibly learn what emotional responses we may happen to have in response to a painting, but this would be trivial in the sense I've established in this paper. There would be no basis on which we could expect anyone else to feel the same emotional response to a particular painting, and so we couldn't infer anything about what emotional responses others might have on the basis of our own experience. Avoiding this conclusion is all that's needed, and the more limited claim made by Gao and Xin that there is a "considerable" degree of predictability from colors to particular emotional or cognitive responses is enough to support my argument. Unlike Kant, I do not want to argue for universalizability when it comes to our perceptions of colors or appreciation of beauty. All that's required to support my conclusion is that there are recognizable patterns that show that at least some other humans would have the same emotional responses when presented with a particular color.

A second possible obstacle to my argument worth taking seriously is the possibility that emotions are not "universal," i.e., that there are no grounds for the inference that my feeling of an emotion is a sign that others may feel the same emotion. To defend against this objection and lend support for my argument, I will cite empirical research that suggests that there are universal or "basic" emotions that are common to human beings as a species, and are not fully dependent on what

Ekman has called “social learning,”³⁵² and that there are reliable antecedents for particular emotional states to be found in non-figurative artworks. Here I’ll build on the point established in the previous paragraph, that certain colors correlate with certain emotional states, in the spirit of looking to empirical research to ground evidence for my view rather than any philosophical work. I take it that these two claims will work together to add support for the view that, by engaging with non-figurative artworks, what we can learn is that our emotional states in reaction to these works are in principle shareable by others. This will act as added support for the view that what we learn from non-figurative art is non-trivial, that we are not merely learning about our own emotional reactions to non-figurative artworks.

Paul Ekman’s research on emotion shows evidence for what he calls “basic emotions.” In short, basic emotions are evolutionarily adaptive features of our species that account for shared affective states across racial or ethnic groups, and across cultures.³⁵³ The link between emotions and biology is important here, because it suggests that one’s repertoire of emotional states are not fully conditioned by one’s upbringing or culture. I qualify the previous statement with the word *fully* because I do not mean to suggest, nor does Ekman, that some affective states or aspects of our emotional lives may be social conditioned, rather, that there are at least some emotions that are universal for human beings as a result of evolutionary adaptation. If this were not the case, then this would place a strong limit on what may be learned

³⁵² Paul Ekman, “An Argument for Basic Emotions,” *Cognition and Emotion*, 1992, 188.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*, 171-2.

from non-figurative art. If a painting makes me feel sad, for instance, and sadness were an emotional state endemic to some cultures but not others, I could not reasonably generalize from my experience to human beings as a species. Ekman's research suggests that this is not the case, and so there are grounds for making inferences from particular experiences to more general ones. But even if it remains the case, as Gao and Xin point out, that our emotional responses to color may be in some cases influenced by culture, and we admit that Ekman's findings do not suggest that every particular emotion is universalizable across the human species, this does not present a strong obstacle to my view, since I only want to argue that we can infer from our emotional responses to artworks that at least some other human beings may share that emotional response to that particular artwork. So, if an emotional response to color or a particular emotion is endemic to a certain culture, we can at least make inferences about individuals within that culture.

What sort of learning arises from non-figurative art remains to be said. It seems doubtful, for reasons given in subsection 3.3., that non-figurative art helps us learn any empirical facts about the world. So, the claim that we learn propositionally, insofar as we understand this to mean something like learning that "Mount Everest is the tallest mountain" or "The battle of Hastings took place in the year 1066," seems doubtful. However, Frank Jackson's famous Mary in the room thought experiment has shown that these sorts of facts about the world are not all that there is to be

learned.³⁵⁴ When Mary sees color for the first time, she learns what it is like to see red. Her phenomenological experience gives rise to what she has learned in this case. She hasn't learned this fact from a textbook – in the example given by Jackson, she already knew all that there was to be learned from textbooks. So, her learning has a phenomenological character here that warrants the label phenomenological learning.³⁵⁵ So, what it's like to see a color, or, in another scenario, what it's like to be a bat,³⁵⁶ are unique cases. Nagel argues that we – as humans – can only come so close to knowing what it's like to be a bat, and we'll probably never get there.³⁵⁷ But when Mary sees color for the first time she learns “What it is like to see red,” which does not provide the same challenges. Mary learns phenomenologically, but what she learns is common knowledge. Other people have seen red too, and she now knows what other people do. Empirical research by Gao, Xin, and Ekman suggests that our emotional responses to non-figurative artworks are an analogous case. Colors reliably provoke particular emotional responses, so we can expect that a particular emotional response to a non-figurative artwork is shareable by others. So, though what we learn from non-figurative art is initially first-personal and phenomenological, there's no reason to say that what we learn stops there. We can also expect that emotional response to be shared, and this is at least one thing that may be learned from non-

³⁵⁴ Frank Jackson, “What Mary didn't know,” *The Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 83, No. 5 (May, 1986), p. 291.

³⁵⁵ The label, however, will be less important than the idea. Jackson does not use this label to describe what Mary learns, nor does he mention a particular kind of learning.

³⁵⁶ See Thomas Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 83, No. 4 (Oct., 1974), pp. 435-450.

³⁵⁷ Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” p. 449.

figurative art.³⁵⁸ So, what we can learn from non-figurative art is something about our fellow human beings, that certain features of our experience of these artworks are shareable by others.

³⁵⁸ What about a painting that only one person has seen? We couldn't say that our experience is shared in this case, but it's not necessary to say that here. All that's necessary is to say that our experience is shareable, in principle.

Appendix 3: Dayya

“Even the iron still fears the rot.”

- Ethel Cain³⁵⁹

He first saw her in the lobby on his third or fourth day. She reminded him of someone – an old love, an old friend, or perhaps some distant relative. Dark eyes, dark hair, and a face so soft she seemed incapable of harm. Soon, he’d learn that a faint smile always lingered around her mouth as if to offer perpetual forgiveness. But as her eyes met his for the first time, he knew not to stare, so he took his book out into the sterile, high-walled courtyard with its large black fountain babbling and its lean flora – a few grasses, two or three small bushes – still stubbornly clinging to life from within the otherwise inhospitable confines of the ward. Taking a seat by the courtyard’s glass door, he glanced up at the small rectangle of sky, now growing a deeper, warmer blue as the sun began to set, and then cracked his book open in search of peace on its pages.

That evening, at dinner, he learned she was from Russia. She spoke slowly, but not self-consciously, with a thick Russian accent. “When did you move over here?” he asked. “Two years ago,” and he knew she had come soon after the invasion. “I cannot live there anymore,” she said, and shook her head. He understood, and quietly admired her courage before the engine of history, its grinding teeth devouring the innocent and the unrepentant alike. From beneath the short sleeves of her off-white, patterned hospital gown, he could see the deep scars on her upper arm, four or five of them on each side, where the longer sleeves of a t-shirt would conceal them. He thought then of

³⁵⁹ Ethel Cain, “Ptolemaea,” *Daughters of Cain Records*, 2022.

the redder, shallower cuts near his wrist and then again secretly swelled with her adoration.

Each morning, after breakfast, a handful of patients would gather around a lively, good-natured nurse in the courtyard's morning sunlight for stretches. As familiar faces gathered, he watched for Dayya. But the clock struck nine-thirty, they commenced their morning routine, and by ten, she still had not joined them. As the patients filed back inside through the glass door and dispersed for small groups, he checked the printed table by the front desk and saw that she was in another group. A part of him still wondered about that familiar feeling he had when he first saw her, and longed for something recognizable in this still new, unfamiliar environment.

At lunchtime, she finally materialized. Perhaps she had overslept – and if she did, he wouldn't have blamed her. Shy, almost mouselike, she ate her lunch with the others without making much conversation. A few older patients discussed family matters and the logistics – or lack thereof – of involuntary hospitalization. By the time lunch was over, he had learned nothing new about her. And he didn't want to pry.

Every day after lunch, each patient would write down three things they were grateful for that day and share them with the group. As the days passed, it became easier and easier to find something to be grateful for. That morning, he had claimed a second cup of coffee, left over from someone who had decided they didn't want it, so he listed “extra coffee” as something worthy of gratitude.

When it came time for everyone to share, he waited patiently for Dayya to speak. She said she was grateful for the hospital staff, her parents, and either her “life” or her “wife” – he couldn’t quite tell through her accent.

Later that evening, they agreed to play a round of chess, and as they set up the pieces, he asked her.

“Did you say you’re grateful for your life, or for your wife?”

“My wife,” she replied, her eyes narrowing into a half-apology – altogether unnecessary – as she maintained eye contact with him over the chessboard.

“So, you got married young,” he said.

“Last year,” she replied. “I was nineteen.”

“Congratulations,” he said, and smiled. He meant it, too. He was relieved that she was not alone.

“When you’re from Russia,” she said as she moved her white pawn forward, “you have to marry wisely.”

As they played, he asked her if she was in school and, if so, what she was studying. She told him she was studying biology over at UMass Boston and that she was spending the summer here in the valley for an internship. “What do you hope to do when you graduate?” he asked as he moved his queen forward. She hesitated for half a second, and then said: “I want to cure death,” both sincerely and as a matter-of-fact, as though the aspiration were almost commonplace. “That’s ambitious,” he said, and eyed the scars on her arm still visible from underneath her sleeves. As he shifted

his gaze, his eyes met hers, and he saw there only honesty and pain. He did not know how to ask what he wanted to ask.

The next day, her wife walked in quickly – tall, lively, earnest – and as the two met, she wrapped Dayya in her arms. Though only two or three years Dayya’s senior, she carried herself with maturity and commanded respect, even in her leather boots, fishnets, and black and green cropped T-shirt. It was visiting hours on Dayya’s third day, and his colleague was already sitting with him at the kitchen table, discussing his emotional support dog, who just then was jumping up on his legs and licking his hands. Dayya soon came over to join them. “Hello,” she said, addressing them both.

“This is my wife, Kate.” He stood up, shook Kate’s hand, and introduced them both to his colleague.

“Dayya wants to cure death,” he told him and smiled. His colleague expressed a doubt, but she countered quickly, a grin on her face. “You two have to think about the ethics, but I only have to worry about the science.” Soon, his colleague and her wife fell into conversation tête-à-tête, while the two of them began another game of chess.

He knew then *why*. Beyond those hospital walls, beyond the oceans, the untamed wildernesses of Eurasia and North America, pawns advance toward their graves while kings and queens confine themselves to the protection of pleasure palaces. If only there were a place, somewhere safe and secure, where Dayya could hide her Kate, then perhaps it would not be necessary – then perhaps eighty sure years would have greater appeal than indefinite yet uncertain decades. But Dayya now remembers headstones under snow, a new mound of icy earth rising with each fallen neighbor, and

though she may not wet her own lips, she longs to offer her love a cup of life everlasting
for as long as kings command pawns.

Appendix 4: The Origin of the World

“The cosmos is within us. We are made of star-stuff. We are a way for the universe to know itself.”

- Carl Sagan³⁶⁰

Sophie shook the paper over the side of the bench to let the snow fall to the ground. As she continued reading, she couldn't quite tell if it was good. Too many superlatives, perhaps. And she was certainly no Helen – that was clear enough from the last six months without so much as a date. But it wasn't really that at all. She wouldn't have gone on one anyway. It was that no one had asked that confirmed it for her. And if Penelope had so many suitors, how many more did Helen have? A bitter thought: Perhaps math was invented to quantify beauty. Or worse, worth.

She bet Paris had blue eyes. It didn't matter that he issued from the Aegean's sunny shores thirty-two hundred years ago, in the thick fog of ancient memory. His behavior was blue-eyed. And as she thought of him, she could feel his icy gaze on her neck, of the terror slowly rising in her flesh, and then the rush of relief that he would not choose her. One too many cheesecakes, perhaps, would be her salvation.

But it was clear that he had worked hard at it, so she gave it another read. She tried to measure out the syllables, to get a sense of the rhythm. Again, as she read, the falling snow blotted out the words, and she shook the paper once more. As she did so, she looked up across the quad to glimpse what company could be found there. There

³⁶⁰ Carl Sagan, *Cosmos: Cosmos: A Personal Voyage*, episode 1, "The Shores of the Cosmic Ocean," directed by David Oyster et al., aired September 28, 1980, on PBS.

was none, save for a huge expanse of white hedged in by university buildings and a thick, forceful powder descending in a hurry, as if returning home from a long sojourn.

It was half-good, she finally decided, and folded the paper twice, then slid it into her coat pocket. She examined the hands on her ice-cold wristwatch, almost surprised they hadn't stopped completely. The second hand lurched into place metronomically, in defiance of entropy. 12:54. It was time to head back up, so she arose from the bench and trudged out across the quad toward the deep-red brick – now accented in white – of the astronomy department.

* * * * *

In her office, she cranked the radiator up and hung her coat on the rack. She eyed the blue clock on the wall – 1:02. Trudging back up to her office had taken longer than it had going down to the bench for lunch. And some part of her expected a disapproving eye, a chastising glance from a superior. But the whole office was empty. It was December 23rd, and her colleagues were away with their families. She wasn't even expected to be there. And yet she could never quite shake the feeling of eyes lurking undetected, watching.

From where she stood near the door, she looked at the typewriter on her desk, the article she had been writing half-written. She approached the desk and sat down in her chair, but she gave no more thought to the typewriter or her article. She longed for tenure – it was why she was here today instead of, say, strolling the icy shores of Lake Michigan, admiring its iced lighthouses. But she felt her ambition ease for a moment and wondered about the man who had written her the poem. His name was Peter, which

meant “rock,” which to her was a bit silly. Everyone’s on the edge of their seat – Would “wisdom” go out with “rock”? She laughed at the thought and let the smile hang about her face before suddenly dissolving into memory. Blue eyes. Recalling that image, her face became stone.

From her chair, she stared blankly through the window at the snow falling furiously, almost obscuring completely the sight of the bench across the quad. A little higher, she could no longer make out the spire of the cathedral beyond the river. Both earth and sky were now as innocent as the saints. The whiteness of winter was consuming everything, so she closed her eyes and tilted her head back, trying hard to think.

With her eyes closed, she held familiar images in her mind. Like a contemplative mobile, she watched planets in their orbit. As she saw them roll in their tracks, she felt the minute ticking of the second hand marching on. “So slow,” she thought, before catching herself. No, it wasn’t like that at all. Losing control of her attention, she opened her eyes and looked at the Norman Rockwell calendar someone had given her as a going-away present. December 1969, it said. She wondered how that could possibly be true. She was 29, and each tick of her wristwatch irritated her. Helen, she remembered, was certainly not 29. Was math invented to quantify worth?

But she caught herself – these thoughts serve no purpose. They’re futile. Or at least that’s what the psychotherapist told her, seven years ago, as she was graduating from Tufts. “Try to use your intelligence for something constructive,” he said. “All you

do is hurt yourself.” When she graduated and moved away from Boston, she didn’t miss him. And yet his languid, apathetic voice still sometimes echoed in her ears.

She got up and paced the room. She remembered there was some leftover cheesecake from the holiday party in the lounge refrigerator. For a moment, she resolved to fetch it, but before she knew it, she was lying down face-up on her little loveseat, her legs draped over the farther armrest, her eyes examining the smooth white ceiling. She closed her eyes.

She remembered how, in the 50s, when she still attended church, the pastor spoke of eternal life. And for a good long while she believed him, so she was careful not to lie, not to... But that was the consolation of a young girl, not an intelligent woman. So, she cast the preacher out of her mind in favor of planets revolving and revolving. And for a moment, she thought she’d rather count their years than deteriorate and decay. “One billion, two billion, three billion...” and so on. But up until what? Perhaps the universe, too, watches for grey in her hair, for wrinkles around the eyes. Perhaps there are hospices, too, on a cosmic scale. But she kept watching.

Here, the story will not be altogether shocking. Our star will expand and expand, growing redder and larger, consuming Mercury, Venus, and the Earth. Like a widow’s tear in a steaming bowl of cheap broth, our planet will fall unnoticed into a great hot mass, never to return. Over billions of years, stars will grow before collapsing in on themselves and rupturing spontaneously in bright white supernovas, jettisoning gaseous elements across thousands of light-years in the form of enormous nebulae. And as each star pops, this world will grow dimmer and dimmer, and the gases will begin

to rotate and spin, slowly. With her eyes shut firmly, Sophie watched nebulae coalesce into still larger nebulae, like olive oil floating at the surface in water. We would be gone, she knew, but she couldn't help to imagine the colors, the scale. Where there had been perhaps fifty or a hundred solar systems would float one heaving cloud of the remnants of dead suns, the cloud itself a final witness to the handful of stars still shining in near total darkness, save for a faint – ever so faint – glow at the heart of the most massive nebula. Soon, these last stars too, if not quite dying, would be pulled into the revolving gas through sheer force of gravity, and what points of light remain would draw ever nearer to their fate in the glowing heart of an unknown cloud. Soon, the universe would go dark.

But Sophie kept watching, her eyes shut with the back of her head resting still against the couch cushion. Perhaps a handful of stars would go out on their own, while still others, given over to the law of accretion, would collide and burst with one another at the heart of the last great cloud.

Soon, all would be dark save for that faint glow, the glow of super-hot gas spinning rapidly at the center. Slowly, surely, the cloud would contract and contract, growing ever smaller like a hot-pink cue ball vibrating in space. Then suddenly a flash – the whole universe, it seemed, lit up white.

* * * * *

Sophie opened her eyes and looked at the blue clock on the wall. 1:32. Suddenly, without thinking, she got up and rushed to the phone at her desk. She felt her fingertip pass through the dialer and rest against the 6 – 6 for 617. For half a second,

blue eyes hovered facelessly in her mind's eye. But she would not be calling her father.

She corrected herself. "3-1-3..."

Then the ringing on the other side of the line. Still more ringing. Then the rustle of the handset coming off the hook and the faint sound of breath in the receiver.

"Peter?"

Appendix 5: “Breath of the Author”

Simone³⁶¹ lies awake

Her breath rising

Falling, her head

Aching, aching

My brother, my brother

She thinks to herself.

Smarter, quicker, more, more.

Will I ever be enough?

Her breath rises, falls.

My breath rises, falls.

She thinks... what if it doesn't get done?

What if my words go unread?

Will I be, will I be...

What? Will I be what?

Will I *be*? Of course,

And isn't that enough?

³⁶¹ See Simone Weil's *Gravity and Grace* and *Waiting for God*.

I lie awake

Eyelids closing, closing.

Thankful for the breath

Of the author.

Appendix 6: “Alligator’s Tear”

The alligator
Lies in wait,
Muscles strong,
Tendons eager.

The alligator
Watches,
Eyes high,
Heart low.

The alligator
Is clumsy,
And frail,
And hungry.

And when she cries
She knows.
Caught somewhere between
Gravity

And grace.

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