Tower to Agora: Insularity and Philosophical Methodology

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Abstract

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Academic philosophy sits at a methodological crossroads, facing threats to its foundational practices, well-justified challenges to its lack of diversity across several axes, and fears of irrelevancy in response to modern challenges like widespread conspiracism. This thesis aims to explore these pressure points through the lens of academic philosophy's insularity problem—its cloistered state within the ivory tower. Aiming to help bring academic philosophy out of this sequestered state, it considers three problems that insular philosophical methodology engenders. First, the epistemic status of philosophical intuitions is threatened by empirical evidence pointing toward a susceptibility to irrational biases. While intuitions can be calibrated by an agent's confidence, confidence can only be calibrated by a sufficiently diverse community of other agents. Philosophy's demographic homogeneity must therefore change for intuitions to be adequately calibrated. Second, philosophical argumentation seems ineffective in the face of conspiracism. This is largely because the agonistic method is inattentive to the social motivations of belief in conspiracy theories. Without adapting philosophical methodology to account for this

social dimension, philosophers cannot aide in the fight against unwarranted conspiracism. Finally, public philosophy appears to be a fruitful strategy to improve philosophy's relevance, and therefore chances for survival. However, obstacles stand in the way of public philosophy's flourishing, rooted in academic philosophy's condescending attitude toward both the public and public philosophy, and the lack of appropriate training for public philosophy projects. A revolution in both attitude and training methodology is essential for public philosophy to succeed, and for it to save academic philosophy from extinction.

Dedicated to Lane Eagles,
sine qua non.
Through floods,
through valley and glade.
Thank you for everything,
and more.

In boundless gratitude to
Kim, Terry, and Cody,
and
in loving memory of
Travis Addington.

.

"A great deal of philosophy, including truly subtle and ingenious works, was not intended as an edifice for men to live in, safe from sun and wind, but as a challenge: don't sleep on! there are so many vantage points; they change in flight: what matters is to leave off crawling in the dust."

-Walter Kaufmann, *Critique of Religion and Philosophy*

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Introduction

Academic philosophy sits at a methodological crossroads, facing threats to its foundational practices, well-justified challenges to its lack of diversity across several axes, and fears of irrelevancy in response to modern challenges like widespread conspiracism. This thesis aims to explore these pressure points through the lens of academic philosophy's insularity problem—its cloistered state within the ivory tower. The following chapters are both metaphilosophical and epistemological in nature, as they question philosophy's methods as means to produce knowledge, both within the profession and outside of it. Ultimately, this thesis asks how philosophy should be conducted in the context of the threats enumerated above: from these crossroads, which road will be taken? Some lead to its flourishing, but some lead to its extinction.

Chapter 1 – Intuitions: Bias, Confidence, and Calibration

Intuitions sit at the "rock-bottom" of philosophical methodology, serving justification for normative arguments and principles.[1] Recent empirical research has threatened the trustworthiness of intuitions, implying that they are subject to irrational biases that undermine their epistemic status.[2] This has led philosophers like Jonathan Weinberg to call some kinds of philosophical intuitions "hopeless."[3] In contrast, Jennifer Nagel has claimed that the empirical threat to intuitions is overcome through calibration, specifically through the agent's feeling of confidence.[4] However, confidence itself is subject to a variety of biases, leading agents to be

[1] Herman Cappelen, *Philosophy without Intuitions* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2012), 6.
[2] Kenneth Boyd and Jennifer Nagel, "The Reliability of Epistemic Intuitions," in *Current Controversies in Experimental Philosophy*, ed. Edouard Machery and O'Neill Elizabeth (Routledge, 2014), 109–27.
[3] Jonathan M. Weinberg, "How to Challenge Intuitions Empirically Without Risking Skepticism," *Midwest Studies In Philosophy* 31, no. 1 (2007): 318–43.
[4] Jennifer Nagel, "Intuitions and Experiments: A Defense of the Case Method in Epistemology," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 85, no. 3 (2012): 495–527.

both over- and under-confident concerning their judgments. In this chapter, I argue that confidence is a risky calibratory tool, but can itself be calibrated through the social processes of philosophy, in a model inspired by Helen Longino's conception of science as social knowledge.[5] However, this calibration of confidence is only possible if academic philosophy succeeds in becoming demographically diverse, as a homogenous profession is vulnerable to irrational idiosyncrasies.

Chapter 2 – Extremely Online: The Social Dimension of Conspiracism

The advent of digital conspiracism was both world-changing and demoralizing. The spread of misinformation concerning sinister conspiracies affected elections, attitudes toward climate change, and even willingness to accept vaccinations against deadly diseases. Arguing with and providing counterevidence to conspiracists does not seem to move the needle, leaving one to wonder if conspiracism is simply an epistemic plague, for which no inoculation is possible. In this chapter, I argue that philosophers have failed to attend to the social dimension of conspiracism—the impulses for group membership, social identity, and collaborative work that make digital conspiracism appealing to some. Factoring in the social dimension reveals that the agonistic method so entrenched in academic philosophy is not likely to be successful against a dyed-in-the-wool conspiracy theorist. Other methods are necessary, including deplatforming and quarantining superspreader conspiracist communities, and employing collaborative dialogue techniques found in the Community of Inquiry methodology.

[5] Helen Longino, *Science as Social Knowledge* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1990).

Chapter 3 – Who is Public Philosophy For?

Public philosophy appears to lead to a promising future for philosophy, but so far it has been beset by skepticism from traditional philosophers and its reach has been limited. I argue that public philosophy is prevented from flourishing by three obstacles: (1) a condescending attitude on the part of traditional philosophers toward both the public and public philosophy, (2) over-adherence to professional norms that are not suited for public audiences, and (3) a lack of expertise in the practical skills necessary to execute public-facing projects. I then provide three ameliorative strategies for these obstacles, including a necessary shift in attitude rooted in both pragmatic and epistemic reasons, an awareness and respect for non-academic norms, and a new direction in training the next generation of philosophers.

Conclusion

The subsequent chapters all require that philosophy's methodology adapt and evolve. This change will involve pain: traditional philosophers will resist the adjustments as desecrating philosophy's purity, professors in philosophy departments will have to learn to provide training that they did not themselves receive, and philosophers who wish to engage with the public will have to maintain several methods in their toolbox, rather than the failed one-size-fits-all strategy associated with the agonistic method. Adopting these recommendations, philosophy will look different from the form it has taken in the last century. Perhaps this many-decades arrangement is a cocoon, from which the discipline may emerge into what Walter Kaufmann's calls the "philosophic flight," akin more to the mythic Socrates than a sad creature, "crawling in the dust."[6] For its own good and its own survival, philosophy can and must transform its methods

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[6] Walter A. Kaufmann, *Critique of Religion and Philosophy* (Princeton University Press, 1978), 9–10.

Chapter One

Intuitions: Bias, Confidence, and Calibration

What is the justificatory status and justificatory power of intuitions? That is, are intuitions justified and can they, in turn, justify other claims? In philosophy, intuitions are regularly and explicitly used, but they are also employed in everyday reasoning, often implicitly. Given the prevalence of intuitions in both everyday and philosophical reasoning, their justificatory status and justificatory power require considerable attention. It is therefore troubling that recent empirical studies have provided reasons to suspect intuitions of being epistemically defective.

Philosophical intuitions are threatened by experimental data, which seems to show that they are subject to arbitrary factors that undermine their reliability, specifically focusing on their stability, universality, and manipulability.[7] If intuitions shift with arbitrary differences in context or framing, then, as Stacy Swain, Joshua Alexander, and Jonathan Weinberg argue, "the growing body of empirical data impugning various intuitions [presents] a real challenge for philosophers who wish to rely on intuitions as evidence."[8] This experimental threat to intuitions comes with an important caveat, however.[9] If a method were to be found that could allow us to detect errors in intuition when they occur and, further, allow us to correct for them, the epistemic value of an intuition would be preserved. Intuitions are often compared to a machine or a scientific instrument, such that if we could only calibrate our intuitions, their reliability might be established, and intuitions would be considered trustworthy. The goal of this project is to assess one such method of calibration: Jennifer Nagel's account of confidence and intuitions. [10] Nagel's

[7] Boyd and Nagel, "The Reliability of Epistemic Intuitions."
[8] Stacey Swain, Joshua Alexander, and Jonathan Weinberg, "The Instability of Philosophical Intuitions: Running Hot and Cold on Truetemp," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 76, no. 1 (2008): 153.
[9] Hereafter, unless otherwise stated, "intuitions" refers to "philosophical intuitions."
[10] Nagel, "Intuitions and Experiments: A Defense of the Case Method in Epistemology."

calibration strategy is meant to counteract Weinberg's claim that intuitions are epistemically "hopeless,"[11] by showing that one such calibratory resource exists: the feeling of confidence that attend intuitions. As the most sophisticated and empirically grounded account of calibration, Nagel's argument provides a promising testing ground for the plausibility of calibrating intuitions.

I then present the skeptical challenge to intuitions as represented by Weinberg's hopelessness argument. Weinberg's view charges intuition as being epistemically "hopeless" in that neither are there means by which agents may detect for errors in their intuition, nor is there a method for calibrating our intuitions against error.[12] Subsequently, I describe Nagel's rejoinder to the hopelessness charge. I focus on her claim that an agent's confidence about their intuition is correlated with the degree to which one's intuition is shared by others.[13] This positive association between confidence and consensus reveals a crucial benefit for philosophical practice: an internally-accessible signal that marks the epistemic reliability of a particular intuition.

Finally, I argue that confidence about intuitions suffers from many of the epistemic problems associated with intuitions themselves. Employing confidence about intuitions as a calibratory measure looks, at first glance, like the epistemic problem is being pushed back a step rather than solved. I consider several means of discerning epistemically valuable confidence from over- and under-confidence, before arguing that confidence about intuitions would be in a troubling state if not for the social processes of philosophy. I argue that confidence about intuitions can be calibrated through the social processes of philosophy and, therefore, *intuitions* can be calibrated through the social processes of philosophy. This form of calibration, even if it

[11] Weinberg, "How to Challenge Intuitions Empirically Without Risking Skepticism."
[12] Weinberg, 328.
[13] Nagel, "Intuitions and Experiments: A Defense of the Case Method in Epistemology," 503.

only serves as a first step and in need of substantial improvement, provides enough of a foothold to defend against the once apparent inevitability of a skeptical outcome regarding intuitions.

The epistemic upshot of these considerations is that intuition is a fallible, fragile epistemic resource, but a resource, nonetheless. Its value arises in the context in which a critical dialectic exists wherein an agent's intuitions are philosophically and thoroughly engaged by a diverse population of challenges and inquiries. Intuitions can still serve as evidence, but only in communities where the appropriate epistemic norms and diversity are in place.

Intuitions, Contamination, and Hopelessness

Intuition is both extremely familiar and frustratingly mysterious. We have a conscious experience of the intuition itself, but we do not have conscious access to the processes that generated the intuition. This is especially troubling in the context of philosophy, where a predominant activity of philosophers is the giving and taking of intuitive reasons. When a philosopher says, "I have an intuition that X," they seem to be implying that they will not be able to say anything more in support of their statement. Herman Capellen calls this use of an intuition a "rock-bottom intuition" for good reason.[14] The "rock-bottom" aspect of intuition allows it to serve as a kind of doxastic bedrock that supports other beliefs, but intuitions themselves do not seem to be supported by other explicit beliefs. At the level of intuition, the philosopher has reached the point where they no longer have conscious access to the reasons for their judgment. The lack of access to the reasons or processes that produce an intuition seems to be the very thing that distinguishes it from a conscious judgment. An individual is nudged toward belief, or

[14] Cappelen, *Philosophy without Intuitions*, 6.

experiences a "seeming," to use George Bealer's phrase.[15] Something just appears to be the case or seems more correct than other options. This maneuver might seem innocuous enough—perhaps understandable or tolerable even if not fully praiseworthy—in cases where rock-bottom intuitions are also commonly shared across individuals, contexts, and cultures.

As Weinberg, Nichols, and Stich argue, intuitions are crucial to the practice of philosophers engaged in the "Normative Project" of epistemology.[16] Epistemology is centrally concerned with the "articulation of regulative norms," wherein the proper methods by which people should form and revise beliefs are specified.[17] Whether in epistemology, ethics, or political theory, intuitions are used to provide a quantity of normative force. There are at least two ways in which intuitions are used normatively.

First, intuitions can be, in and of themselves, normative judgments or evaluations. When seeing the trolley problem for the first time, an individual's intuition that it would be wrong to sacrifice one person for many contains clear normative content. The agent is making a judgment concerning what a person should and should not do. In evaluating intuitions of this type, we would hope to assess whether or not the agent has successfully picked out the moral or epistemic properties that are relevant, and whether or not the agent has evaluated those properties correctly.

For example, imagine a person, Lei, who is presented with a Gettier case wherein a person's belief about the number of coins in her pocket turns out to be both true and justified, but only accidentally. Upon being asked whether the agent in the Gettier case knowledge has, Lei responds with, "If the person is right-handed, then she has knowledge. If she is left-handed, she

[15] George Bealer, "Intuition and the Autonomy of Philosophy," in *Rethinking Intuition: The Psychology of Intuition and Its Role in Philosophical Inquiry,* ed. Michael DePaul and William Ramsey (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998), 208.
[16] J. M. Weinberg, S. Nichols, and S. Stich, "Normativity and Epistemic Intuitions," *Experimental Philosophy*, 2008, 430.
[17] Weinberg, Nichols, and Stich, 430.

does not have knowledge." Picking on these obviously irrelevant features is a sign that Lei's intuition is not tracking epistemic qualities properly.

But this kind of intuition might be evaluated along another dimension. The agent might be picking out the relevant properties but evaluating them incorrectly. To pick a relatively uncontroversial case, if Lei is told about a case of cold-blooded murder, and Lei has the intuition that the murderer did nothing wrong, then most would judge that Lei's faculty of intuition is not functioning properly. When intuitions are seen as individualized judgments concerning normative concepts, we want those intuitions to track the relevant properties in the objects of their focus, and we want those intuitions to be accurately evaluating those properties.

A second way in which intuitions function normatively is in their support of normative principles. In order to generate a normative principle, a philosopher might consult their intuitions concerning an array of cases. Depending on how they respond to those cases, the philosopher might form different principles. For example, consider the trolley problem. Take two philosophers, Marco and Jessie. Marco believes that the lever should be pulled, thereby sacrificing the single person to save a greater number. This might be generalized to something like a utilitarian or consequentialist principle: maximize happiness or well-being for the greatest number. Imagine that Jessie has the opposite reaction; Jessie believes you should not sacrifice the single person for the many. Jessie could argue that this illustrates that some actions are wrong and should not be done no matter the consequences, pushing her to endorse a deontological ethical principle. Within epistemology, this process, from intuition to normative principle, has been played out most famously in response to Gettier cases. Judging that the person in his scenario cannot have knowledge leads Edmund L. Gettier to suggest that knowledge must not be

merely justified true belief.[18] This single intuition led to a great variety of adjustments to the justified true belief conception of knowledge, including, for example, Goldman's requirement for an appropriate causal relation to hold between the world and the agent's belief.[19]

Whether in epistemology, ethics, or any other normative sphere, intuitions are used to generate or motivate normative principles. When we ask if intuitions can justify other beliefs, normative principles seem to be the most important potential recipients of intuition's justificatory power. Intuitions act as judgments to which principles should conform to some degree. But the direction of justification can be flipped; intuitions can be affected by one's normative principles and other factors as well. A person's intuitions might be changed by thinking for a long time on a particular problem, hearing arguments from opposing viewpoints, or personal experiences.[20] For example, one might override their intuition that they should pull the lever in the trolley case because of their antecedent commitment to a Kantian moral principle.

At the foundation of the skeptical position about intuitions is recent empirical evidence that appears to show that intuitions are vulnerable to a number of biases that are pernicious and difficult, or impossible, for the agent to detect.[21] An agent's judgment, it seems, can be manipulated by changes to wording, framing, or even the order in which cases are presented.[22] Intuitive judgment appears to be tracking arbitrary and irrelevant elements in a case, rather than

[18] Edmund L. Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?," *Analysis* 23, no. 6 (June 1963): 121–23.
[19] Alvin I. Goldman, "A Causal Theory of Knowing," *The Journal of Philosophy* 64, no. 12 (1967): 357–72.
[20] For a recent exploration of using judgments about particular cases to generate normative principles, see: William Talbott, *Which Rights Should Be Universal?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
[21] For summaries of the empirical evidence against intuition's reliability see: Wesley Buckwalter, "Non-Traditional Factors in Judgments about Knowledge," *Philosophy Compass* 7, no. 4 (2012): 278–89; Eric Schwitzgebel and Fiery Cushman, "Expertise in Moral Reasoning? Order Effects on Moral Judgment in Professional Philosophers and Non-Philosophers," *Mind and Language* 27, no. 2 (2012): 135–53; Weinberg, Nichols, and Stich, "Normativity and Epistemic Intuitions."
[22] Lewis Petrinovich and Patricia O'Neill, "Influence of Wording and Framing Effects on Moral Intuitions," *Ethology and Sociobiology* 17, no. 3 (May 1996): 145–71; Kevin Tobia, Wesley Buckwalter, and Stephen Stich, "Moral Intuitions: Are Philosophers Experts?," *Philosophical Psychology* 26, no. 5 (2013): 629–38; Christina Starmans and Ori Friedman, "The Folk Conception of Knowledge," *Cognition* 124, no. 3 (2012): 272–83.

descriptively or normatively important features.[23] Not only is intuition vulnerable to striking effects based on irrelevant variables, but this manipulation is undetectable to the agent who suffers from the bias. Call this undetectable, epistemically damaging intrusion of arbitrary epistemic factors *the contamination problem*. Left unchallenged, the contamination problem threatens to severely undermine the justificatory status and power of intuition.

Weinberg characterizes the most damaging consequence of the contamination problem in terms of "hopelessness."[24] Hopelessness and hopefulness concern the ability of agents to detect when errors occur and, further, their ability to correct for those errors. An epistemic resource is hopeless when error detection is low and there is little an agent can do about errors. Weinberg argues that the errors of philosophical intuitions allow for few means of detection and calibration. Weinberg attempts to draw a dividing line between philosophical intuitions and intuitions associated with logic and mathematics. This latter category of intuitions is not so hopeless because of the availability of alternative epistemic resources by which we can vet them. Similarly, epistemic judgments associated with scientific practice, journalism, and jurisprudence are hopeful in that there are well-accepted and effective means of detecting errors and correcting for them.[25] Notably, we do not lose out on intuitions concerning epistemic justification:

> We have had a long and fairly well-documented history of trying out different norms to guide our inquiries, and we can learn from our historians which norms have been active when and what results they seem to have yielded. And we can use our best information about the structure of investigative communities both past and present, as well as what

[23] A formative attack on intuitions appealed to differences between cultures in intuitive responses to thought experiments. However, recent research has cast doubt on this line of critique. For arguments that claim there are cultural differences in intuition, see: Weinberg, Nichols, and Stich, "Normativity and Epistemic Intuitions"; Starmans and Friedman, "The Folk Conception of Knowledge"; Edouard Machery et al., "Gettier Across Cultures," *Noûs* 49, no. 4 (2015). For a critique of this line of argument, see: Joshua Knobe, "Philosophical Intuitions Are Surprisingly Robust Across Demographic Differences," *Epistemology & Philosophy of Science* 56 (January 1, 2019): 29–36, https://doi.org/10.5840/eps201956225.
[24] Weinberg, "How to Challenge Intuitions Empirically Without Risking Skepticism," 327.
[25] Weinberg, 333.

> we know about the human agents who operate within them, to speculate counterfactually about what results various sorts of norms might or might not generate for us today.[26]

Crucially, Weinberg argues, epistemic norms have been "partially tested in the laboratory of the history of science" and so have been vetted, to some degree, by experience.[27] According to Weinberg, experience provides a calibratory resource, outside of intuitions, to vet intuitions. More generally, when we have calibratory resources in hand, they can act as checks and balances against intuitions. What is distinctive of the epistemic judgments and norms that Weinberg wants to preserve is the ability to vet those intuitions, stating that "we can appeal to something outside of those intuitions themselves."[28] Other kinds of intuitions, like moral intuitions, are not comparably open to calibration in Weinberg's view.

Weinberg's chief claim, then, is that philosophical intuitions, other than those logical and mathematical intuitions that are successfully vetted by external calibration methods, are hopeless and are therefore vulnerable to the contamination problem. Philosophical methodology, inasmuch as it involves a faculty of intuition unable to be calibrated by epistemic resources outside of itself, is in need of substantial methodological revision.[29] By implication, previous philosophical work which depends on intuitions as justification must either be discarded or retroactively justified by means other than intuition.

The Confident Intuition: Nagel's Calibration Strategy

Because a diagnosis of hopelessness depends on the lack of a successful calibratory resource, Nagel's calibration strategy focuses on providing one such resource. If Nagel's attempt at calibration goes through, the pessimistic claims of Weinberg, Stich, and other skeptics are

[26] Weinberg, 329.
[27] Weinberg, 340.
[28] Weinberg, 339.
[29] Weinberg, 340.

undermined. As both skeptics and collaborationists share the view that calibratory resources are necessary to establish intuition as a trustworthy epistemic tool, there is a clear means of resolving the dispute: either a calibratory resource will be found or it will not. If not, intuition is in trouble. The most promising potential calibratory resource for intuitions, according to Nagel, is confidence.[30]

Nagel suggests that philosophers, and humans in general, have access to alternative epistemic resources that may be used to detect errors in intuition and to correct for them.[31] She frames this claim in the context of the illusions that afflict sensory experience.[32] Several philosophers have invoked an analogy between sense perception and intuition, including Robert Audi,[33] Ernest Sosa,[34] Timothy Williamson,[35] Steven Hales,[36] and Moti Mizrahi.[37] Just as sensory perception involves errors, but can be trusted in most circumstances, intuition can also be judged as a fallible-but-trustworthy faculty. Nagel's account goes deeper, pinpointing the exact calibratory resources needed to save intuition from hopelessness. She starts with the analogy between sense perception and intuitions, focusing especially on optical illusions.

Optical illusions, such as a stick appearing bent in a glass of water or colors appearing differently depending on the colors that surround them, are common. However, despite their vivacity, few adult agents are actually tricked by optical illusions. The ways in which agents deal

[30] Nagel, "Intuitions and Experiments: A Defense of the Case Method in Epistemology," 496.
[31] Nagel, 521.
[32] Nagel, 497.
[33] Robert Audi, "Intuition, Inference, and Rational Disagreement in Ethics," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 11, no. 5 (2008): 475–92.
[34] Ernest Sosa, "Experimental Philosophy and Philosophical Intuition," *Philosophical Studies* 132, no. 1 (2007): 99–107.
[35] Timothy Williamson, "Philosophical 'Intuitions' and Scepticism About Judgement," *Dialectica* 58, no. 1 (2004): 109–53.
[36] Steven D. Hales, "The Faculty of Intuition," *Analytic Philosophy* 53, no. 2 (2012): 180–207.
[37] Moti Mizrahi, "Does the Method of Cases Rest on a Mistake?," *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 5, no. 2 (2014): 183–97.

with optical illusions, and the broader class of reoccurring errors Nagel calls "natural illusions," is significant.[38] When an agent confronts the stick in the water, their epistemic position is not immutable. They may touch the stick or take it out of the water. They may consult scientific research on refraction, water, and the durability of solid objects. They may discuss their experience with other agents and come to learn that the brokenness of the stick is merely an accidental, misleading optical phenomenon that does not reflect the stick's actual form.

In the case of optical illusions, the agent consults calibratory resources in order to detect the error of one epistemic modality and, further, they can correct for the error, despite its reoccurring and tenacious quality. They might notice that their perceptual experience has a strange quality dissimilar to their more common, veridical experiences. For example, in the case of the apparently bent stick in water, the sudden change from bent to straight when the stick is pulled from the water indicates to the agent that something is amiss. The agent can note that their experience has been affected by some quirk of perception and so disbelieve, or at least suspend judgment, that the stick is suddenly bent and then unbent with each journey into and out of the water. Even though the illusion does not go away with their newfound knowledge, they may yet still have correct beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors in the face of such an illusion.

Nagel wishes to emphasize this epistemic resourcefulness in the face of natural illusions and to suggest that agents may engage in a similar maneuver in the case of intuitions. The crux of this analogy is the availability of calibratory resources for an illusion-suffering modality, because the invocation of alternative epistemic resources is what makes the threat of perceptual illusions inert. If we had no calibratory resources on which to depend when confronted with an

[38] Nagel, "Intuitions and Experiments: A Defense of the Case Method in Epistemology," 497.

optical illusion, we would have no way around the illusion and be stuck with a resulting set of false beliefs.

Analogically, if there are no calibratory resources to be found for intuitions, it would be difficult, or impossible, to notice, guard against, and correct for natural illusions. It is therefore crucial that some calibratory resources are identified for intuitions, or else the justificatory status and power of intuitions are undermined. This is the locus of disagreement for Weinberg and Nagel: Weinberg denies the availability of calibratory resources and calls many kinds of intuition hopeless, and Nagel rejects the diagnosis of hopelessness by offering confidence as a calibratory resource. [39]

The efficacy of Nagel's calibratory resource is therefore paramount. Nagel's proposed calibratory resource is the feeling of confidence, referencing the work of Asher Koriat's "Self-Consistency Model" of intuitions:

> Koriat established that a person's level of confidence in an intuitive judgment predicts the degree to which that individual will make the same judgment again when presented with the same problem again, and, furthermore, predicts the judgment's consensuality—the extent to which others will make the same judgment.[40]

The presence of confidence one has about their intuition, on Nagel and Koriat's account, is a signal that they will have the same intuition again and that others will share that intuition, the *consensuality* of the intuition. Confidence would therefore be an extremely valuable epistemic resource. Nagel clearly states the potential benefits of using confidence as calibratory resource: "[intuition] is a signal which carries information not only about the yes-or-no question, but also

[39] Nagel provides another argument, distinct from the calibratory argument, which classifies epistemic intuitions as a kind of mind-reading, a cognitive capacity that is generally successful and evolutionarily successful. This argument, while deserving consideration on its own, is outside the scope of this project. For more on this argument, see: Boyd and Nagel, "The Reliability of Epistemic Intuitions," 111; Helen De Cruz, "Where Philosophical Intuitions Come From," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 93, no. 2 (2015): 242–43.
[40] Nagel, "Intuitions and Experiments: A Defense of the Case Method in Epistemology," 503.

about the extent to which one's own response will be stable and others will respond similarly."[41] If an internally accessible signal associated with intuitions provides an epistemic goods, information on the consensuality of intuitions, then intuitions do not seem so hopeless. We might be able to guard against the influence of arbitrary contaminants like order effects, if only we attend to our feelings of confidence. In her empirical study on introspective access to the stability of intuitions, Jennifer Wright makes a similar argument that confidence about an intuition is positively correlated with the intuition's stability over time.[42] Confidence therefore seems to be our best bet to calibrate intuitions.

As Nagel states, this confidence criterion rejects Weinberg's claim that intuition is a "basically…a 1-bit signal."[43] The calibrationist position here seems sturdy. An intuition can have multiple dimensions: it can be strong or weak, conceivably defeasible or rock-solid, waning or vivid, and so forth. One might have a vivid, affect-laden intuition in response to a trolley case, but find themselves unmoved and only weakly opinionated about a Gettier case. Intuitions are not simple signals, but complex ones, with many degrees and phenomenological properties, confidence being only one of them.

What is most crucial for Nagel's argument, then, is that confidence allows us to calibrate our intuitions for self-consistency and consensuality. This is necessary both for Nagel's analogy between the illusions of sense-perception and intuitions on one hand, and, on the other, her optimistic claims about the ability of philosophers to effectively evaluate theories. If alternate epistemic resources, like Nagel's confidence signal, are sufficiently helpful, then the threat of hopelessness about intuitions is dispelled. Sosa, in line with Nagel's view, sums up the position

[41] Nagel, 509.
[42] Jennifer Wright, "On Intuitional Stability: The Clear, the Strong, and the Paradigmatic," *Cognition* 115, no. 3 (2010): 491–503.
[43] Weinberg, "How to Challenge Intuitions Empirically Without Risking Skepticism," 335.

neatly: "[the] upshot is that we have to be *careful* in how we use intuition, not that intuition is useless."[44] The care we take with intuitions ultimately means that we pay close attention to the feeling of confidence that attends intuition.

With the dialectic between Nagel and Weinberg in hand, the rest of this project seeks to evaluate just how good of a signal confidence can be. Since confidence is the top contender for a calibratory resource for intuitions, its success or failure is critical for the future of philosophical methodology. If it does not live up to our hopes, intuition's hopelessness would even more assured.

Calibrating Confidence

Confidence could be a helpful epistemic resource for intuitions in several ways. In the spirit of Nagel's position, it could track consensus. Or else, one might hope that confidence tracks the general proper functioning of cognitive processes, such that when everything is working well, one feels confident about their intuition. Further, confidence could potentially track the lack of potential serious criticisms to one's view, in the vein of a contextualist standard for justification. Clearly, there are many potential paths for confidence to plausibly calibrate intuitions. My account is agnostic toward the specific epistemic properties that confidence tracks. One of them might be right, all of them might be right, or some other configuration might be right. This project leans pluralistically, in the sense that confidence is a rich resource, useful for intuition in many ways rather than just one. What is significant for this project is confidence's status as a calibratory resource for intuition. If confidence succeeds as a calibratory resource for intuition, then hopelessness is averted. If confidence fails, then intuition loses its best chance against the charge of hopelessness.

[44] Sosa, "Experimental Philosophy and Philosophical Intuition," 105.

Confidence as a signal for the epistemic value of an intuition creates a puzzle. On one hand, confidence is often used to determine the epistemic value of a belief. Imagine Fatima is trying to decide which is the best route to a restaurant. Fatima could rationally decide which route is better by attending to her differing levels of confidence about the quality of each route, without ever being able to explicitly list out what makes her choice better than the alternative. Similar stories could be told for choosing a babysitter, picking a recipe, or deciding whether or not to trust a witness's testimony. There is a largely implicit association between confidence and the strength of one's reasons or the reliability the cognitive processes that produced the belief. It feels like common sense to think that when one's evidence is incomplete or shaky for any number of reasons, one's confidence tends to diminish. Confidence, then, appears to be a practical and reliable signal about the epistemic value of a belief or judgment.

On the other hand, confidence is also associated with vices like naiveté, arrogance, and epistemic wantonness. Compare the confident, blustery interlocutors of Plato's dialogues and the proverbial humility of Socrates. Socrates is in a more laudable epistemic state than his interlocutors, just because he does not share their overconfidence about his beliefs. Inappropriate confidence is not rare and therefore is not a mere hypothetical concern. Confidence can also be a signal of irrationality or, at least, epistemic recklessness.

For any instance of confidence about an intuition, one's confidence might be warranted or might not be. But that is not the chief problem for confidence as a calibratory resource. The larger issue is this: it is unclear whether or not there are any internally accessible resources by which we, as agents, can determine whether an instance of confidence is warranted or not. If an agent is lucky, their confidence could be tracking consensuality. If they are not so lucky, their confidence could be signaling their unreflective arrogance. If overconfidence were an irregular

phenomenon and humans typically only felt confidence when appropriate, such a concern would be mostly hypothetical and we could reasonably, but defeasibly, trust confidence to signal when an intuition is shared by others.

Regrettably, overconfidence is all too common in reasoning. Frequently, agents make assertions and take on positions with an unwarranted certitude. One might plausibly wonder if there is any epistemic vice so common as overconfidence. One of the reasons the conversations in the Socratic dialogues feel so familiar and grounded, even while touching on the most abstract of topics, is the moment in which Socrates' interlocutors assert their position and show who they really are: those who are sure they know something when they do not. Their foolishness, and relatability, does not result from their mistaken beliefs, but from their overconfidence. Euthyphro and Thrasymachus are not puzzling or otherworldly characters.[45] They might remind us of people we know or have argued with. Or, even worse, they might remind us of ourselves in our less-virtuous moments.

But we need not trust personal experience on its own. The prevalence of overconfidence is empirically documented as well. Grounded in the heuristics and biases literature initiated by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, research on overconfidence shows that people often overestimate their performance on judgment tasks, overestimate their performance rankings relative to others, and express unjustified certainty about the accuracy of their judgments.[46] No one does, and no one should, claim that every instance of confidence is suspect, but it is common

[45] Plato, "Euthyphro," in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper, trans. G.M.A Grube (Indianapolis, Ind: Hackett Publishing Co., 1997), 1–16; Plato, "Republic," in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper, trans. G.M.A Grube (Indianapolis, Ind: Hackett Publishing Co., 1997), 971–1223.

[46] For summaries, see: Dale Griffin and Amos Tversky, "The Weighing of Evidence and the Determinants of Confidence," in *Heuristics and Biases: The Psychology of Intuitive Judgment*, ed. Thomas Gilovich and Dale Griffin (Cambridge, U.K. ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Nigel Harvey, "Confidence in Judgment," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 1, no. 2 (May 1997): 78–82; Daniel Kahneman, Paul Slovic, and Amos Tversky, eds., *Judgment Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases* (Cambridge University Press, 1982).

enough that we should say that overconfidence is frequent. This frequency entails that the fear that overconfidence is not only a worrisome what-if scenario, akin to Descartes's evil demon or a brain-in-a-vat hypothesis, but an empirically-grounded skeptical threat for intuitions. Jennifer Saul makes a similar argument concerning implicit bias, a mental phenomenon similar to the contamination problem, as it involves irrational biases afflicting judgment without conscious access.[47] Overconfidence, like implicit bias, is empirically grounded and alarmingly frequent. Concerns about the threat of overconfidence cannot be reasonably brushed aside as fanciful or alarmist.

However, if overconfidence were internally discernable from justified confidence, then the frequency of overconfidence need not concern us much. In other domains, biases might be extremely frequent, but the availability of a detection system dispels the threat. For example, if I always use less salt in my cooking than I should, I can simply taste my food to detect for the appropriate level of saltiness or ask someone else to. My tendency to error is worrying, but hits and misses are discernable and so I need not distress over the bias too much. Perhaps overconfidence is widespread, but detectable in such a way that it does not count against confidence as an epistemic signal. We would have to have a method of discerning confidence and overconfidence that is internally accessible to the agent for the agent to be able to rationally trust or distrust their feeling of confidence. How might we be able to discern confidence and overconfidence?

For many kinds of judgments about which we have confidence, we have available to us sources of evidence outside the feeling of confidence itself. A student wondering about whether they should be confident about their scholastic ability could reference grades, feedback from

[47] Jennifer Saul, "Scepticism and Implicit Bias," *Disputatio* 5, no. 37 (2013): 243–63.

instructors, or awards earned or lost. An individual wondering if they successfully recognized someone can confirm their judgment with the person they are trying to recognize or a third party. Many philosophers have compared intuition and perception for the reason that both intuition and perceptual judgments are often made without any consciously-accessible steps. Since perceptual judgments are often justified, despite the occurrence of natural illusions, Nagel has argued intuitions might be justified in an analogical way. This maneuver of looking toward an epistemic resource beyond the intuition itself has left us with confidence as a possible resource. Now we see that confidence itself requires some calibration for similar reasons to intuitions. Beyond an agent's internal feeling of confidence, external calibration for confidence is available in many domains other than intuition.

There are three methods which, in everyday reasoning, allow us to discern between confidence and overconfidence. They are undoubtedly fallible, but they successfully prevent us from going so far as to attribute epistemic hopelessness to confidence. The three methods that allow us to calibrate confidence are: (a) internal examination of the reasons and reasoning that led to one's confidence, (b) a means for checking the accuracy of one's judgments about which one is confident, and (c) social processes which provide external feedback. If one or more of these means are available to the faculty of intuition, then the faculty can avoid hopelessness.

Reasons for, and Reasoning about, Confidence

One way in which we check our confidence in the realm of more typical explicit beliefs is to consult the evidence we have for those beliefs and the reasoning by which we formed those beliefs. People who are overly self-conscious might engage in this behavior to a fault. That is, they might constantly wonder whether or not they have good reasons to feel confident about their knowledge, abilities, or performances. In a healthier way, we might ask ourselves if we should

be confident in our beliefs about mundane things like what is the best route to a given destination or more significant questions like whether or not we should trust a romantic partner. We explicitly go over our evidence and our reasoning to see if our antecedently held judgments warrant the confidence we had about them.

For example, imagine Jameelah was confident in her judgment about the trustworthiness of her romantic partner, Zahara. One day, however, her friend asks her, "should you really trust Zahara?" Jameelah starts to wonder if her confidence is warranted. She thinks about the times in which Zahara has been less than honest or has been manipulative or deceitful and notices that Zahara has proven herself to be rather untrustworthy. She realizes that she made inferences about Zahara's character that were unjustified. Jameelah then decides that she had been overly confident about her judgment and so discounts that confidence. Agents may or may not undertake a chain of reasoning this explicit or methodical, but this kind of self-examination of reasons and reasoning is an essential part of reflection. Examining one's evidence is a nearly indispensable calibration procedure for confidence about judgments in general.

The example of Jameelah and Zahara points toward the curious situation in which we find ourselves with respect to confidence and intuition. Intuition needs to be calibrated and so we look to confidence as a calibratory measure. However, confidence itself requires calibration since it too can easily go astray. In some sense, we have pushed the problem back a step. This might not be an issue, though, if it turns out we can sufficiently calibrate confidence by means of this explicit evaluation of one's evidence and reasoning.

Is such a maneuver possible in the case of confidence and intuition? Several obstacles stand in the way. Intuition, by its nature, is formed without a series of consciously-accessible steps and sources of evidence. No such internal reflection can double-check our confidence about

intuitions as it did in the case of Jameelah and her judgment about Zahara. Jameelah could attend to her past experiences with Zahara, stories other people have told her about Zahara, and the inferences she made based on that personal and testimonial evidence. Each step could, in theory, be checked and evaluated. The subterranean nature of intuition generation presents an apparently insurmountable obstacle for calibration by way of mere internal reflection. This internal calibration procedure, while available to confidence in other domains, does not seem helpful in the case of intuition. Confidence about intuition appears to miss out on this source of calibration.

Checking for Accuracy

Attending to the evidence and reasoning that led to a judgment is not the only way to calibrate one's intuition. One might have information about the reliability of one's judgments and could infer from that data the reliability of one's intuitions. Edouard Machery introduces the metaphor of trying to shoot a target to help clarify the proper domain for intuitions:

> That the reliability of a skill or capacity depends on the circumstances in which this skill or capacity is applied is equally true of our physical skills and of our psychological capacities... Because we know that shooting accuracy decreases when people shoot at targets that are more distant and smaller than they are used to, we should be less confident in the accuracy of a shooter who has been trained in shooting at twelve-inch targets at ten yards if we know that the target is smaller than twelve inches and more distant than ten yards. If we do not know how distant or how small the target is or if we do not know how size and distance affect her reliability, for all we know, the shooter might be very unreliable (if the target is very far or is very small) or quite reliable (if, say, she is shooting at a ten-inch target at fifteen yards). In these conditions, we should be reluctant to accept a bet if the odds favor the shooter hitting the target.[48]

Machery claims that we have good reason to think that our intuitive capacities are outside their proper domain for good functioning when applied to thought experiments. Such an argument is outside the scope of this project, but the metaphor is helpful. With many non-intuitive

[48] Edouard Machery, "Thought Experiments and Philosophical Knowledge," *Metaphilosophy* 42, no. 3 (April 2011): 201.

judgments, we can actually check the target to see if our judgments were accurate. If a person is confident in their belief that the next dog they meet will be friendly, there are means available to check the target. They can interact with the next dog they meet, consult others about their own judgments about the dog's demeanor, or ask the owner about the dog's typical behavior. If such a strategy is open to intuitions, then confidence could serve as a useful calibratory tool for intuitions.

To check the target for confidence about intuitions would mean that we are able to check if our normative intuitions were correct. Nagel describes an optical illusion where subjects have incorrect intuitions about which figure has a longer line as an example wherein our intuitions can be calibrated.[49] A crucial difference between intuitions in this case and intuitions in the case of philosophy, however, is that one can simply take out a ruler and check the accuracy of their judgments. In the case of normative intuitions, no such ruler exists. There appears no way of doing so currently and no real open prospects for doing so in the future. Short of having some epistemic power that allowed us to observe normative truths in the we observe objects and their properties, it is unclear how we could determine whether our normative intuitions have been accurate or not. At best, we could check for consensuality, which Nagel recommends. But these tell us nothing about accuracy, only coherence. Coherence, with oneself and others, is an epistemic good, but does not provide much help in determining whether or not one's intuitions have hit the target or not.

Philosophy's Social Processes as a Calibratory Resource

The two potential sources of calibration for confidence about intuitions considered so far, attending to the evidence and reasoning for one's intuition and checking for accuracy, do not

[49] Nagel, "Intuitions and Experiments: A Defense of the Case Method in Epistemology," 507–8.

provide the calibration we sorely need. If these were our only options, confidence about intuitions, and therefore philosophical intuitions, would be in trouble. Luckily, there is another option, and it is one that is often left out in philosophical accounts of intuition. Typically, philosophers and other intuition-employing agents are considered only as island-like individuals who have their internal cognitive content, and theirs alone, with which to work. Philosophy, according to this conception, is done privately and independently, like Descartes in his sitting room by the hearth, silently cognizing.

But this is not how philosophy is done. Philosophers talk to one another. They write to and about one another. Participating in conferences and peer review are practices based on the stance that philosophers do a service for each other by engaging with and critiquing each other's work, much like the practices of other knowledge-generating communities like science and mathematics. Others notice the flaws and strengths of one's arguments that go unseen from the first-person perspective. But the incredible value of the social dimension is left out in discussion of intuitions and the arguments surrounding them. In some ways, leaving out the social dimension makes sense. Intuitions do feel intensely personal and private. It is often difficult to communicate one's intuitions and, in those moments, one feels the sharp distinction between the insular world of one's own mind and the distant world of the interpersonal.

The final escape route for confidence, therefore, would be to test our confidence about intuitions socially. In the last century, science was also confronted with the epistemic problem of individual bias. This concern was convincingly addressed by Helen Longino's claims that the social procedures of peer review, criticism, and replication acted as a filter on those biases.[50]

[50] Longino, *Science as Social Knowledge*.

Carole J. Lee and Christian D. Schunn characterize Longino's view concerning the power of social processes to mitigate contaminating influences as follows:

> Helen Longino argues for a form of social empiricism, in which a scientific community, organized and structured in appropriate ways, can make use of the diversity of members' perspectives to identify and critique biasing background assumptions. Background assumptions ''bias'' hypothesis evaluation in the sense that they modulate how an observer sees and weighs the evidence bearing on it. Bias, under this account, can be negative when idiosyncratic background assumptions are left unchecked; it can be productive in its ability to open new lines of critique and inquiry, with innovations in methods, concepts, and modes of explanation. Background assumptions are not granted immunity from the demand for reasons and empirical support.[51]

The concern about idiosyncratic background assumptions is especially troubling in the context of intuitions, where intuitions in the form of normative judgments can often serve as the epistemic bedrock for arguments, theories, and frameworks. If philosophy is to ameliorate these idiosyncrasies, then, in keeping with Longino, process-focused remedies are needed.

It is reasonable to hope that successful philosophical practice might minimize the effects of overconfidence in a similar manner. For any given philosopher suffering from overconfidence, the input of other philosophers might act as the necessary calibrating factor. Philosophers with competing intuitions can argue with one another, present novel thought experiments, and generally engage in a dialectic that humbles the overly confident and validates the justly confident.

For example, let us say a novice philosopher has an intuition about which they are deeply confident: the consequences of an action are the only morally significant features one should consider. All other views seem mistaken in obvious ways and the novice philosopher could not be surer about their intuition. Now imagine she starts discussing this intuition with others. One philosopher brings up the trolley problem, about which they find themselves unable to pull the

[51] Carole J. Lee and Christian D. Schunn, "Social Biases and Solutions for Procedural Objectivity," *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (May 1, 2011): 353.

lever, apparently contradicting their own consequentialist leanings. Another philosopher mentions how consequentialism might allow us to sacrifice undesirables in order to bring about better overall consequences. This too is unappealing to the novice philosopher. Their confidence about their intuition decreases. Though they still hold the intuition that the consequences of an action are the morally significant features of an action, they are not as sure. They now believe other moral viewpoints have varying degrees of credence. This example is not meant to show that consequentialist intuitions are wrongheaded, but to show that holding a moral view with no respect for its alternatives is probably a sign that person is not properly considering objections to their view or listening to the arguments in favor of other views.

Other philosophers have helped to calibrate the novice philosopher's confidence about their intuition and so provided a meaningful strategy, ultimately, for calibrating intuitions. It seems clear that these kinds of conversations happen, especially at the beginning of a philosophical career, and can help humble a novice's arrogance.

As stated above, this matches our actual philosophical practice in important ways. Philosophers subject their arguments to intensive review from other philosophers. Conferences, peer review, and engaging in discussion are just a few of the ways in which philosophers implicitly recognize the epistemic value of making philosophy a social enterprise. For this exact reason, introductory philosophy courses often have discussion sections intended to facilitate the social practice of philosophy. This recognition is also apparent in a more negative sense: the lone philosopher, working outside of a community of other philosophers, often makes novice mistakes and holds an overly high opinion of their work's originality and power. Just as the lone scientist would lose out on so much epistemic value, so too would the lone philosopher.

There are two features of philosophical practice, however, that make such social calibration difficult. First, intuitions are often treated as the rock-bottom grounding of a philosophical view. That is, intuitions are treated as if they were both atomistic and foundational for philosophical beliefs. This implies that when there is a clash of intuition between two parties, there appears very little that can be done. What could a person appeal to once they have reached the most basic reasons for their beliefs?

Even when intuitions are made explicit, philosophers do not always know what to do with competing intuitions. Often, in response to such a worrying intuition, a philosopher might simply throw their hands up and say that they just do not know what to do with such a claim. This seems to happen when one deeply disagrees with a particular intuition but does not have much to say in the way of objecting to the intuition. For example, when confronted with the intuition that "suffering need not be avoided, morally" one might react with an extremely powerful intuition in favor of the opposite position, see any attempt at dialectic as fruitless, and walk away.

This runs contrary to the social processes of philosophy, however, and makes calibration difficult. This practice implicitly treats intuitions like discrete deliverances of a mysterious, but rational, faculty. This is only partially correct. The cognitive sources of an intuition are largely inaccessible to the person who has the intuition. Agents cannot merely introspect and find the determinants of their intuitions. Intuitions are *phenomenologically* foundational, in that there seems to be no rational structure supporting the intuition that is consciously accessible. However, intuitions are not *cognitively* foundational. Intuitions do not come from nowhere; they are formed by a multitude of complex, non-conscious processes. While this disallows the sources of intuitions to be directly accessible, they remain *indirectly* accessible. An intuition can be

changed by a particularly effective thought experiment, vivid experience (e.g., formerly puritanical parents accepting their LGBTQIA+ children), or by reflective deliberation.[52] Although intuitions are tricky to get to, they are not unassailable. Dialectic can have a meaningful impact on intuitions and so a conflict of intuitions should not be treated as a reason to end a conversation. There is much to say to one another, even when intuitions conflict.

Philosophers should be cautious about the strategy of abandoning the dialectic when competing intuitions are found. One is easily tempted to retreat to one's familiar philosophical surroundings and discuss matters with only those who already agree that, for example, Rawls is basically correct or that externalism has to be true. For a discipline that nearly fetishizes the practices of Socrates, philosophy is wary of gadflies. This wariness should come to an end if we are to serve as a calibrating influence for each other's confidence and so too each other's intuitions.

The importance of a diversity of viewpoints is made clear in Tamar Szabó Gendler's work on the persuasive role that thought experiments take on. Gendler argues that thought experiments can activate "representational schema that was otherwise inactive or subordinate; the result of this may be to evoke response that run counter to those evoked by alternative presentations of relevantly similar content."[53] Competing viewpoints are therefore necessary for thought experiments to have some utility. Further, in describing the success conditions for thought experiments provided by Judith Jarvis Thomson, Elizabeth Anderson, and John Rawls, Gendler claims:

> Thomson's thought experiment "works" if it brings about a reframing of the subject's attitudes in the domain it is intended to illuminate—if he comes, either reflectively or

[52] See, for example: John Rawls, "Outline of a Decision Procedure for Ethics," *The Philosophical Review* 60, no. 2 (1951): 177–97, https://doi.org/10.2307/2181696.
[53] Tamar Szabó Gendler, "Philosophical Thought Experiments, Intuitions, and Cognitive Equilibrium," *MISP Midwest Studies In Philosophy* 31, no. 1 (2007): 75.

> unreflectively, to represent the question of the fetus–mother relationship in ways akin to those that he represents the violinist–patient relationship. Anderson's "works" if, when faced with decisions about whether to institute certain sorts of social policies, the subject sees her decision as being relevantly similar to that faced in Anderson's scenario. Rawls's "works" if, when considering questions of whether a particular social arrangement is just, the subject makes use of principles that would be endorsed in the original position.[54]

The goal for thought experiments, according to Gendler, is to activate a schema that would be otherwise inactive and so provide some disequilibrium into a settled cognitive state. A thought experiment is successful when the newly "evoked response becomes dominant, so that the subject comes…to represent relevant non-thought experiment content in light of the thought experimental conclusion."[55]

Thus, Gendler provides the foundation for the social utility of philosophical interaction. Philosophers can activate each other's previously inactivated schemas to a number and a degree that an isolated philosopher generally cannot. The novelty generated by groups of individuals talking with one another provides a calibratory resource on the confidence of one's intuitions. When one thinks that a certain judgment was clear or obvious, one only need to discuss it with another philosopher to find holes, shaky foundations, or counterexamples that one would likely not have thought of on one's own. An implication of this view is that heterogeneity of viewpoints within philosophy is of paramount epistemic importance.

As Kristie Dotson and others have argued, philosophy is not a welcoming place for philosophers outside of its principal demographics.[56] This analysis is born out in the data: academic philosophers are overwhelmingly white, cisgender men.[57] Gatekeeping and boundary

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[54] Gendler, 86.
[55] Gendler, 86.
[56] Kristie Dotson, "How Is This Paper Philosophy?," *Comparative Philosophy* 3, no. 1 (December 30, 2012): 121, https://doi.org/10.31979/2151-6014(2012).030105.
[57] "Member Demographics" (The American Philosophical Association), accessed August 17, 2021, https://www.apaonline.org/page/demographics; Eric Schwitzgebel, "Diversity in Philosophy Departments: Introduction," *Blog of the APA* (blog), June 11, 2020, https://blog.apaonline.org/2020/06/11/diversity-in-philosophy-departments-introduction/; Isaac Wilhelm, Sherri Lynn Conklin, and Nicole Hassoun, "New Data on the

policing are troubling practices that make philosophy grotesquely monolithic in its demographics and also impoverishes philosophy. Longino's point about the necessity of diverse viewpoints for ameliorating idiosyncratic bias is pivotal: a non-diverse field makes calibration impossible.

The social procedures of philosophy can mirror those of science to the extent that multiple perspectives, mutual criticism, and shared standards of research can calibrate one's views. Confidence can benefit from this calibration, and in turn be used to calibrate intuitions. Internal calibration of intuitions using confidence does not look promising, but philosophers may find refuge in the social dimension. This use of the social dimension is already implicitly advocated in the existing practices of philosophers, but academic philosophy's diversity problem must be rectified, treated as the urgent moral and epistemic problem that it is.

Confidence can therefore serve as a calibrating mechanism for intuition, but only in particular circumstances: where there is a social resource by which other people can help to calibrate our confidence. The frequency and ease with which overconfidence goes undetected makes the social calibratory element indispensable. A philosophical community can act as that social calibratory element, but only to the degree to which its members engage with others who hold competing intuitions. This social calibratory measure allows us to calibrate our confidence and so make some headway in calibrating our intuitions.

Conclusion

Intuitions are fallible and fragile things. It is when we are most confident about our intuitions that we should recall the power and subtlety of bias. This does not mean that intuitions

Representation of Women in Philosophy Journals: 2004–2015," *Philosophical Studies* 175, no. 6 (June 1, 2018): 1441–64, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-017-0919-0; Jaquelina Falkenheim, "Doctorate Recipients from U.S. Universities 2018" (National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, December 3, 2019), https://ncses.nsf.gov/pubs/nsf20301/data-tables.

should have a fundamentally different role in philosophy. Intuitions will continue, and should continue, to serve as foundations for theories, in evaluations of cases, and other dialectical functions. Skepticism does not successfully banish intuitions from the realm of philosophy, though it provides enough reasonable doubt to place less trust in intuitions and to keep its fallibility in mind.

This project has sought to evaluate the calibratory resource of confidence. Confidence is problematic in that it is subject to error and has a troubling signal-to-noise ratio. Internal means of calibrating confidence about intuitions were found wanting, due to the peculiar nature of intuitions. An external means of calibration, however, provided the calibratory resource that confidence required. The use of social procedures in philosophy helps curtail overconfidence, legitimize justified confidence, and bolster under-confidence.

Before philosophers rest too easy, however, they must prioritize the diversification of the field. This is already well-justified on ethical grounds, but diversification is essential to the calibration of intuitions as well. Philosophy undermines itself by its shamefully homogenous demographics.

Chapter Two

Extremely Online - The Social Dimension of Conspiracism

"The internet has always contained the seeds of postmodern hell," argues Franklin Foer, diagnosing the double-edged relationship between truth and the internet.[58] In the era of pervasive "digital pollution,"[59] the seeds are sprouting, thriving on a toxic mixture of manipulative algorithms, malevolent actors, and a highly networked society. While much remains unclear about our digital and epistemic futures, there seems to be a consensus that the epistemic ecology of the internet is conducive to the spread of misinformation.[60] Online platforms allow communities to form around false beliefs, promulgating and empowering them. This is an epistemic crisis, one that online platforms, journalists, and governments are attempting to address without great success.[61]

The landscape of the internet is fraught with epistemic pitfalls: disinformation campaigns, echo chambers (wherein dissenting voices are intentionally excluded), epistemic bubbles (wherein dissenting voices are merely unincluded by unintentional omission),[62] and peer-to-peer circulation of rumor are all challenges for the epistemic agent. Conspiracy theories, in particular, generate a great deal of epistemic difficulty, as they exist at the intersection of many of these

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[58] Franklin Foer, "The Era of Fake Video Begins," *The Atlantic*, April 8, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/05/realitys-end/556877/.

[59] Martin Longman, Judy Estrin, and Sam Gill, "The World Is Choking on Digital Pollution," *Washington Monthly*, January 13, 2019, https://washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/january-february-march-2019/the-world-is-choking-on-digital-pollution/.

[60] Janna Anderson and Lee Rainie, "The Future of Truth and Misinformation Online" (Pew Research Center, October 2017), https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2017/10/19/the-future-of-truth-and-misinformation-online/.

[61] Daniel Dunke and Susan Benkelman, "Tech Platforms Are Racing to Combat Misinformation before Elections. Is It Too Little, Too Late?," Poynter, April 11, 2019, https://www.poynter.org/fact-checking/2019/tech-platforms-are-racing-to-combat-misinformation-before-elections-is-it-too-little-too-late/.

[62] C. Thi Nguyen, "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles," *Episteme*, 2018, 1–21, https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2018.32.

epistemic challenges, while incorporating complications in the form of definitional problems, political polarization, threats of violence, and psychological idiosyncrasies.[63]

Conspiracy theories have presented a difficult collection of questions for philosophers, psychologists, lawmakers, and the media: why do people believe in conspiracy theories? Why has conspiracism grown to such cultural prominence in the 21st century? Which strategies are best for reducing belief in conspiracy theories? To attempt to unravel this epistemic knot, epistemologists and psychologists have focused on logical fallacies, personality traits, and epistemic vices as potential explanations for the phenomenon. A prominent thread in the epistemology of conspiracy theories is the claim that belief in conspiracism originates with a "crippled epistemology."[64] As explicated by both Russell Hardin and Cass Sunstein, the beliefs and inferences of conspiracists are corrupted by epistemic bubbles and echo chambers that prevent believers from interacting meaningfully with counterarguments and evidence that undermine their views.[65]

While this account of crippled epistemologies provides genuine insight, it focuses too much on the flow of information, and leaves out the quasi-religious flurry of collaborative activity that produces, sustains, and rewards belief in conspiracy theories. To understand the development and formation of belief in conspiracism, one must attend to the communities in

[63] For overviews, see: Karen M Douglas, Robbie M Sutton, and Aleksandra Cichocka, "The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories," n.d., 5; Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Karen M. Douglas, "Belief in Conspiracy Theories: Basic Principles of an Emerging Research Domain," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 48, no. 7 (December 2018): 897–908, https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2530; Karen M. Douglas et al., "Understanding Conspiracy Theories," *Political Psychology* 40, no. S1 (2019): 3–35, https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12568.

[64] Russell Hardin, "The Crippled Epistemology of Extremism," in *Political Extremism and Rationality*, ed. Albert Breton, Gianluigi Galeotti, and Pierre Salmon, 2002, 3–22.

[65] Hardin; Cass R. Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule, "Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures*," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 17, no. 2 (2009): 202–27, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9760.2008.00325.x.

which conspiracism flourishes. In our time, the home and hub of conspiracism is the online community.

In examining political extremism, Russell Hardin sought to provide an account of extremism that "focuses on the costs and benefits of having and coming to have knowledge or to correct what knowledge one has."[66] To investigate trust on the internet, Karen Frost-Arnold argues for a systems-oriented social epistemology which "evaluates epistemic systems according to their positive or negative epistemic outcomes for members."[67] Frost-Arnold relies on Alvin Goldman's conception of a systems-oriented social epistemology, which focuses on social systems like "social practices, procedures, institutions, and/or patterns of interpersonal influence that affect the epistemic outcomes."[68]

Following Hardin, Goldman, and Frost-Arnold, and drawing on recent research on the social psychology and individual traits of conspiracism, I provide an analysis of conspiracism that focuses on the social benefits of belief in conspiracy theories, including pragmatic desiderata like group membership, the formation of a social identity, and participation in collaborative work. Online conspiracist communities provide these benefits and more, serving as a social club and as an engine for conspiracism. Ultimately, this project is a step in the direction of a more general ameliorative, epistemological strategy to prevent and reduce conspiracism. Without a full picture of the motivations of conspiracism, prevention and reduction strategies not only fail to capture the dynamics of how beliefs are formed, infected, and passed on, they are also, practically speaking, doomed.

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[66] Hardin, "The Crippled Epistemology of Extremism," 5.

[67] Karen Frost-Arnold, "Trustworthiness and Truth: The Epistemic Pitfalls of Internet Accountability," *Episteme* 11, no. 1 (March 2014): 66, https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2013.43.

[68] Alvin I. Goldman, "A Guide to Social Epistemology," in *Social Epistemology: Essential Readings*, ed. Alvin I. Goldman and Dennis Whitcomb (Oxford University Press, 2010), 18.

In their work on the communication of rumors, Jill A. Edy and Erin E. Risley-Bair call these interpersonal qualities the "social dimensions of rumors and conspiracism."[69] To depict the significance of the social dimension of conspiracism, I first present the predominant philosophical accounts of conspiracism, focusing primarily on the flow of information into, out of, and within the communities being assessed. These information-focused analyses do not consider what motivates individuals to join and participate in conspiracist communities: the pragmatic benefits, which are fundamentally social in nature. I argue that online conspiracist communities provide three benefits that motivate belief in conspiracy theories: group membership, social identity, and participation in collaborative work. Ultimately, I argue that recognition of the social dimension of conspiracism implies the standard practices of philosophy will not succeed in ameliorating conspiracism.

A note on this chapter's methodology: this chapter depends on the work of psychologists and sociologists, in addition to epistemologists. As a result, this argument might be seen as within the domains of naturalized epistemology and ameliorative epistemology. In concert with this empirically-grounded methodology, and because journalists have been the primary documentarians of modern conspiracism, newspapers and other journalistic institutions are cited throughout this project. While these articles are not peer-reviewed, their in-depth research and the track record of the institutions and journalists themselves make them suitable sources for this project's purposes.

Conspiracy theory communities nurture and encourage misinformation and, as examples like climate denial, anti-vaxx, and Pizzagate show, misinformation can produce substantive, concrete dangers. It is tempting to become apocalyptic in our epistemic forecast but

[69] Jill A. Edy and Erin E. Risley-Baird, "Rumor Communities: The Social Dimensions of Internet Political Misperceptions," *Social Science Quarterly* 97, no. 3 (2016): 588, https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.12309.

understanding the communities that rally around conspiracy theories is a critical step to preventing and reducing irrational belief in conspiracy theories.

The Epistemology of Conspiracism

While conspiracy theories have long been part of the political and cultural landscape,[70] online platforms have elevated their status in the public discourse. Conspiracy theories not only violate epistemic norms, but also generate lasting negative impacts on public policy and individual decision-making.[71] Consider, for example, climate change deniers who reject environmental legislation due to suspicions of a conspiracy of climate scientists, or parents that refuse to vaccinate their children due to fears of a cover-up of vaccines causing autism.[72] Climate change denialism and the anti-vaxx movement are not harmless cultural curios. They produce actual harms. Not only do they harm the conspiracists themselves, in terms of their decision-making and status as epistemic agents, but also nonbelievers, including the conspiracists' own children.[73] Some far right conspiracists have claimed that COVID-19 is a hoax perpetrated to justify infringements on individual rights.[74] Other conspiracists claim the illness is real, but

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[70] Rob Brotherton, *Suspicious Minds: Why We Believe Conspiracy Theories* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Sigma, 2015), 17.

[71] Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Karen M. Douglas, "Belief in Conspiracy Theories: Basic Principles of an Emerging Research Domain," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 48, no. 7 (December 2018): 899, https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2530.

[72] Joseph E. Uscinski and Santiago Olivella, "The Conditional Effect of Conspiracy Thinking on Attitudes toward Climate Change," *Research & Politics* 4, no. 4 (October 2017): 205316801774310, https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168017743105; Daniel Jolley and Karen M. Douglas, "The Effects of Anti-Vaccine Conspiracy Theories on Vaccination Intentions," *PLoS ONE* 9, no. 2 (February 20, 2014), https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0089177.

[73] Randal Jackson, "The Effects of Climate Change," Climate Change: Vital Signs of the Planet, accessed January 3, 2020, https://climate.nasa.gov/effects; Daniel Jolley and Karen M. Douglas, "The Effects of Anti-Vaccine Conspiracy Theories on Vaccination Intentions," *PLoS ONE* 9, no. 2 (February 20, 2014), https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0089177.

[74] Joseph E. Uscinski and Adam M. Enders, "The Coronavirus Conspiracy Boom," The Atlantic, April 30, 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/04/what-can-coronavirus-tell-us-about-conspiracy-theories/610894/.

caused by the advent of 5G cellular networks, rather than a virus.[75] Both theories incentivize believers to skirt proper isolation strategies and to advocate faulty policy toward harmless technology. In the case of the 5G theory, some have even been motivated to commit arson, lighting the cellular towers on fire.[76] Disregarding conspiracism as an amusing quirk or an inconsequential cultural strain is therefore irresponsible and even dangerous.

The philosophical questions surrounding conspiracism include: (1) what defines a conspiracy theory?[77] (2) how much credence should be afforded to conspiracy theories?[78] (3) how do we epistemologically and psychologically explain belief in conspiracy theories?[79] and (4) how do we prevent or disrupt epistemically-vicious conspiracism?[80] This project aims at the third and fourth of these questions. The main motivation for this project is illuminating how understanding the motivations for conspiracism are crucial to developing successful ameliorative strategies. While questions of definition and credence are important, they are too far outside the scope of this project to consider them in depth. This project will employ a definition of "conspiracy theory" that draws on Qassim Cassam and Brian L. Keeley's accounts.[81] Conspiracy

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[75] Wasim Ahmed et al., "COVID-19 and the 5G Conspiracy Theory: Social Network Analysis of Twitter Data," *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 22, no. 5 (May 6, 2020), https://doi.org/10.2196/19458.

[76] Ahmed et al., 6.

[77] Brian L. Keeley, "Of Conspiracy Theories," *The Journal of Philosophy* 96, no. 3 (1999): 109–26, https://doi.org/10.2307/2564659.

[78] For example, David Coady, "Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule on Conspiracy Theories," *Argumenta - Journal of Analytic Philosophy* 3, no. 2 (May 2018): 291–302; David Coady, "Conspiracy Theories and Official Stories," *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 17 (January 1, 2003): 197–209, https://doi.org/10.5840/ijap200317210.

[79] For example, van Prooijen and Douglas, "Belief in Conspiracy Theories"; Joseph E. Uscinski, Casey Klofstad, and Matthew D. Atkinson, "What Drives Conspiratorial Beliefs? The Role of Informational Cues and Predispositions," *Political Research Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (2016): 57–71; Rob Brotherton, *Suspicious Minds: Why We Believe Conspiracy Theories* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Sigma, 2015); *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them* (Oxford University Press, 2018), https://www-oxfordscholarship-com.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/view/10.1093/oso/9780190844073.001.0001/oso-9780190844073.

[80] Most prominently, Cass R. Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule, "Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures*," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 17, no. 2 (2009): 202–27, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9760.2008.00325.x.

[81] Quassim Cassam, *Conspiracy Theories* (Cambridge, UK ; Medford, MA: Polity, 2019); Keeley, "Of Conspiracy Theories."

theories are speculative claims, contrary to established fact and based on unwarranted reasoning, that a secret group has undertaken a nefarious action. Cassam has employed the terms "amateurish" and "esoteric" to describe the flavor of conspiracy theories.[82] Examples include claims that the World Trade Center attacks on September 11th, 2001, were an "inside job" and that global warming is a hoax.[83] These views, what Keeley calls "unwarranted conspiracy theories,"[84] which will be the focus of this project, are distinct from true historical claims about actual coordinated conspiracies. Hereafter, "conspiracy theory" refers to "unwarranted conspiracy theory," unless otherwise specified.

Before going further, it is important to clarify what kind of conspiracist (in contrast to conspiracy theory) this project is assessing. This project does not seek to explain the behavior of bad actors who intentionally aim to manipulate others, lie, or spread misinformation. Instead, my argument concerns a subset of who Eric Hoffer calls "true believers," those who sincerely and deeply believe in conspiracy theories.[85] In some cases, these true believers are what Kate Starbird calls "unwitting agents," individuals who may help to enact the agenda of intentional manipulators, though they are themselves not *intentionally* spreading misinformation.[86]

The ongoing struggle to clean up the epistemic landscape of the internet in the face of malicious operatives, unwitting agents, and the attention economy has made the analysis of conspiracy theories not only a high priority, but a time-sensitive one as well. The epistemology of conspiracism has been largely individualistic in nature, focusing mostly on the rationality,

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[82] Cassam, *Conspiracy Theories*, 28.
[83] Cassam, 3.
[84] Keeley, "Of Conspiracy Theories," 111.
[85] Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2010).
[86] Kate Starbird, "Disinformation's Spread: Bots, Trolls and All of Us," *Nature* 571, no. 7766 (July 24, 2019): 449–449, https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-019-02235-x.

evidence, attitudes, and biases of individual agents who believe in conspiracy theories. While this has been fruitful, it has also only provided part of the story, as individual conspiracists exist within social networks that affect their rational capacities, contribute to their evidence set, manipulate their attitudes, and feed their biases. This section attempts to chart the progress from individualist accounts of conspiracism to theories which are increasingly social in nature. While there is progress to be seen in this deeper understanding of the social dimension of conspiracism, it still centers too much on the flow of information in and out of the communities, rather than the relationships within the networks and, specifically, the social motivations of group members.

Richard Hofstadter's seminal piece, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," helped to shift discourse about conspiracy theories away from the view that only the mentally ill subscribe to conspiracism.[87] He argues that if the paranoid style associated with conspiracism were only relegated to "profoundly disturbed minds," the question would be of "little contemporary relevance," claiming that "[it] is the use of paranoid modes of expression by more or less normal people that makes the phenomenon significant."[88] Hofstadter keeps his focus keenly on the individual agent and only ventures to the realm of the social when considering a group's perceived disenfranchisement. He argues that those who believe in conspiracy theories come to their belief from a feeling of being "dispossessed" of what was once theirs and a fear that the end times are nigh. "America has been largely taken away from them and their kind, though they are determined to try to repossess it and to prevent the final destructive act of subversion," Hofstadter argues.[89] Hofstadter's recognition of the emotional and social motivations of conspiracism is both insightful and ahead of its time

[87] Richard Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," *Harper's Magazine*, November 1964, https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics/.
[88] Hofstadter, 77.
[89] Hofstadter, 81.

Quassim Cassam also primarily focuses on the individual in his analysis of conspiracism. His work, "Vice Epistemology,"[90] accounts for belief in conspiracy theories by focusing on negative intellectual character traits, "vices,"[91] in the vein of Linda Zagzebski's work on epistemic virtues.[92] Cassam points to vices like gullibility, carelessness, and laziness, in contrast to virtues like thoroughness and discernment as the causes for an individual's belief in conspiracy theories.[93] Cassam's vice epistemology of conspiracy theories helps us understand the psychological and epistemic mechanisms of belief in conspiracy theories. However, I argue that while this provides part of the picture, it does not capture the social dimension of conspiracism. Just as describing the vices of a thief explains why she is willing to steal a jewel, it does not explain the value of the jewel to the thief. I do not claim that this is what Cassam attempted to accomplish, but there is a further question that must be asked concerning motivation.[94]

Further progress toward the social dimensions of conspiracism come from Russell Hardin and Cass Sunstein. While Hardin's focus is on extremists, broadly construed, his analysis provides helpful concepts for the philosophy of conspiracism. First, he identifies the "crippled epistemology" of extremists: an agent suffers from a crippled epistemology when they hold beliefs that originate in a particularly narrow or insular set of sources.[95] This leads to Hardin's more general point about the significance of one's social context in the formulation and sustaining of one's beliefs:

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[90] Quassim Cassam, "Vice Epistemology," *The Monist* 99, no. 2 (April 1, 2016): 159–80, https://doi.org/10.1093/monist/onv034.
[91] Cassam, 159.
[92] Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
[93] Cassam, "Vice Epistemology," 164–65.
[94] More recently, Cassam has argued that the "primary function" of conspiracy theories "is to promote a political or ideological agenda rather than to tell the truth." Cassam, *Conspiracy Theories*, 31.
[95] Russell Hardin, "The Crippled Epistemology of Extremism," in *Political Extremism and Rationality*, ed. Albert Breton, Gianluigi Galeotti, and Pierre Salmon, 2002, 3.

> It might seem astonishing that one could know that others generally believe differently and that one nevertheless insists strongly on the truth of one's own particular beliefs. But this capacity seems less astonishing if one's particular beliefs are those of a group or society in which one spends one's life and that those who believe otherwise are outside that group or society. In these conditions, my beliefs may get reinforced constantly by those around me even though those beliefs might be shared by at most a tiny fraction of the world's population.[96]

The social dimension matters, Hardin claims, because the pressures and rewards of one's social context are epistemically forceful. We can draw an important lesson from Hardin: taking account of the reinforcing community around the conspiracist renders the mystery of conspiracism much less perplexing.

Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule draw on Hardin's conception of a crippled epistemology to advocate for an ameliorative strategy intended to disrupt the epistemic bubbles of conspiracy theorists.[97] They follow Hardin's conception of the central cause of conspiracism being epistemic agents existing in particularly narrow epistemic bubbles:

> Our primary claim is that those who hold conspiracy theories of this distinctive sort typically do so not as a result of a mental illness of any kind, or of simple irrationality, but as a result of a "crippled epistemology," in the form of a sharply limited number of (relevant) informational sources.[98]

Sunstein and Vermeule claim that conspiracist communities should be infiltrated by something akin to an epistemic secret agent, providing counterarguments and "informational sources" that undermine that community's belief system, thereby popping the epistemic bubble on which conspiracist communities depend.[99] This has been criticized on moral and epistemic grounds,[100] as well as charged as being detrimental to a proper democracy,[101] but this project will not wade

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[96] Hardin, 10.
[97] Sunstein and Vermeule, "Conspiracy Theories."
[98] Sunstein and Vermeule, 206.
[99] Sunstein and Vermeule, 218.
[100] Coady, "Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule on Conspiracy Theories."
[101] Kurtis Hagen, "Is Infiltration of 'Extremist Groups' Justified?," *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 24, no. 2 (2010): 153.

into the murky waters of this debate. Rather, Sunstein and Vermeule's insistence on the importance of the conspiracist communities is a launching pad for the argument I make below: the social dimension of conspiracism is an essential aspect of its flourishing, especially in an online context. Online conspiracist communities provide a significant motivation for belief in conspiracy theories and act as an engine for conspiracism in general. Because of its importance, it is also a vulnerability that ameliorative projects should focus on, though Sunstein and Vermeule's particular strategy of deceptive infiltration is morally questionable.

Two recent, more socially-oriented works come from C. Thi Nguyen and Cailin O'Connor and James Owen Weatherall. Nguyen argues persuasively for a distinction between epistemic bubbles and echo chambers. He argues that epistemic bubbles exclude contrary voices by means of inadvertent "omission."[102] For example, an epistemic bubble could consist of our network of family and friends who might share our political opinions, just by the nature of who we spend time with and who we seek to form relationships with. Other perspectives are not intentionally excluded, but some perspectives nevertheless are. In an echo chamber, by contrast, "other voices are actively undermined."[103] Diverse perspectives are not only left out, as Sunstein has previously pointed out, but also intentionally suppressed or excluded. Nguyen's analysis of echo chambers provides a model for understanding a certain kind of epistemic community:

> I use "echo chamber" to mean *an epistemic community which creates a significant disparity in trust between members and non-members.* This disparity is created by excluding non-members through epistemic discrediting, while simultaneously *amplifying members' epistemic credentials*. Finally, echo chambers are such that *general agreement with some core set of beliefs is a prerequisite for membership*, where those core beliefs *include beliefs that support that disparity in trust*.[104]

[102] Nguyen, "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles," 2.
[103] Nguyen, 1.
[104] Nguyen, 6.

Nguyen claims that this is a conceptual distinction and communities may have qualities of each category. This seems to be the case for online conspiracist communities, as they involve explicit distrust of outsiders (e.g., calling them sheep, shills, or other pejorative words meant to undermine their credibility) and so can be considered echo chambers, but also act as epistemic bubbles due to the formation of social ties and other inadvertent means of incidentally omitting contrary views, even when this is not intended. Nguyen's analysis points us toward the social good of group membership, so valuable to the modern conspiracist. For online conspiracist communities, there is a strong disparity between the in-group and out-group, including the level of trust each is afforded. In the next section, I argue that group membership affords many goods like trust and that these goods incentivize the conspiracist to maintain their good standing in conspiracist communities.

O'Connor and Weatherall also confront the social aspects of misinformation, though they focus primarily on misinformation related to scientific claims.[105] Through the use of computer simulations that mimic social networks, O'Connor and Weatherall point to conformity and trust or mistrust as critical factors in the spread of false beliefs and polarization.[106] This attention to social structures and the attitudes, motivations, and emotions of the agents within those structures is essential to understanding modern conspiracism. As Erin Nash notes, O'Connor and Weatherall's analysis focuses mainly on scientists, policymakers, and other "elites."[107] More is needed to understand the motivations of non-elites, and especially conspiracists, in spreading misinformation.

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[105] Cailin O'Connor and James Owen Weatherall, *The Misinformation Age: How False Beliefs Spread* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019).
[106] O'Connor and Weatherall, 73, 87.
[107] Erin J. Nash, "O'Connor & Weatherall, 'The Misinformation Age,'" *BSPS* (blog), June 17, 2019, http://www.thebsps.org/2019/06/nash-on-oconnor-weatherall/.

The accounts above help to show that focusing on the social dimension of conspiracy theories illuminates the movement of information in and out of conspiracist communities. However, the social motivations driving conspiracism have not yet been incorporated into ameliorative efforts. In the next section, I attempt to articulate these social motivations by focusing on online conspiracist communities. These communities serve as the modern platform and the driving engine of conspiracism.

Online Conspiracist Communities

Previous accounts of conspiracism focused on the flow of information in and out of communities, considering the impacts of echo chambers and epistemic bubbles and the role of diversity of thought. There is no doubt that these are important factors in explaining and ameliorating conspiracism. However, this is not a complete picture. Questions remain: why do these communities exist in the first place? How do they form and why do people join? What keeps them within the echo chambers and epistemic bubbles? In other words, what motivates agents to participate in behaviors that leads to unjustified beliefs? To answer these questions, we must look to the predominant locus of conspiracism: online conspiracist communities.

Conspiracy theories are no longer relegated to the back corners of used bookstores or niche radio shows broadcasting late at night.[108] Conspiracy theories are culturally front-and-center, as evidenced by the depth to which conspiracism is blooming on modern media platforms, including reddit, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and the *chan* forums (e.g., 4chan and 8chan).[109] Conspiracism flourishes in the internet age, and divorcing our epistemic analyses from

[108] "The Art Bell Vault Is Unlocked, and It's Filled with Aliens, Time Travelers, and Bigfoots," AV Club, accessed February 18, 2020, https://news.avclub.com/the-art-bell-vault-is-unlocked-and-its-filled-with-ali-1837898012.
[109] Heidi Oi-Yee Li et al., "YouTube as a Source of Information on COVID-19: A Pandemic of Misinformation?," BMJ Global Health 5, no. 5 (May 2020): e002604, https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2020-002604.

this context is a mistake. Muirhead and Rosenblum contrast the modern picture of conspiracism with "classic conspiracism":

> For classic conspiracists, the internet is a source of dots and patterns—information that fills in the narrative and solidifies their explanation of events. For the new conspiracists, all the energy is directed at repetition and affirmation. Repetition is the new conspiracism's oxygen and, it sometimes seems, its whole purpose. With the internet, repeating charges takes no effort. Bare assertions are easily echoed and affirmed.[110]

We implicitly understand the importance of social identity and group membership when it comes to political alignments, but the dismissive misconception of the conspiracist as alone in their parents' basement obfuscates the very real communities that surround and support them.

Not all forms of misinformation spread through community interaction. For example, television shows that spread falsehoods through their hosts, panelists, or advertising are largely one-way and therefore are less networked and less interactive. The media at this end of the spectrum would be more amenable to analyses related to individual traits and biases. These forms of media, however, are also less generative of activity on the part of their audiences and less likely to breed the personal attachments and emotional investment that interactive communities do. This can be seen by traditional media like television shows devoting resources to encouraging user engagement on websites like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Passive reception of misinformation, while a problem, does not lend itself to the same interactive fanaticism as online communities.

One notable conspiracy theory loomed largely and absurdly during the 2016 presidential election in the United States: Pizzagate. Pizzagate claimed that a ring of politicians, celebrities, and socialites participated in an underground ring of pedophilia and occult rituals, using phrases

[110] Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum, *A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2019), 32, https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691190068.

like "cheese pizza" to mean "child pornography," because of the shared initials "CP."[111] Believers purported that a pizzeria in Washington D.C., Comet Ping Pong, served as a secret hub for Pizzagate participants, holding ritualistic meetings in its basement (undermined by the fact that Comet Ping Pong does not have a basement).[112] Like many conspiracy theories, Pizzagate involved decoding arcane symbolism and finding patterns in random or misleading selections of data. It has also had the trappings of conspiracy theories specific to the last few decades: a fear of the occult and satanism, allegations against politicians and celebrities for their involvement, and a focus on physical threats to children.

Pizzagate garnered attention both from its deep, but flawed, investigative work and its provocative name, connecting something as innocuous as pizza to something as horrific as child predation. The person that made it infamous, however, was Edgar Maddison Welch, who brought an assault rifle to Comet Ping-Pong in an effort to stop the alleged child abuse invented by the Pizzagate conspiracy theory.[113] Only a couple of months later, another Pizzagate believer, Ryan Jaselskis, allegedly lit a fire within the restaurant in a failed attempt to burn it down.[114] In addition to these acts of violence, the owners and employees of Comet Ping-Pong have been harassed and threatened by other Pizzagate believers.[115]

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[111] Gregor Aisch, Jon Huang, and Cecilia Kang, "Dissecting the #PizzaGate Conspiracy Theories," *The New York Times*, December 10, 2016, sec. Business, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/12/10/business/media/pizzagate.html.

[112] Amanda Robb, "Pizzagate: Anatomy of a Fake News Scandal," *Rolling Stone*, November 16, 2017, https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/anatomy-of-a-fake-news-scandal-125877/.

[113] Spencer S. Hsu, "'Pizzagate' Gunman Says He Was Foolish, Reckless, Mistaken — and Sorry," *Washington Post*, June 14, 2017, sec. Public Safety, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/pizzagate-shooter-apologizes-in-handwritten-letter-for-his-mistakes-ahead-of-sentencing/2017/06/13/f35126b6-5086-11e7-be25-3a519335381c_story.html.

[114] "Man Pleads Guilty to Setting Fire at 'Pizzagate' Restaurant in D.C.," NBC News, accessed April 27, 2020, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/man-pleads-guilty-setting-fire-pizzagate-restaurant-d-c-n1103691.

[115] Abby Ohlheiser, "Fearing yet Another Witch Hunt, Reddit Bans 'Pizzagate,'" *Washington Post*, accessed November 19, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2016/11/23/fearing-yet-another-witch-hunt-reddit-bans-pizzagate/; Benjamin Freed, "Comet Ping Pong Forced to Add Security to Music Shows,"

The Pizzagate conspiracy theory and the resulting real-world threatening behavior originated in online communities. Users shared rumors, engaged in investigative work, and collaborated on developing theories, making connections, and documenting leads for future research.[116] Described as such, it sounds like a group of scientists or journalists advancing human knowledge or revealing the seedy truth behind political institutions. Or perhaps one might think of these communities as allied and overlapping war rooms, fighting battles against enemies that do not exist. It seems clear that this is how conspiracists think of themselves, researcher-*cum*-journalist-*cum*-warriors, defending truth and justice. This idea will be pursued below in association with the role of social identity in conspiracism.

Communities do not only span physical space, but also virtual domains.[117] The attachment of a community member to other members, and to the community itself, however, is often overlooked by accounts of conspiracism, as they focus on the flow of information, rather than the motivations of agents to participate in conspiracist communities. I argue that participation in the community is critical to understanding, and to disrupting, modern conspiracism. This commitment to a community is as important, if not more important, than any rational commitments on behalf of the conspiracist. Therefore, ameliorative efforts must take the emotional, social dimension into account. Merely arguing with conspiracists, even armed with empirical facts and philosophical acumen, will not be enough. In the following sections, I describe the features of conspiracist communities that make them so attractive to their members: the opportunities for collaborative work, group membership, and social identity.

Washingtonian (blog), December 1, 2016, https://www.washingtonian.com/2016/12/01/comet-ping-pong-to-beef-up-security-at-music-shows-after-pizzagate-harassment/.

[116] Robb, "Pizzagate: Anatomy of a Fake News Scandal."

[117] See, for example, Francesca Tripodi, "Yakking about College Life: Examining the Role of Anonymous Forums on Community Identity Formation," in *Digital Sociologies*, ed. Jessie Daniels, Karen Gregory, and Tressie McMillan Cottom, 1st ed. (Bristol University Press, 2017), 256, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1t89cfr.22.

Collaborative Work

Online conspiracist communities *work*. That is, there is a continuous flurry of activity in the thriving communities.[118] They write, decode, analyze, share, argue, support, delegitimize, harass, and post together.[119] This continuous stream of activity accomplishes many desiderata for the community. It gives members a reason to keep coming back: to post about their work and add content to the community, to read the new posts and respond with comments, likes, or shares, or merely absorb the new material. The new material is sharable, effectively creating marketing content as posts are spread across social media, attracting and converting new members. In Caroline Haythornwhite's analysis of social networks and online communities, she emphasizes these aspects as hallmarks of being part of a community: "we find online community members reporting the kinds of strong emotional and social bonds associated with local community, sharing the resources of stories and information, enjoying their time together online and working toward common goals."[120] All of this activity, including the inciting posts and then the follow-up discussions, generates a subculture: connections, friendships, a shared history, behavioral norms, in-jokes, and social identities for the individuals involved.

Collaborative work allows online conspiracist communities to act as an engine for conspiracy theories and conspiracist behavior, generating content, shares, and social connection. Starbird, Arif, and Wilson have identified disinformation campaigns as a kind of collaborative work:

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[118] Kate Starbird, Ahmer Arif, and Tom Wilson, "Disinformation as Collaborative Work: Surfacing the Participatory Nature of Strategic Information Operations," *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 3 (November 7, 2019): 1–26, https://doi.org/10.1145/3359229.

[119] Alvin Chang, "We Analyzed Every QAnon Post on Reddit. Here's Who QAnon Supporters Actually Are.," Vox, August 8, 2018, https://www.vox.com/2018/8/8/17657800/qanon-reddit-conspiracy-data.

[120] Caroline Haythornthwaite, "Social Networks and Online Community," in *Oxford Handbook of Internet Psychology*, ed. Adam N. Joinson et al., vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, 2012), 2, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199561803.013.0009.

> Online information operations are participatory in nature. Their messages spread through—and with the help of—online crowds and other information providers. Our work views strategic information operations online as collaborative work, a perspective that pushes us to expand our focus beyond "bots" and "trolls" to consider the role of online crowds (unwitting and otherwise) in spreading disinformation and political propaganda.[121]

While intentional disinformation campaigns are distinct from online conspiracist communities, online conspiracist communities sometimes participate in disinformation campaigns, either as unwitting agents or as intentional manipulators. Just as the collaborative work lens reveals the epistemic behaviors of the participants in disinformation campaigns, so too does the lens reveal much about online conspiracist communities.

There is an endless variety of activities involved in this collaborative work. In terms of scale and grandiosity, they range from mere social participation like leaving a comment in a forum discussion, to investigative work like examining photographs for image manipulation, to violent acts like bringing an assault rifle to Comet Ping-Pong. Luckily, the collaborative work tends to be largely non-violent, including evidence collection and its attendant analysis and discussion with fellow believers. Hofstadter highlights the impressive amount of pedantry and evidence collection in the "paranoid literature":

> A final characteristic of the paranoid style is related to the quality of its pedantry. One of the impressive things about paranoid literature is the contrast between its fantasied conclusions and the almost touching concern with factuality it invariably shows. It produces heroic strivings for evidence to prove that the unbelievable is the only thing that can be believed. Of course, there are highbrow, lowbrow, and middlebrow paranoids, as there are likely to be in any political tendency. But respectable paranoid literature not only starts from certain moral commitments that can indeed be justified but also carefully and all but obsessively accumulates "evidence." The difference between this "evidence" and that commonly employed by others is that it seems less a means of entering into normal political controversy than a means of warding off the profane intrusion of the secular political world. The paranoid seems to have little expectation of actually

[121] Starbird, Arif, and Wilson, "Disinformation as Collaborative Work," 109:5.

> convincing a hostile world, but he can accumulate evidence in order to protect his cherished convictions from it.[122]

The pedantic accumulation of evidence speaks to the work involved in being a conspiracist. This unpaid, unsolicited labor must be explained.

Conspicuous among the online communities supporting conspiracy theories was the subreddit, r/theGreatAwakening, which hosted links, images, and discussion posts for believers in the conspiracy theory around the elusive figure known as "Q." Q was purportedly an insider in the Trump administration who would provide special insight into the backroom machinations of the executive branch, providing predictions and riddles like a bureaucratic variant of the Oracle at Delphi.[123]

In reality, the individual or group known as Q made vague predictions and tied together discrete phenomena into a compelling narrative. Q created an endless game that mixed cloak-and-dagger political strategy with social media participation and modern-day augury. For example, Q claimed that President Trump was playing a long game that would end in Hillary Clinton's arrest (along with other members of the "swamp" and the "deep state" and was engaged in a series of political maneuvers and feints to accomplish these ends. Believers went wild when President Trump, standing with top military commanders, stated that this meeting represented "the calm before the storm."[124] It is unclear if Trump was intentionally appealing to believers in Q or not, but it was taken as a purposeful message by the community.

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[122] Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," 85–86.

[123] Jane Coaston, "#QAnon, the Scarily Popular pro-Trump Conspiracy Theory, Explained," Vox, August 1, 2018, https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/8/1/17253444/qanon-trump-conspiracy-theory-reddit.

[124] Mark Landler, "What Did President Trump Mean by 'Calm Before the Storm'?," *The New York Times*, October 6, 2017, sec. U.S., https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/06/us/politics/trump-calls-meeting-with-military-leaders-the-calm-before-the-storm.html.

What was most essential to the success of the "Qanon" community was the sheer amount of work to be done. That is, there were tasks to be done by believers: noting and decoding hidden messages, working out the long-term strategy behind apparent gaffes, documenting the surprising amount of support from conservative celebrities like Roseanne Barr and Sean Hannity, and other instances of deciphering and drawing connections.[125] One does not need college degrees or official titles to earn a respected place in the community—one just needs to contribute, by creating content or generating purported knowledge, by advancing the mission, or simply by being a clever writer. Reputations are built, comradery developed, and achievements accomplished, no matter who the participants are offline.

Though guilty of many epistemic vices, the believers were prolific. A participatory culture provides the pleasures of contributing, collaborating, belonging, and recognition. Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis define participatory cultures:

> In many ways, places like 8chan/pol/ exemplify Henry Jenkins' concept of participatory culture. These environments have "relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices." On the chans, rough MSPaint art is normal; sharing images is required to post on the board; posters review each other's content and help to improve it; and [newcomers] are encouraged to lurk in order to understand the culture. Thus, there is a low barrier to entry, and various forms of "legitimate peripheral participation" exist in which curious onlookers can slowly learn group norms and become accepted contributors.[126]

Participatory cultures are generative of content, but also social bonds between members, including mentorship relationships and socially-constructed standards of success. Jessica Johnson describes how the participatory structure of social media binds individuals through emotion:

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[125] Coaston, "#QAnon, the Scarily Popular pro-Trump Conspiracy Theory, Explained."

[126] Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis, "Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online" (Data & Society, May 2017), 34, https://datasociety.net/output/media-manipulation-and-disinfo-online/.

> Social media generates and amplifies affect to the extent that "people enjoy the circulation of affect that presents itself as contemporary communication" (Dean, 2010, p. 21, emphasis in the original). Subsequently, the enjoyment of participating in an affective network is a "binding technique" that intensifies through reflexive communication: adding comments, links, and interconnecting myriad platforms, people, and devices (Dean, 2010, p. 21). Rather than finding accurate news meaningful, Facebook users find the affective pleasure of connectivity addictive, whether or not the information they share is factual, and that is how communicative capitalism captivates subjects as it holds them captive.[127]

The shared activity produces an emotional bond between community members. Just as the small interactions at schools, shops, workplaces, and public spaces generate affective connections, so too do the posts and comments of an online community.

This can be an extremely alluring prospect. Imagine you are smart, but bored; that you are witty, but introverted; that you believe the world is falling apart and you must help save it. Kimberley Brownlee argues that humans have social needs beyond mere access to other people—humans also have "social-contribution needs," the ability to "contribute to specific other people's survival and well-being."[128] Online conspiracist communities provide opportunities to fill this contributory need. There are low barriers to entry, but endless opportunities to work together to advance the cause, irrational as the cause may be. Whether these achievements are real or valuable are another matter, but to their participants they feel real and valuable. A proper epistemology of conspiracy theories requires us, therefore, to attend to these incentives for participation. Real justification or not, true beliefs or not, collaborative work provides a motivating reason to join up and stay in the fight.

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[127] Jessica Johnson, "The Self-Radicalization of White Men: 'Fake News' and the Affective Networking of Paranoia," *Communication, Culture and Critique* 11, no. 1 (March 1, 2018): 110, https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcx014.
[128] Kimberley Brownlee, "Social Beings," in *Being Sure of Each Other* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 16, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198714064.003.0002.

Group Membership

Participating in the collaborative work described above generates something beyond mere forum posts; it creates a community. Conspiracist communities are often overlooked in epistemic analyses, though psychologists have increasingly noted the social dimension of conspiracism. Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Karen M. Douglas summarize recent psychological research on conspiracism:

> Taken together, the findings reviewed in this section underscore the social qualities of conspiracy theories. Even when beliefs in conspiracy theories do not always have prosocial consequences...they originate from basic social motivations that characterize intergroup conflict, namely to uphold a strong ingroup identity and to protect against a threatening outgroup.[129]

Joining a conspiracist community provides numerous social benefits. That is, a message board or a particular corner of Twitter has its own references, norms of behavior, in-jokes, and even a sense of identity and meaning. A shared history of events, commentary, and stock responses to outsiders forms a narrative that existing and prospective members can slot into. Behavior norms are accepted as "the way we do things," or even encoded as formal, explicit rules. Focusing on disinformation campaigns, Starbird, Arif, and Wilson characterize the development of behavioral norms in networked communities in response to crisis events:

> The online nature of their activity allows for an epistemic community to take shape around these conversations, through following relationships on Twitter, and in places like r/conspiracy on reddit. It also allows for other people converging online to make sense of a crisis event to be passively exposed to this activity—as well as the epistemology that drives it and the techniques used to promote it. Thus, this activity can act to recruit others into the community and teach them the social rules of participating there. Studying this behavior allows us to see the intersection of platform features, social and socio-technical structures (network ties, online norms), and human behaviors that constitute the phenomenon of going "down the rabbit hole."[130]

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[129] van Prooijen and Douglas, "Belief in Conspiracy Theories," 903.

[130] Tom Wilson, Kaitlyn Zhou, and Kate Starbird, "Assembling Strategic Narratives: Information Operations As Collaborative Work Within an Online Community," *Proc. ACM Hum.-Comput. Interact.* 2, no. CSCW (November 2018): 15, https://doi.org/10.1145/3274452.

A community is born through the collaborative work of an online conspiracist community with behavioral norms and social rules, just like a face-to-face community.

Recognition of the community's role helps indicate which strategies might be useful in combating online conspiracist communities and which are not. If a member of an online conspiracist community is committed to it through a sense of belonging, as a person might be to their national or local culture, then rational arguments will most likely deflect off them, ineffectual and pointless. Despite the nominal commitment to critical thinking prevalent in online conspiracist communities,[131] engaging in the agonistic method of philosophy will likely not convince an online conspiracist community member that they should reconsider their views. Leaving an online conspiracist community would constitute more than a change in view; it would be abandoning their community. That is, it would be a betrayal, more like turning traitor than leaving a website.

Online conspiracist communities offer what many communities offer: social ties.[132] In her argument for a right against social deprivation, Brownlee discusses the tight connection between the social dimension and a life worth living:

> To lead a minimally good human life, we need to have minimally adequate opportunities to access and contribute to social connections for their own sake. And social deprivation is disvaluable both instrumentally and non-instrumentally because it denies us states of being constitutive of a human life worth the name.[133]

Brownlee's argument for the human need for social ties points toward the need's role as a motivator for conspiracism. Social ties form such an elemental part of a flourishing life as a human that they are easy to overlook, but the personal connections produced by online

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[131] Will Partin, "What If Modern Conspiracy Theorists Are Altogether Too Media Literate?," The Outline, accessed April 30, 2020, https://theoutline.com/post/8509/revolution-q-conspiracy-theorists-media-literacy.
[132] Viren Swami and Rebecca Coles, "The Truth Is Out There," *Psychologist* 23, no. 7 (July 2010): 560.
[133] Kimberley Brownlee, "Social Deprivation," in *Being Sure of Each Other* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 45, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198714064.003.0003.

conspiracist communities are not to be ignored. Nguyen points out that echo chambers involve a disparity in trust between the in-group and out-group.[134] This trust of the in-group is indicative of a deeper social tie. An isolated individual can find a welcoming community, who understands and shares their quirky interests that people who are geographically near them might scoff at. They find people with whom they have a rapport, who collaborate with them, and who understand them. They find themselves considering other community members as friends, even if they do not know their real names. That the experience is mediated by keyboards, screens, and online platforms does not seem to matter. As Haythornwaite argues:

> [interactions] such as exchange of information and advice, social support, mutual help and provision and receipt of services can have the cumulative impact of creating trust among network members, shared history and language and known expectations about behaviours that support the community in its common goals.[135]

The social ties are meaningful to the members and make sticking with the community that much more appealing. As Brownlee argues about belonging in general:

> When we belong somewhere with, to, or in a set of people, then we have a place and usually we know our place. This means we know what is expected of us, often because we hold a well-defined, interpersonal role within the unit, such as mother, father, sibling, spouse, aunt, uncle, cousin, grandparent, or friend. These paradigms pervade most societies, and when we hold one or more of these roles, we usually have a satisfying sense of personal identity. Without them, we can feel lost and look lost…[136]

Belonging to a group is a social good and the promise of belonging is a motivator to participate in a conspiracist community.

These community ties are deeply relevant to belief and justification. Often, community ties partially determine a subset of one's beliefs, preceding, and at times superseding, the total available evidence to an agent. In his analysis of echo chambers and epistemic bubbles, Nguyen

[134] Nguyen, "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles," 6.
[135] Haythornthwaite, "Social Networks and Online Community," 2.
[136] Brownlee, "Social Beings," 19.

argues that even those who recognize the importance of social structures for belief can often ignore how social structures can affect belief in an ongoing manner:

> Famously, Dan Kahan and Donald Braman argue for the cultural cognition thesis – that is, that cultural commitments are prior to factual beliefs, and that non-evidentially formed cultural values inform which future presentations of evidence will be admitted as weighty (Kahan and Braman 2006). Though the values may originally come from an individual's culture, Kahan and Braman focus their analysis on how those acquired values function in individual reasoning to create polarization. They pay little attention to the continuing role of the contingent social structures in which the individual is embedded.[137]

The contingent social structures of online conspiracist communities invite new members, reward and sustain their belief, and, through collaborative work, bring them further and further into the fold.

Social Identity

Derived from the combination of collaborative work and group membership, conspiracists achieve a social identity within their online communities.[138] Speaking of online profiles, Nicole B. Ellison and danah boyd argue that, "Over time, the profile has shifted from a self-presentational message created by the individual to a portrait of an individual as an expression of action, a node in a series of groups, and a repository of self and other-provided data."[139] In online conspiracist communities, one's social identity is shaped by the community itself. This happens in at least two ways: (1) the esteem and regard that one receives from one's

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[137] Nguyen, "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles," 10–11.

[138] Nicholas DiFonzo, "Conspiracy Rumor Psychology," in *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, ed. Joseph E. Uscinski (Oxford University Press, 2018), 262, https://www-oxfordscholarship-com.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/view/10.1093/oso/9780190844073.001.0001/oso-9780190844073-chapter-17.

[139] Nicole B. Ellison and danah boyd, "Sociality Through Social Network Sites," in *The Oxford Handbook of Internet Studies*, ed. William H. Dutton (Oxford University Press, 2013), 154, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199589074.013.0008.

fellow community members and (2) the perceived role one achieves by being a member in the community, as keepers of "arcane knowledge"[140] and as paladins fighting the good fight.

By joining and participating in an online conspiracist community, one can receive the joys that non-conspiracist communities offer. These include the respect, gratitude, and friendship of other community members. At times, online communities offer even more concrete tokens of esteem, such as shares, likes, retweets, or even awards.[141] Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis characterize the appeal of status in online group membership, in the context of groups that intentionally manipulate the media:

> Users may also partake in media manipulation as a way of gaining status and acceptance within online communities. On Facebook and Twitter, status is generated through likes, shares, and comments, so users are incentivized to create content that will resonate with their friends, followers, and groups. Even within anonymous communities, users can still communicate high status through slang, in-jokes, and subtle conversational cues, so individuals may partake in variations of the same practices. Taken as a whole, these communities may feel that by manipulating media outlets, they gain some status and a measure of control over an entrenched and powerful institution, which many of them distrust and dislike.[142]

The structure and processes of online communities reward participation and invite members further in, increasing their conspiracist belief, commitment, and activity. The social identity one gains by participating in collaborative work and joining the community is valuable, independent of epistemic goods like justification and truth. However, there is an additional boon to one's social identity through a self- and community-perception as a knower of secret truths.

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[140] Rob Brotherton, *Suspicious Minds: Why We Believe Conspiracy Theories* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Sigma, 2015), 122.

[141] Astrid M. Rosenthal-von der Pütten et al., "'Likes' as Social Rewards: Their Role in Online Social Comparison and Decisions to like Other People's Selfies," *Computers in Human Behavior* 92 (2019): 76–86, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2018.10.017.

[142] Marwick and Lewis, "Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online," 31.

Many conspiracy theories have a common seed: a sense that things are not quite as they seem.[143] A recurring ethos of "awakening," "shining a light," or "revealing the truth" undergirds many online conspiracist communities. The average person is viewed as a hapless sheep and political leaders as secret monsters hiding in plain sight. Members of online conspiracist communities are therefore wise and knightly, fighting the good fight against evildoers, for a world that does not understand or respect their crusade. Brotherton summarizes:

> Possessing arcane knowledge holds a deep psychological appeal. There is fun to be had cracking codes, sifting through signs, and uncovering lost knowledge and secret plots, Susan Harding and Kathleen Stewart point out. As Richard Hofstadter wrote, the conspiracy theorist gets to be "a member of the avant-garde who is capable of perceiving the conspiracy before it is fully obvious to an as-yet unaroused public."[144]

Though belonging to an online conspiracist community may not look like the best path to secret knowledge from the outside, to the believer it feels like they are part of something special, that they are no longer ignorant of important truths about the world, and that non-believers are naive. To borrow language from *The Matrix*[145] and from another problematic online community, Men's Rights Activists,[146] conspiracists believe they have taken "the red pill," choosing knowledge over ignorance.

The spread of Pizzagate, for example, depended on distrust of the rich and powerful, especially those on the opposite end of the political spectrum from the conspiracists. Pizzagate alleged that the political circles of Hillary Clinton were heavily engaged in predatory and occult behavior, so it naturally attracted those who were both conservative and conspiratorially minded.

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[143] Muirhead and Rosenblum, *A Lot of People Are Saying*, 29.

[144] Brotherton, *Suspicious Minds*, 111.

[145] Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski, *The Matrix* (Warner Home Video, 1999), https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0133093/.

[146] Rebecca Reid, "Welcome to the Red Pill: The Angry Men's Rights Group That 'Knows What Women Want,'" The Telegraph, accessed January 14, 2020, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/life/red-pill-mens-rights-anti-feminist-group-who-know-what-women-want/.

Believers in Pizzagate, as a result, perceived themselves as virtuous protectors of children who saw through the veil to secret evils. This identity is naturally appealing and provides a sense of both meaning and direction for those who adopt it as their own.

Birtherism was similarly politically motivated, but depended on anti-immigrant and racist sentiments. Joining the birthers meant that one could pat themselves on the back for helping to stop a religious conspiracy from overtaking the country. This stance was completely unjustified and Islamophobic in nature, but that did not prevent the message from bolstering one's social identity with moral and epistemic delusions of grandeur. Hofstadter describes the conspiracist's self-perception as moral crusader and arcane knower:

> As a member of the avant-garde who is capable of perceiving the conspiracy before it is fully obvious to an as yet unaroused public, the paranoid is a militant leader. He does not see social conflict as something to be mediated and compromised, in the manner of the working politician. Since what is at stake is always a conflict between absolute good and absolute evil, what is necessary is not compromise but the will to fight things out to a finish. Since the enemy is thought of as being totally evil and totally unappeasable, he must be totally eliminated—if not from the world, at least from the theatre of operations to which the paranoid directs his attention.[147]

Online conspiracist communities provide many non-epistemic goods to their members. These goods may not be real, in the sense that their value might only be perceived rather than tangible, but that does not rob them of their emotional appeal or undermine the personal commitment of the believers. The opportunity for collaborative work, the goods of group membership, and the contributions to one's social identity are powerful incentives for conspiracist belief. While this has gone underrecognized in the epistemological literature, it has serious implications for ameliorative efforts.

[147] Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," 82.

Implications: Amelioration, Debunking, and the Agonistic Method

There is substantial public debate about the best strategy to contest conspiracy theories. Many well-intended individuals attempted to directly confront conspiracy theorists by debunking their claims with counterarguments, the presentation of expert testimony, or even physical evidence. An advocate of this strategy might argue that the conspiracists desire justified true beliefs and so one only needs to demonstrate to them that their beliefs are either not justified or untrue. This is an extraordinarily difficult task, akin to deprogramming or religious conversion, due to the community attachments at play. The conspiracist believes, fundamentally, that they have access to truths that nonbelievers are too naive or uninformed to see. They are unlikely to budge, even when there exist obvious defeaters for their beliefs. Some conspiracy theories are constructed such that they are unfalsifiable in the Popperian sense, inoculated against criticism and therefore psychologically immune to philosophical argumentation.[148] Data is cherry-picked, counterevidence is explained away, and critics are either sheep, shills, or just part of the conspiracy.

If conspiracists are committed to their community in a manner one's attachment to one's friends and family, one can see why it would be difficult for a conspiracist to give up their position in light of new evidence or counterarguments. In Edy and Risley-Baird's research on rumor communication, they argue that responding to debunking efforts actually reinforces the social ties of the community members:

> When a rumor, conspiracy theory, or misperception is debunked, rumor communities face a threat to their existence. They respond not only with psychological resistance, but by publicly responding to and counterarguing debunking messages, asserting their credibility as speakers to assess the rumor's validity, and highlighting their interconnection with more conventional social groups. Where some research perspectives view such behaviors

[148] Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, Routledge Classics (London: Routledge, 2002), 17, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203994627; A. A. Derksen, "The Seven Sins of Pseudo-Science," *Journal for General Philosophy of Science / Zeitschrift Für Allgemeine Wissenschaftstheorie* 24, no. 1 (1993): 23.

> as expressions of psychological states and traits or explore person-to-person linkages sustaining the rumor, this analysis examines the communicative and social dimensions of such political behavior in public forums.[149]

Moreover, changing one's mind disinvites them from the community. They would become a mixture of a traitor or apostate. In addition to the renunciation of their beliefs, already a difficult prospect, they would suffer a loss of collaborative work opportunities, boons to their social identity, and their community. Just as we have sympathy for those who have the resolve to leave certain religious sects or cults, contrary to their family or community's demands, so too must we for the former conspiracist. It is a difficult thing to do and, often, simple argumentation will not be enough to dislodge the attachment. While a great deal of psychological and marketing research has explored why it is difficult to argue someone into changing their minds, we find here one more consideration.

If one takes collaborative work, group membership, and social identity as goods to which conspiracists might aspire, then one might consider them instrumentally rational for maintaining their unjustified beliefs to retain those goods. To break the spell of an online conspiracist community, the standard agonistic method of dialectical combat will often not prevail for the non-conspiracist because they have other benefits overriding truth and justification.[150] Instead, other goods must be offered in place of those provided by the online conspiracist community. In examining the role of identity in partisan beliefs, Jay J. Van Bavel, and Andrea Pereira argue:

> ...interventions that either fulfill social needs through nonpartisan means or motivate people to search for the truth, thereby increasing the strength of accuracy goals, will reduce partisan bias. For instance, reducing worldview or self-esteem threats by affirming an individual can open their mind to otherwise threatening information. To make this effective in a political context, it is necessary to determine which goals produce social value for an individual and fulfill those needs. When people are hungry for belonging,

[149] Edy and Risley-Baird, "Rumor Communities," 594.

[150] The agonistic method is also called the "Adversarial Method" by Janice Moulton. See: Janice Moulton, "Duelism in Philosophy," *Teaching Philosophy* 3, no. 4 (October 1, 1980): 419–33, https://doi.org/10.5840/teachphil19803424.

> they are more likely to adopt party beliefs unless they can find alternative means to satiate that goal. As such, effective interventions should target social goals that are relevant to each individual so as to decrease identity motives. An alternative strategy is to enhance the accuracy goal by incentivizing this goal or by activating identities associated with this goal. For instance, holding people accountable or paying them money for accurate responses can reduce partisan bias. Likewise, priming alternative identities as scientists, jurors, or editors might heighten the accuracy goal and reduce partisan bias.[151]

Ameliorative efforts have to recognize the role of identity and community membership if they are to have any success. Dialectical attempts in the vein of the agonistic method must be replaced or severely adapted in order to actually convince a conspiracist to change their views, as being disillusioned also involves leaving their communities. One might recall that Socrates, the paradigmatic example of the agonistic method, rarely convinced his interlocutors. They left the dialogue, beliefs fully intact.

Ameliorative efforts must therefore confront the social dimension of conspiracism. Strategies beyond debunking are necessary. Deplatforming, for example, is the act of removing or banning individuals or communities on social media networks.[152] Efforts like deplatforming appear to be especially promising, given the strategy's success in disrupting the efforts of malicious cultural figures like Milo Yiannopoulos and Richard Spencer.[153] Deplatforming does not involve injecting additional arguments or counterevidence into these communities, but disrupting the ability of members to socialize, work together, and, ultimately, commune. If one wishes to mitigate the impact of these communities, deplatforming works. For this strategy to responsibly implemented, however, philosophers must be involved to help assess the ethical

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[151] Jay J. Van Bavel and Andrea Pereira, "The Partisan Brain: An Identity-Based Model of Political Belief," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 22, no. 3 (2018): 219, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2018.01.004.

[152] Richard Rogers, "Deplatforming: Following Extreme Internet Celebrities to Telegram and Alternative Social Media," *European Journal of Communication* 35, no. 3 (June 1, 2020): 214, https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323120922066.

[153] Zack Beauchamp, "Milo Yiannopoulos's Collapse Shows That No-Platforming Can Work," Vox, December 5, 2018, https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/12/5/18125507/milo-yiannopoulos-debt-no-platform; "YouTube Bans Prominent White Supremacist Channels," *BBC News*, June 30, 2020, sec. Business, https://www.bbc.com/news/business-53230986.

direction of these efforts and to create criteria for assessing conspiracist hubs. It should not be left to tech CEO's or social media managers.

Alongside social media strategies like deplatforming, there is a role for philosophers to engage the individuals who might otherwise be inducted into conspiracist communities. One might imagine philosophers playing the role of devil's advocate in these communities, undermining their confidence through a Socratic attack on their beliefs. Given the social motivations of these beliefs, it is not clear that this strategy will have any impact. More likely, the community will circle the wagons and rebuff any such intrusion, no matter the skill of the philosopher or the power of the arguments they bring to bear.

Merely lobbing objections or injecting contrary views will not suffice. Rather, in the spirit of Bavel and Pereira's suggestions above, a philosophical community that guides those interested in discovering truth, working collaboratively, and searching for meaning, would more plausibly have an impact. This publicly-oriented stance, however, is one that academic philosophy has not fully adopted. Philosophers could provide, directly or indirectly, an alternative means to the social goods that online conspiracist communities offer. Philosophers need not construct new communities and identities for the conspiracists, but learn to engage with these existing communities in a manner that will not cause them to circle the wagons and entrench their conspiracist identity further. If one wishes to change minds, approaching with diplomacy will be more successful.

This would require professional philosophers to make a few substantive changes. First, they must engage with non-philosophers about their beliefs and commitments. The projects within public philosophy and philosophy for children paradigms have made great progress in this realm, but more outreach to individuals not already inside the echo chambers and epistemic

bubbles of philosophy is sorely needed. This will require philosophers leaving their own academic bubbles and participate with these communities.

Second, lessons can be taken from the Community of Philosophical Inquiry, emphasizing a more collaborative approach in place of the agonistic method.[154] In addition to a focus on epistemic modesty, respectful challenges to assumptions, and constructive perspective-seeking, the Community of Philosophical Inquiry approach offers a community-building focus that offers more to the conspiracist than the agonistic method. While conspiracists will likely default to an argumentative, agonistic stance of their own, philosophers do not have to respond in kind. The inquiry method provides a useful model for ameliorative efforts: rather than try to convince the conspiracist to leave their community through verbal combat, the Community of Philosophical Inquiry presents an inviting community to take the place of the one they are losing. Minds rarely seem to be changed by debate; rather, a long conversation, over weeks and months and even years, is needed.

These changes will take a long time to take root and to have an effect, but they take the facts on the ground seriously: conspiracist communities are not built primarily on a chain of premises leading to a conclusion. Conspiracist communities, like more typical communities, will receive diplomacy better than dialectical war. If conspiracism fills a need for collaborative work, group membership, and social identity, then agonistic argumentation will not be enough to combat conspiracism. Rather, philosophers can take these social motivations seriously.

The upshot of this understanding of conspiracism is that philosophy can and must rethink its methods if it wishes to be in the game of improving reasoning among the public. It might mean a diplomatic approach and direct communication with conspiracists. It might mean

[154] Jana Mohr Lone and Michael D. Burroughs, *Philosophy in Education: Questioning and Dialogue in Schools* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781442234772.

working together to advocate for positive societal, policy, or cultural changes that help satisfy the social needs that fuel conspiracism. What we know now is that simple argumentation against conspiracist claims is not enough to have a large impact. With the social motivations in mind, progress can be made.

Conclusion

Understanding the role that belonging to a community plays in conspiracism is an essential part of making conspiracism intelligible, and therefore manageable. The benefits of group membership, social identity, and participation in collaborative work are substantive and alluring. Argument alone will not often win against such prized goods.

We face an epistemic crisis—a crisis that philosophy could help to remedy. Philosophical scholars and teachers must fulfill the role of shaping the epistemic ecosystem so that the strategies undertaken will be both ethically and epistemically informed. We have not yet fully lost the battle against conspiracism, but our trajectory is worrisome. Only by taking proactive strategies against online conspiracist communities will we avoid the full degradation of knowledge in the age of misinformation. This is a critical role for philosophers in the modern landscape and it should not be left to online community managers, engineers, or CEOs. Normative expertise is required, of the kind that only philosophy can provide. However, philosophers themselves must adapt and learn to convince those who are not persuaded by arguments alone.

Chapter Three

Who is Public Philosophy For?

> "The teaching and research that occur in university settings matter tremendously, but these institutions are the educational equivalent of gated communities. Not all people can or want to gain entrance."
>
> – David Domke, "The Something We Can Do."[155]

> "I don't know what philosophy is, but it scares me."
>
> –Anonymous Public Humanities Program Officer[156]

Our era has been called a "golden age of public philosophy."[157] Examples are abundant: podcasts on ethics,[158] accessible books on the lessons of Stoicism,[159] discussion events for community members, and even sitcoms on major networks.[160] However, the value of public philosophy has often been called into question. Its critics claim that it is frivolous, does not advance the field, and is a waste of time for the philosophers who produce it and the public for whom it is produced. On this skeptical view, philosophy is watered down for public audiences, devolved into a remedial state that does little for anyone, if it does anything at all. In short: public philosophy is pointless. This charge has been disputed with powerful arguments for the usefulness of public philosophy.[161] Aligning with these apologetic accounts of public

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[155] David Domke, "The Something We Can Do," *Antipode* 40, no. 3 (2008): 390, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2008.00605.x.

[156] Anonymous Public Humanities Program Officer, in discussion with the author. March 2019.

[157] Justin Weinberg, "Is This the Golden Age of Philosophy?," Daily Nous, February 24, 2016, https://dailynous.com/2016/02/24/is-this-the-golden-age-of-philosophy/.

[158] Tamler Sommers & David Pizarro, "Very Bad Wizards," Very Bad Wizards, accessed January 31, 2021, http://www.verybadwizards.com/.

[159] Massimo Pigliucci, *How to Be a Stoic: Using Ancient Philosophy to Live a Modern Life*, 1st edition (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

[160] *The Good Place*, Comedy, Drama, Fantasy, Romance (Fremulon, 3 Arts Entertainment, Universal Television, 2016).

[161] See for example: Nancy McHugh et al., "Public Philosophy Is Good—For Philosophy and For the Public," *Blog of the APA* (blog), March 5, 2019, https://blog.apaonline.org/2019/03/05/public-philosophy-is-good-for-philosophy-and-for-the-public/; Brian J. Collins and Philosophy Documentation Center, "The Broad Nature and Importance of Public Philosophy," *Precollege Philosophy and Public Practice* 2 (2020): 72–87, https://doi.org/10.5840/p420204114; Massimo Pigliucci and Leonard Finkelman, "The Value of Public Philosophy

philosophy, this chapter attempts to get more specific about what kind of public philosophy is beneficial. Some instances of public philosophy, on this view, do not adequately serve the goals of public philosophy. This chapter attempts to show what obstacles public philosophy faces, which make the enterprise more likely to be guilty of pointlessness. On the constructive side, this chapter then provides three ameliorative strategies to avoid these pitfalls. Critically, public philosophy must be designed and executed *for* the public, whereas the nonbeneficial kind is merely made *open to* the public. A public philosophy serving the public is one that will benefit the public *and* academic philosophy. An implication of this standard, should it be heeded, is that even those philosophers who do not wish to participate in public philosophy should still support public philosophy as means toward preserving the existence of philosophy and serving broader communities outside of academia.

This chapter first considers the skeptical view that public philosophy serves no valuable goals, and then rebuts it. However, I concede that public philosophy faces three difficult obstacles that prevent it from achieving its goals of reaching the public: the academy's attitude of condescension, an over-dependence on academic norms in its public programming, and a dearth of skills in executing its projects.

I then argue that for public philosophy to meaningfully serve the public, and therefore to avoid pointlessness, change is necessary. First, public philosophy must adopt an attitude centering on service to the public, rather than to departments and universities. While the instruction of students is a valuable and necessary public-oriented mindset, a focus on students alone will not achieve public philosophy's goals. Second, and implied by the first, public

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to Philosophers," *Essays in Philosophy* 15, no. 1 (2014): 86–102, https://doi.org/10.7710/1526-0569.1491; Gregory Littman, "Writing Philosophy for the Public Is a Moral Obligation," *Essays in Philosophy* 15, no. 1 (2014): 103–16, https://doi.org/10.7710/1526-0569.1492.

philosophy must adopt the norms and strategies that succeed in creating an inviting program to the public, drawing on practices from community engagement, popular entertainment, and pedagogy (including the best practices of academic instruction at schools, colleges, and universities). Finally, public philosophy requires a base of well-trained philosophers who can operationalize, organize, and produce public philosophy programming. This skill set is largely left untaught in academic philosophy and leaves the future of public philosophy projects up to chance, depending on which academic philosophers happen to have good instincts for logistics and implementation, or for the rare autodidact who is interested enough to scrounge for the necessary skills. Public philosophy requires a skillset distinct from academic research, department administration, and graduate student mentorship. While academic teaching can serve as a great resource for and bridge to public philosophy, it is only a piece of the puzzle. If these skills are not taught, they will be neither honed nor made abundant.

Before going further, however, it is important to designate what I am referring to with the term "public philosophy." While this includes public scholarship, in the form of philosophical research written with a general, non-academic audience in mind, the more prominent and representative examples are philosophy podcasts, events with philosophers that are aimed at audiences outside of the discipline, philosophy for children programs, community projects, and mass media with a clear and vivid portrayal of philosophy (e.g. the sitcom *The Good Place,*[162] the novel *Sophie's World,*[163] or the documentary *Examined Life*[164]). Introductory philosophical courses, while important and valuable, would not generally fall under public philosophy in the

[162] *The Good Place*.
[163] Jostein Gaarder, *Sophie's World: A Novel About the History of Philosophy*, trans. Paulette Moller, 1st edition (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).
[164] Astra Taylor, *Examined Life*, Documentary (Sphinx Productions, 2009).

current usage of the term, though these introductory courses would provide critical insight about how to engage non-philosophers.

One might wonder what makes a topic, question, or enterprise "philosophical" and where the border is between philosophy and non-philosophy. Another interesting question concerns the definition of the "public," for surely there is a wide variety of publics. It seems clear that meeting specific publics where they are will require a thorough commitment to equity and the expertise to satisfy those commitments, which are entire fields of inquiry on their own. These are important and significant questions, but outside the scope of this project, since my aim is not to argue whether public philosophy is philosophy or to specify how to reach a particular public, but, rather, to ensure that public philosophy is not pointless by providing discipline-wide recommendations at a strategic level, rather than a tactical one. For the purposes of this project, the "public" refers to anyone outside of academia, broadly construed. Students straddle this line, as some dip in and out of the university, while others remain for their entire lives. Moreover, they often occupy a privileged position compared to those without access to university and college education and are therefore part of the academic cloister, but often for a relatively brief amount of time. As will be described below, the expertise developed in connecting students to philosophy is a rich resource for developing a public philosophy strategy.

Though this chapter must set aside the definitional questions relating to the "public" and "philosophy," starting with a rough definition of "public philosophy" is essential. Offering a "broad" conception of public philosophy, Brian J. Collins argues that "'public philosophy' should be understood disjunctively (inclusive) as philosophical work done by professional philosophers outside the 'walls' or domain of the academy, or philosophical work done by professional or non-professional philosophers for/with an audience of non-professional

philosophers."[165] Following Collins, our definition of public philosophy is necessarily pluralistic and expansive, allowing for the multitude of current forms of public engagement and open to future forms not yet prominent or even conceived. As stated above, this includes public scholarship, podcasts and YouTube channels about philosophy, works of fiction like *The Good Place* or the novels of Iris Murdoch, public-facing events on philosophical questions or featuring philosophers, and philosophical discussion groups in communities. This list is not exhaustive, but only provides examples of the rich variety of forms public philosophy may take.

Certainly, more and more outlets for public philosophy will be developed. As Collins notes, "this is not a completely new phenomenon—Socrates didn't operate within the confines of a university either—it is a departure from the standard mode of operation that has developed since the establishment of medieval universities."[166] Public philosophy is not necessarily new, but its role in academic philosophy is more prominent than it has been in decades and its place is not well-secured. Many philosophers are unsure about this phenomenon and numerous challenges have arisen.

Is It Pointless?: Skepticism about Public Philosophy

Erin McKenna, in considering whether philosophers are a thoughtful profession or not, puts the relevancy problem that philosophy faces succinctly:

> With the importance of the liberal arts not fully understood by the general public, philosophy stands out as one of the more vulnerable disciplines—again in large part a result of our own attitude and actions. If we don't publicly value teaching, and if our research is considered best when it can be least understood or applied, why are we surprised that many people wonder if there is still a need to teach philosophy?[167]

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[165] Brian J. Collins, "The Broad Nature and Importance of Public Philosophy," *Precollege Philosophy and Public Practice* 2 (2020): 73, https://doi.org/10.5840/p420204114.
[166] Collins, 72.
[167] Erin Mckenna, "Are We a Thoughtful Profession?," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 43, no. 2 (2007): 395, https://doi.org/10.2979/TRA.2007.43.2.395.

Many see public philosophy as a way of reaching new audiences, sharing the benefits of thousands of years of philosophical activity, and generally making the world a more informed, capable, logical, and curious place. But if an academic philosopher has no interest in such goals, but wishes instead to remain in their ivory tower conducting research, then public philosophy might very well seem pointless or frivolous. Massimo Pigliucci and Leonard Finkelman describe the skeptic's perspective:

> The need for public philosophy is absolute and perhaps even dire…Nevertheless, our view has been disputed by practitioners within philosophy, at least in part because of threats from outside the field. From the outside: non-philosophers disparage the study of philosophy generally, and so public philosophy with it. From the inside: a number of (fortunately, increasingly older) colleagues disparage engagement with the public as a waste of time, or an activity of "inferior" intellectual value—as opposed to writing yet another academic paper that will likely be read by a dozen people worldwide and cited maybe once or twice during its shelf life.[168]

Public philosophy is viewed as containing little or no intellectual merit. William C. Pamerleau articulates this concern about the unproductivity of public philosophy:

> Public philosophy would seem a waste of time, from this perspective. Discussions advance on a topic and then recede before any resolution is achieved. Tangents are frequent. The discussants often do not even agree on the questions being asked, let alone the means by which they can be answered. In short, if you're looking for fruitful conclusions to the conversations—a theoretically viable answer to the question on the table, the nature of the discussion would make it seem extremely unlikely that the endeavour will end successfully.[169]

Public philosophy is seen by skeptics as pointless: an unproductive waste of time. In the following, I sketch the skeptical position of public philosophy, represented by Agnes Callard and Brian Leiter. Ultimately, the skeptics point toward a suspicion that public philosophy is pointless. While disagreeing with the general thrust of these arguments, I will ultimately concede

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[168] Pigliucci and Finkelman, "The Value of Public Philosophy to Philosophers," 87.

[169] William C. Pamerleau, "Keeping the Conversation Going: A Pragmatist Assessment of the Value of Public Philosophy," in *Philosophy and Community: Theories, Practices and Possibilities*, ed. Amanda Fulford, Grace Lockrobin, and Richard Smith (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 64, https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350073432.

that pointlessness is a danger for public philosophy and offer some ameliorative strategies. However, the apologists are correct that the mission of public philosophy is essential and should be supported, even by those who do not have an interest or commitment to public philosophy themselves.

Agnes Callard describes academic philosophy's gatekeeping as a virtue:

> Philosophy is a bubble. Not much of it happens in high school, or after college. It lives inside academia, or, more precisely, inside a space that is itself inside academia. At the University of Chicago, for instance, philosophy is one of the few departments with a hard policy against offering credit towards the major for courses taken outside our department. We won't call it "Philosophy" unless we taught it to you. Philosophy polices its boundaries.[170]

For Callard, this seems to be a way of retaining high standards and making sure what is called "philosophy" is actually philosophy. Callard starts with the claim that philosophy is done for its own sake, because "its questions are important," and not done for "pleasure."[171] She goes on to argue that we might engage in philosophy in the spirit of "business" or "pleasure." That is, philosophers might provide answers to the questions that people have, or provide a form of entertainment, respectively. If we go for the business route, we are doomed, because philosophers can provide very few answers, only a method of thinking well. If we are to provide entertainment, we would not be doing philosophy at all, with Callard stating explicitly, "I think there is something wrong with calling that philosophy."[172] Public philosophy, according to Callard, is ultimately pointless or not philosophy at all.

Putting aside the distinction between business and pleasure for the moment, Callard's claim that philosophy offers nothing of value from the "business" perspective amounts to a

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[170] Agnes Callard, "Is Public Philosophy Good?," The Point Magazine, February 13, 2019, https://thepointmag.com/examined-life/agnes-callard-is-public-philosophy-good/.
[171] Callard.
[172] Callard.

curious denial of philosophical expertise or, at least, extrinsic philosophical value. In a presentation on philosophical expertise and the public, Justin Weinberg has argued in the opposite direction, stating:

> If philosophers are not experts, why should they be paid to philosophize? Why should the academic discipline of philosophy even exist? Those are not unreasonable questions. So it is in our professional interests to make that antecedent sound as implausible as possible. That means that we should be promoting the value of what it is we're expert at (creating questions). We should be honest and not overextend ourselves in exercising our philosophical capacities. We should emphasize in our engagement with the public how much we philosophers agree on, such that we can disagree as we do. In these ways, and in much more direct ones, we ought to promote the idea of philosophical expertise.[173]

Weinberg is right: philosophers know how to create questions. At their best, they know how to deftly lead discussions, provide challenging arguments, raise counterexamples, and, in general, act as a midwife to wisdom. Not all philosophers can do this. Philosophers, as a collective, may not be able to always do this. But the philosophers who are good at their jobs are able to do this. To return to the distinction between the business and pleasure of philosophy, such a division seems artificial, and does not quite capture the impressive range of philosophical work.

Philosophy takes the form of dives into mountains of research (which some find dull and others find fun), invigorating debates with friends and colleagues (though some find this unpleasant and to be avoided), life-changing moments as one tests their own beliefs in a Cartesian act of self-examination (though some bypass this altogether), and other moments of tedium, joy, and transcendence. Philosophy is many things, but Callard is correct to say that philosophy's main claim to expertise lies in its way of thinking, reasoning, and rigorous examination. This can be offered in methods both serious and entertaining. Any teacher of quality knows that one must adapt to their students and that different students need different

[173] Justin Weinberg, "Selling Ourselves Short (Adventures in the Philosophy of Public Philosophy)," *Daily Nous* (blog), February 2019, https://dailynous.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/selling-ourselves-short-presentation-draft-weinberg.pdf.

things. A pluralistic approach is best, as public philosophy need not be self-serious and aimed at moments of mythic transformation, nor frivolous "edutainment." While Callard applies an unhelpful dichotomy to philosophical activity, she gives a precise and apt description of one of philosophy's greatest gifts:

> Philosophy doesn't jazz up the life you were living—it snatches that life out of your grip. It doesn't make you feel smarter, it makes you feel stupider: doing philosophy, you discover you don't even know the most basic things.[174]

The promulgation of healthy doubt and the invitation to the examined life is an incredible feat philosophy can perform. It should not be reserved for those privileged enough to enter the ivory tower.

On what the public wants and the relationship between the public and the academy, Callard makes an illuminating, if counterintuitive, move at the end of her piece, stating:

> Perhaps I am underselling the public in assuming that you want answers or entertainment. Perhaps some of you also want what I want, which is to think through the most important questions in the best way human beings have come up with: together. Perhaps my ideal interlocutor is hidden amongst you. Perhaps. I have to admit I don't really have much of a sense of how that would go. How are you going to refute me if I can't hear you?[175]

The most charitable interpretation of this text seems to point toward Callard recognizing the limits of the academic's perspective on the public and perhaps even calling out the "ivory tower" undercurrent in her position. In any case, Callard's point here anticipates a recommendation I make below. Much of public philosophy is of low quality because academic philosophers do not know and have not heard from the public. A gap of ignorance must be traversed in order to do good public philosophy. It is curious that so many philosophers are willing to give up cherished beliefs, ruthlessly self-criticize their own stances, and subject themselves to philosophical cross-

[174] Callard, "Is Public Philosophy Good?"
[175] Callard.

examination at every opportunity, but will not ask the communities in which they live what they need, what they want, and what philosophy can do for them. Tom Stern makes a point sympathetic to Callard's, but coming from the opposite direction, arguing that public philosophy is necessary, but should not lose its life-changing force:

> Philosophy may sometimes be difficult in the sense that it is difficult to understand, that it overcomplicates, or requires technical expertise, that it is written for those in the know with no thought spared for the rest. Those who bring such thoughts to a wider audience show their skill in cutting through this difficulty as swiftly and as painlessly as possible. But it cannot come at the cost of another kind of difficulty: that it can take your dearest thoughts—your politics, your science, your hope or your affections—and shake them up or cut them down. In other words: it cannot be defanged from the start.[176]

This seems like a critical point of agreement between skeptics and defenders of public philosophy. Philosophy is valuable and has the capacity to change your life, sometimes dramatically and forever. The disagreement stems from whether or not philosophy can or should do that outside of the academic setting. Given that philosophy was producing these effects in the cafes of 20th century Paris, in the worldwide ripples from figures like Karl Marx, Socrates, and Zhuang Zhu, and even before an institution like a university was established, there does not seem to be good reason to think that philosophy can and should only be done in the academy.

Brian Leiter criticizes public philosophy from a different angle. Rather than arguing that philosophy has little to offer the public, he claims that working with and for the public will not offer much to academic philosophy. Specifically, he argues that it is unlikely that any non-philosopher will generate any "interesting philosophical insight."[177] In other words, collaborating

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[176] Tom Stern, "Complications of Philosophy," The Point Magazine, June 16, 2015, https://thepointmag.com/examined-life/complications-of-philosophy/.

[177] "Why? Philosophical Discussions About Everyday Life," NPR.org, accessed January 31, 2021, https://www.npr.org/podcasts/600319572/why-philosophical-discussions-about-everyday-life, quoted in: Jack Russell Weinstein, "What Does Public Philosophy Do?," *Essays in Philosophy* 15, no. 1 (2014): 33–57, https://doi.org/10.7710/1526-0569.1488.

with or serving the public will not advance philosophical inquiry as a discipline. Public philosophy is therefore a barren field and nothing of value will be harvested.

There have been many responses to the vein of argumentation that Leiter espouses. In Chapter One, I argue that increasing diversity and reducing homogeneity in academic philosophy will contribute to the calibration of intuitions.[178] Increased and richer relationships with the public would add to this effort, by bringing a wider variety of intuitions to bear on philosophical cases and questions and by potentially connecting people from more diverse backgrounds to academic philosophy. In the context of archaeologists collaborating meaningfully with indigenous communities, Alison Wylie describes the epistemic need for inter-community engagement:

> The philosophical rationale for such a stance is captured by the liberal democratic conviction that more ideas, diverse voices and angles of vision is inherently a good thing epistemically. The wider the range of perspectives an individual or a community can bring to bear on a question, or in assessment of prospective knowledge claims, the more likely it is that error and bias will be exposed, that the full complexity of the subject and all relevant implications will be appreciated.[179]

Academic philosophy, far from losing its purity, would gain a richness, novelty, and breadth of experience that are currently sorely underrepresented. The sheer creativity made possible from building bridges to the public is perhaps a separate issue from the survival of philosophy, but would make philosophy more worthy of its own survival.

In contrast to Leiter, Adam Hosein has argued that public philosophy writing should be taken as seriously as journal and book publications in terms of contributing to the field.[180]

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[178] See Chapter One of this project, "Intuitions: Bias, Confidence, and Calibration."
[179] Alison Wylie, "A Plurality of Pluralisms: Collaborative Practice in Archaeology," *Objectivity in Science*, Boston Studies in the Philosophy and History of Science, 2015, 204–5, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-14349-1_10.
[180] Adam Hosein, "Taking Public Philosophy Seriously," Daily Nous, April 17, 2017, http://dailynous.com/2017/04/17/taking-public-philosophy-seriously-guest-post-adam-hosein/.

Challenging the worthiness of traditional philosophical research with provocative imagery, Stern has implied that journal publications are overly valued and esteemed:

> No industry anxiously awaits the latest philosophical innovations. No general public hangs on our words. Even within the profession, the average philosophy publication is cited once and probably only then to be mischaracterized, cast aside or pigeonholed by a new author, whose work, in turn, meets the same fate. Sometimes, even as I work on my next one, I imagine a philosophy publication as one of those giant, icebreaking vessels that rides at the head of an arctic convoy, powering a path homeward through the frozen ocean. Only in this case, the ocean is not blocked by ice but by other icebreaking vessels, bobbing, marooned where they ran out of fuel, just as this one will maroon somewhere, adding more debris for the next. And in this case, there is no clear sense of home—only homesickness. Ghastly glorious, these vessels.[181]

The vessels are impressive, but not exactly helping anyone, Stern argues. Jack Russell Weinstein counters Leiter with a different strategy. Weinstein claims that Leiter has inappropriately applied the norms of academic philosophy to public philosophy, arguing:

> Academic philosophy is only a success if something new is brought to the table, if the researcher contributes meaningfully to his or her field. But public philosophy may lead to trite, hackneyed, or familiar conclusions, and still be considered successful because it brings something new to the individual, perhaps a new perspective or maybe just the realization that intellectual life can be fun. These are modest goals, but they are important, and they are goods in themselves. Brian Leiter's demand for interesting philosophical discoveries is as absurd for public philosophy as it is irrelevant.[182]

Weinstein is rejecting Leiter's measure for success, stating that public philosophy should not be evaluated according to advancing the discourse, but in sharing the goods of philosophy with more people. This chapter will follow Weinstein's lead by arguing that there is a difference in norms, which characterizes the distinction between the two enterprises. This difference in norms, however, also points to the means by which public philosophy can help to preserve academic philosophy, means by which academic philosophy cannot save itself.

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[181] Stern, "Complications of Philosophy."

[182] Weinstein, "What Does Public Philosophy Do?," 52.

Even for those who doubt public philosophy's intellectual merit or ability to contribute to the public good, public philosophy could still avoid pointlessness and constitute an enterprise worth supporting. Academic philosophy is under a considerable amount of pressure, as are most humanities disciplines. Prominently, philosophy departments have been closed at universities.[183] As Massimo Pigliucci and Leonard Finkelman argue, philosophy has a "significant public relations problem."[184] Nancy McHugh, Evelyn Brister, and Ian Olasov argue that the insularity of academic philosophy and philosophy's waning relevancy are connected:

> Although we've presented many reasons why the work of public philosophy is good for the public, we should also recognize why it is a critical good for academic philosophy. In the last hundred years, as philosophy has become increasingly focused inward with our work inside the academy, the potential value and impact of philosophy has become significantly less recognized on the outside. This has led, in part, to shrinking departments and budgets and many more philosophers than there are academic jobs for philosophers. This is not a mere coincidence. Part of the "good" of public philosophy is that it might just be what saves philosophy from extinction.[185]

While reductions in funding for public institutions is well-documented[186] and there is some troubling data about the number of available faculty positions for philosophers,[187] more empirical research is needed to firmly establish the trend of philosophy departments diminishing in number and, for those that continue to exist, a reduction in faculty positions. However, the anecdotal evidence is striking: philosophy departments seem to be at high risk for cuts and

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[183] See, for example, the archive of news items related to the closing or downsizing of philosophy departments curated by the Daily Nous: "Cuts and Threats to Philosophy Programs Archives," Daily Nous, accessed January 31, 2021, https://dailynous.com/category/cuts-and-threats-to-philosophy-programs/.

[184] Pigliucci and Finkelman, "The Value of Public Philosophy to Philosophers," 88.

[185] McHugh et al., "Public Philosophy Is Good—For Philosophy and For the Public."

[186] "Public Research Universities: Changes in State Funding | American Academy of Arts and Sciences," accessed August 15, 2021, https://www.amacad.org/publication/public-research-universities-changes-state-funding/section/3.

[187] Charles Lassiter, "How Blue Can You Get? The 2020-2021 Job Cycle," Soaked feet, bone-dry cuffs, accessed August 15, 2021, http://charleslassiter.weebly.com/1/post/2020/11/how-blue-can-you-get-the-2020-2021-job-cycle.html. While this data comes from the era of the COVID-19 pandemic, the author asserts that "the situation was already unsustainable, and the pandemic has only made matters worse."

closures. [188] Philosophy has a relevancy problem, and this relevancy problem is an existential threat.[189] Chris Norris warns what will happen if philosophers do not successfully reach out beyond the ivory tower:

> For unless philosophers manage to communicate outside and beyond that self-enclosed specialist sphere then they are not only risking its rapid disappearance under present economic and socio-cultural conditions. Otherwise philosophy is liable to forfeit its claim to public attention, not to mention public funding, by giving every sign of routine indifference to that major part of its responsibility which consists in the promotion of intelligent debate about issues that are too important, or just too interesting, to remain the exclusive preserve of a specialist few.[190]

If philosophers cannot show their work to be of value, it is only a matter of time before philosophy departments are so reduced or even completely closed, that academic philosophy will effectively become extinct. Robert C. Solomon makes the point succinctly: "…the fate of philosophy depends on one thing and one thing only, our collective ability to inspire joy in philosophy…"[191]

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[188] Justin Weinberg, "Philosophy Departments Under Threat: Information, Pro-Active Strategies, Defense," Daily Nous, October 23, 2020, https://dailynous.com/2020/10/23/philosophy-departments-threat-information-pro-active-strategies-defense/; "Are Philosophy Departments Being Targetted for Cuts or Elimination More than Other Programs? And, If so, Why?," Leiter Reports: A Philosophy Blog, accessed August 15, 2021, https://leiterreports.typepad.com/blog/2011/03/are-philosophy-departments-being-targetted-for-cuts-or-elimination-more-than-other-programs-and-if-s.html; "Questions Raised about Cuts in Liberal Arts Programs at Western Illinois," accessed August 15, 2021, https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/06/14/questions-raised-about-cuts-liberal-arts-programs-western-illinois; "Saving Philosophy from Elimination: What Can Be Done?," The Philosophers' Cocoon, accessed August 15, 2021, https://philosopherscocoon.typepad.com/blog/2020/06/saving-philosophy-from-elimination-what-can-be-done.html; For an overview of news stories, see: "Cuts and Threats to Philosophy Programs," Daily Nous, accessed August 15, 2021, https://dailynous.com/category/cuts-and-threats-to-philosophy-programs/.

[189] This critique of insularity is also found in publicly engaged scholarship. For overviews, see: "Knowledge, Engagement and Higher Education: Contributing to Social Change," Higher Education in the World (Global University Network for Innovation, 2020), http://www.guninetwork.org/report/higher-education-world-5/documents; Patricia Leavy, "Introduction to The Oxford Handbook of Methods for Public Scholarship," in *The Oxford Handbook of Methods for Public Scholarship*, 2019, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190274481.013.18.

[190] Chris Norris, "Talking to Ourselves? Academic Philosophy and the Public Sphere," *Think* 13, no. 37 (ed 2014): 58, https://doi.org/10.1017/S147717561300047X.

[191] Robert C. Solomon, *The Joy of Philosophy: Thinking Thin Versus the Passionate Life* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 4.

Debates about public philosophy cannot merely be about what serves philosophers alone, though, or what philosophers wish to do with their time. It is a rare privilege that philosophers at wealthy institutions do not need to be as concerned with the threat of closures, as those in departments at community colleges, small and mid-sized universities, or even state universities. The question we assess therefore cannot be, "what should philosophers do, assuming they can do anything under no threat of scarcity?" While this might be a fun hypothetical exercise, it is similar to a question like, "What would I do if I had no bills to pay, no responsibilities, no obligations at all?" It is interesting, but not especially relevant to the future direction of a discipline that will be gutted by increasingly scarce, inconstant, and inequitable funding of the humanities.[192]

One need not be merely pragmatic and avoid normative questions of what academic philosophy should look like. It is outside the scope of this project, but ultimately the pragmatic injunction to make philosophy in service of the public is also an ethical one. As a matter of justice, fairness, and community-mindedness, academic philosophy should not be squirreled away in ivory towers, especially crumbling ones prone to toppling over. Such cloistering reinforces the abominable homogeneity of academic philosophy. If philosophy is important and valuable, in any sense, then it must be shared, welcoming those who have been deprived of it.

In sum, philosophy must serve the public for two ends. First, to save philosophy from extinction. Such an extinction event would not only eliminate public philosophers but also the research opportunities that academic philosophy prioritizes above all else, not to mention the ability to teach non-philosophers and future philosophers alike. Second, because philosophy is valuable, it is a disgrace to reserve it for the privileged few. To make philosophy of service to the

[192] A tangential note: if philosophy can only be done in an academic setting, philosophers should be even more concerned about waning academic opportunities and therefore the relevancy of philosophy in general.

public, and therefore to achieve these two goals, we are faced with three major obstacles, discussed in the next section.

Three Obstacles to Successful Public Philosophy

An Attitude Problem

Public philosophy must evolve if it is to achieve its aims and avoid pointlessness. The most basic and most important change is one of attitude on the part of the discipline, traditional academic philosophers, and even those who engage in public philosophy. Massimo Pigliucci and Leonard Finkelman describe the prevailing attitude toward public philosophy:

> "…a frequent reaction from colleagues who hear about the above-mentioned public pursuits is along the lines of, "why is anyone wasting her time doing this?," or "that sort of thing cheapens real philosophy," or finally, "those are just people who want to make money out of philosophy." We find all three reactions downright bizarre, and more importantly, highly deleterious to the profession."

This attitude of derision and superiority is an enormous obstacle for philosophers to overcome. Jack Russell Weinstein articulates the tension between philosophers and the public:

> Philosophers don't like the general public; we have a tendency to regard them as the enemy. The very first story in the Western philosophical narrative—Thales's monopolization of the olive presses—is one of a philosopher getting revenge. It is a self-serving anecdote that confirms for many philosophers, their attitude of intellectual superiority, suggesting that philosophers could indeed get the upper hand economically, politically, or otherwise, if only we cared about worldly goods. But, the story suggests, because philosophers are morally as well as intellectually superior, we choose not to take advantage of those whom we could easily best.[193]

Putting aside engaging in public philosophy programs and just speaking in terms of the public's support for academic philosophy, why would the public rally around a discipline which shows such contempt for them? How strong is the argument being presented to the public that concludes that philosophy is valuable and worth supporting?

[193] Weinstein, "What Does Public Philosophy Do?," 34.

David Domke is correct when he claims that the public can sense the academic's "aloofness."[194] It is no wonder they should ignore our invitations when they are sent. We have already told them what we think of them, and they know when they are not wanted. They need only see that an event, described as "open to the public," is still being held in a classroom in the middle of a labyrinthine university campus with curving roads, confusing parking, no helpful directions other than abbreviated building names, and scheduled during the workday. The condescending, exclusionary, and unpleasant attitude toward the public has not been overlooked by the public.

It is not just the untutored public that perceives philosophy as apart from the world. Michèle Lamont, in her research on reviews of fellowship applications, found that following views of philosophers were held by the review panelists:

> (1) philosophers live in a world apart from other humanists, (2) nonphilosophers have problems evaluating philosophical work, and they are often perceived by philosophers as not qualified to do so, (3) philosophers do not explain the significance of their work, and (4) increasingly, what philosophers do is irrelevant, sterile, and self- indulgent.[195]

These views led to philosophy being seen as a "problem field" for the panels, requiring program officers to ask panelists to "stay 'open-minded'" toward philosophical proposals, a "plea for 'affirmative action' toward a discipline."[196] Philosophy's problematic attitude engenders a negative attitude among non-philosophers, creating a cycle of mutual antagonism.

Some academic philosophers are even incensed that the public does not do more for academic philosophers, wishing to be met more than halfway:

> [My second reaction is] to ask exactly which public we are supposed to engage with. Is it the public that is not willing to run a simple Google search before declaring that public-facing academic work does not exist? Is it the public that so devalues the work of

[194] Domke, "The Something We Can Do," 391.
[195] Michèle Lamont, *How Professors Think: Inside the Curious World of Academic Judgment* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2009), 64.
[196] Lamont, 64.

> teaching that it doesn't even occur to them to think of it as a form of public engagement? Or do they have in mind the public that tolerates ever-shrinking public support for higher education and turns a blind eye to the destruction of the profession through adjunctification?...
>
> A genuine exchange between academics and the broader public would require people to let down their guard and be willing to do a little work. As it stands, academics, especially in the humanities, often face the demand to justify the value of their field of study—and I always want to ask, "Really! You don't understand why it's valuable to study literature or history or ask big questions?" The very fact that the question is even being posed means that the exchange is doomed in advance. It would be much more productive if nonacademics recognized that academics are human beings and that if a fellow human being is willing to devote their life to studying a topic, there must be something interesting about it.[197]

Adam Kotsko's perspective is representative of a prominent strain in academia. Two aspects are striking. The first is the claim that public philosophy is doomed from the start, because the public is not willing to do the work necessary to successfully engage. The second aspect is emotional: a reactive attitude in response to the public's lack of appreciation for academic philosophy. Kotsko is right that the relationship would be healthier if the public had more of an inherent curiosity for academic philosophy and were banging at departmental doors, asking for more philosophy in their lives. But this is not the way things are, and it seems academic philosophy is largely to blame for their cloistering. Another issue at play, which academic philosophy is not entirely responsible for, is that philosophy is generally not included in pre-college curriculum and, as a result, it is unreasonable for non-academics to be especially curious about something they may not even know exists.

This insulation of philosophy is not just an accident but tied to the university model of education and philosophical work. Robert Frodeman and Adam Briggle describe the historical

[197] Adam Kotsko, "Public Engagement Is a Two-Way Street," Inside Higher Ed, October 23, 2017, https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2017/10/23/claiming-academics-arent-engaging-public-wrongheaded-essay.

"purification of philosophy," an intentional attempt to cloister philosophy and free it from modernization.[198] They go on to argue that this cleansing was a mistake:

> Our claim, then, can be put simply: Philosophy should never have been purified. Rather than being seen as a problem, "dirty hands" should have been understood as the native condition of philosophic thought—present everywhere, often interstitial, essentially interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary in nature. Philosophy is a mangle. The philosopher's hands were never clean and were never meant to be.[199]

Philosophy must be kept in a kind of antiseptic stasis, according to this trend. Kristie Dotson, too, has written convincingly about the boundary policing prominent in academic philosophy, which entrenches the homogenous demographics of philosophy and prevents a "culture of contribution" and "multiple canons" from taking hold.[200] The coupled desire for "clean hands" and active contempt for the public will doom philosophy.[201] A successful public philosophy is its only remedy.

It is telling that much writing about public philosophy is whether it is worth doing at all. What progress can be made, professional philosophers ask? What is the value? There is an implicit clause here, "what is the value *for me*?" where "me" often refers to a tenured professor at a research university who already enjoys all the spoils of thousands of years of philosophical toil. Little attention is given to these questions: why should the goods of philosophy be so sequestered? By what natural law is philosophy kept within the cloister of university by default? Weinstein argues there is no such natural law:

> Socrates did philosophy in the agora. And while in our contemporary world, the only philosophy that seems to matter takes place in the university, this is more the result of

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[198] Robert Frodeman and Adam Briggle, "When Philosophy Lost Its Way," *Opinionator* (blog), January 11, 2016, https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2016/01/11/when-philosophy-lost-its-way/.
[199] Frodeman and Briggle.
[200] Dotson, "How Is This Paper Philosophy?"
[201] This corresponds to a more general identity problem in philosophy concerning what counts as philosophy, disadvantaging who do not match the demographic homogeneity of academic philosophy, while privileging white, cis-males from affluent backgrounds. For an exploration of the "philosophical personality," especially as it relates to demographics and self-mythologization, see: David M. Peña-Guzmán and Rebekah Spera, "The Philosophical Personality," *Hypatia* 32, no. 4 (ed 2017): 911–27, https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12355.

> social change than disciplinary necessity. The cloistering of academia in the medieval university, the professionalization of the disciplines in the 19th century, and the brute necessity of financing an academic lifestyle conspire to justify equivocating the profession of philosophy with all forms of philosophical inquiry.[202]

Similarly, George Littman has pointed to ancient philosophers like Seneca and Xenophon, as well as modern philosophers like John Locke and John Stuart Mill as producing work aimed at non-philosophers.[203] Even Immanuel Kant "saw it as the philosopher's duty to serve the ends of humanity through moral education and political critique."[204]

Contrary to Kotsko, it is philosophy that must change, because the public does not perceive any reasons to accommodate philosophy. The public has not been offered anything that might appeal to them or anything that meets them where they are. They sense the contempt, they sense philosophers' lack of interest, and they have no desire to have doors shut in their face, if they are aware of philosophy at all. Philosophers pushed them away. It is time for philosophers to make amends. Philosophy has to make itself known, show off its value, and connect to the public. In sum, this current attitude of reluctance and condescension makes authentic engagement, and therefore a successful public philosophy, impossible. In the next section, I will discuss how this attitude must be changed. Before moving on to the ameliorative section, however, more must be said of the obstacles that public philosophy faces.

Too Much Expertise

Thousands of years of argumentation, research, and intellectual traditions loom behind philosophy's core questions. It is invoked through difficult jargon and sometimes obscure

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[202] Weinstein, "What Does Public Philosophy Do?," 36.

[203] Littman, "Writing Philosophy for the Public Is a Moral Obligation," 104.

[204] Gregory Littman, "Writing Philosophy for the Public Is a Moral Obligation," *Essays in Philosophy* 15, no. 1 (2014): 104, https://doi.org/10.7710/1526-0569.1492; K. Sweet, "Philosophy and the Public Sphere: Kant on Moral Education and Political Critique" 41 (March 1, 2011): 83–94.

references to articles, books, and philosophers. It is, at the very least, alienating and exclusionary to the non-academic public. Similar in view to Lamont's research above,[205] Norris precisely describes the public image of philosophy:

> One big complaint has to do with the perceived technicality of much philosophical discussion, by which is mostly meant some variously weighted combination of jargon-prone style, narrowness of focus, specialist readership, arcane interests, and—above all—remoteness from the sphere of shared or commonplace human concerns…lay readers tend to be repelled by an ethos (not to say cult) of technical expertise that places such a distance between experts and non-expert but genuinely interested parties in the case of a discipline or practice like that of philosophy.[206]

Philosophers resist ameliorative efforts on this front, worrying about watering down the field for the public. They are concerned about the public not knowing enough to really engage in the conversation. The discipline's primary methods, after all, rely on references to academic literature, the invocation of names and traditions (e.g., Kant, contextualism, etc.), and technical terminology. It serves as shorthand, allowing conversations to move more quickly for those in the know and, ideally, propelling the conversation into deeper and richer territory. It serves a marker of belonging to the in-group; a nod of the head to a Kant reference lets everyone know you belong here too. It is also part of the methodology: philosophy is always in conversation with its long history. The dead are your interlocutors as much as anyone in the room.

The issue is that, as much as this might function in an academic setting, it is a failed strategy in most other settings. It is exclusionary, unclear, unpleasant, dismissive, pretentious, and annoying. The public catches the whiff of smugness and knows that they are viewed as remedial participants, if they are invited to be participants at all. They have not read enough, have not asked the right questions, have not *thought* enough. Who would willingly sacrifice their free evenings for a program where they are made to feel this way? Not many. Certainly not

[205] Lamont, *How Professors Think*, 64.
[206] Norris, "Talking to Ourselves? Academic Philosophy and the Public Sphere," 58.

enough for public philosophy to do its job. As McKenna argues, "We've never embraced our calling and work as teachers. We've been content to talk only to ourselves all along."[207] While this claim might bypass the teaching at community colleges and other pedagogically-focused institutions, it does pinpoint an attitude prevalent in research-focused departments.

In describing their innovative work with neuroscientists, Sara Goering and Eran Klein argue that philosophical practice must change so that philosophers make successfully operate in the public sphere.[208] Locating their project in the context of "field philosophy," where philosophers contribute to projects outside of the traditional work done in philosophy departments, Goering and Klein suggest that field philosophers who aim to be successful will need to check their argumentative styles and confidence levels, and acknowledge and develop sensitivity to what they may not understand."[209] So too will public philosophers have to adapt to a new context. Attendance to the needs to the public is not only a shift in practice, but also requires a shift in attitude.

Academic philosophers might claim that philosophy is just too difficult or technical for the average person. Putting aside for the moment that this is representative of the attitude problem mentioned above, it is also not a good argument against public philosophy. It is a clear reminder that academic philosophy has not done its job. Only the very privileged few have been brought along for the "philosophic flight," as termed by Walter Kaufmann.[210] That philosophers have not shared their goods and left so many behind is an embarrassment to philosophy, not an indictment of the public. Littman has specifically argued that writing for the public is a moral

[207] Mckenna, "Are We a Thoughtful Profession?," 402.
[208] Sara Goering and Eran Klein, "Embedding Ethics in Neural Engineering: An Integrated Transdisciplinary Collaboration," in *A Guide to Field Philosophy: Case Studies and Practical Strategies*, ed. Evelyn Brister and Robert Frodeman, 1st ed., vol. 1 (Routledge, 2020), 17–34, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351169080-2.
[209] Goering and Klein, 32.
[210] Kaufmann, *Critique of Religion and Philosophy*, 9.

obligation, stating that it is no excuse to believe that philosophy is best done in a technical, jargon-heavy manner, stating:

> This reply to the charge that ordinary English is inadequate for philosophy also serves against any objection to bringing philosophy to the public on the grounds of difficulty. For example, public philosophy cannot be rejected on the grounds that philosophy is too hard for non-professionals to engage in properly. While it is obvious that non-professionals cannot be expected to perform at a professional level, this is no reason not to help them to philosophize as best they can. It would be absurd to leave them in ignorance on the grounds that their ignorance will always be greater than ours, just as it would be to abolish education on the grounds that understanding will always be limited.[211]

Academic philosophers who do not wish to do public philosophy should not force themselves to. It will spoil the whole endeavor for both public philosophers and the public. However, academic philosophers who do not wish to do public philosophy should still support those who do wish to perform this service, because it is good for the discipline, good for the public, and could prevent academic philosophy from disappearing altogether.

Too Little Expertise

While philosophical expertise can sometimes be a problem for public philosophy, inasmuch as academic norms can sometimes get in the way of public engagement, academic philosophers often suffer from a dearth of other kinds of expertise, including program design, event planning, and outreach.

A typical "public-facing" philosophical event will take place on campus, during the workday, in the standard format of a lecture followed by questions from the audience, assuredly dominated by older, white, cis-male professors. It is unlikely that someone with an off-campus, full-time job could even imagine attending a talk at 3 p.m. on a Thursday afternoon, let alone someone with who has children or multiple jobs. One should wonder how a family or a non-

[211] Littman, "Writing Philosophy for the Public Is a Moral Obligation," 112.

academic would even hear about these events in the first place. Most importantly, even if a family or non-academic became aware of the event and could make time for it, philosophers should ask themselves if such people could ever feel welcome.

Being *open* to the public does not mean *inviting* or *welcoming* to the public. It certainly does not mean that it is designed for the public. The kinds of design and logistical questions that philosophers generally avoid are the exact sorts that need careful attention for public programming. These questions include: what venues, physical or otherwise, would make this event convenient and accessible to public audiences? What time of day is best and easiest for public audiences to attend events? How should we communicate about this event and who should we communicate to? These are the broadest level of questions for event planning and they imply many more, especially concerning details like language, tone, outreach methods, and program design. This is yet to even mention the skills inherent to project management: establishing timelines, dependencies, and soliciting community input.

Philosophers, broadly speaking, do not reward or cherish these skills. This is troubling for the nascent discipline of public philosophy. Public programming requires a set of competencies very different from research, writing, and teaching. Because event planning, project management, and accessibility concerns are not taught at any level of philosophical education, it is no wonder such skills are lacking. Despite this being explained by philosophy's historical lack of interest in such topics, this does not mean the skills are any less necessary. This is a substantial obstacle to successful public philosophy, even for those with the best of intentions and the most fervent of commitments to the public. But, as Adam Hosein as argued, in providing the necessary training to young philosophers, "we may well train a generation of philosophers

who will put philosophy back at the center of intelligent public discourse."[212] In the next section, this chapter explores how the three obstacles might be overcome, one by one.

Public Philosophy Evolves

Discussions about public philosophy often center on what it accomplishes for academic philosophy. In this section, I argue that while this may make sense for academic philosophers to consider, it cannot serve as the design principle behind public programming. This is especially true if one's ultimate aim is to preserve academic philosophy, using public philosophy as a means to its survival. To avoid pointlessness, public philosophy must serve the public first. Public philosophy designed to accommodate and improve the lives of academic philosophers will be designed in a way that alienates and excludes the public. Public philosophy designed in this way will not sufficiently offer incentive for the public to engage, outside of those who already want to be part of academic philosophy.

Whether or not one is supporting public philosophy for the good of the public or to preserve philosophy, the programming must be designed for the public. The public must be met more than halfway because they do not yet believe that philosophy is worthwhile in itself. They must be shown that it is valuable to them. This must go beyond arguing the public into believing that philosophy is valuable; rather, the fruits of philosophical labor have to be on display, clearly and concretely. Additionally, public philosophy will not expand beyond the small, insular audiences of academic philosophers and demographically similar hobbyists that it currently appeals to. A discussion group that meets once a month with the same ten white men showing up each week is not a successful one, no matter how long running it may be.

[212] Kevin Zollman, "Creating a Philosophical Culture of Engagement," Blog of the APA, February 12, 2019, https://blog.apaonline.org/2019/02/12/creating-a-philosophical-culture-of-engagement/.

In the context of evaluating public philosophy, Jack Russell Weinstein acknowledges that:

> Ultimately, though, the problem this critique of quality reveals is that there are, in fact, no established standards for public philosophy. There is no community agreement as to what public philosophy should look like, let alone, what criteria it ought to privilege.[213]

Standards are sorely lacking and much of existing public philosophy is unsuccessful. Events are poorly attended and, when they do have a lively audience, they largely match the homogenous, privileged demographics that academic philosophy is guilty of overly attending to. In order for public philosophy to achieve its goals, whether it is the betterment of one's community or the survival of philosophy, changes are necessary. These changes operate at different levels in the approach, design, and execution of public philosophy programs, as well as the future of the endeavor, as we think about how to prepare the next generation of philosophers.

Public philosophy must proceed according to an ethos of service, which goes beyond opening event registration to non-philosophers and posting videos on department YouTube accounts. Designing for the public is a principle that is simple in its formulation but difficult in its execution. In the negative, the principle states: do not design public philosophy programming for expediency or the convenience of academic philosophers. Failing to design for the public produces the problems described in the previous section. Designing for the public is therefore motivated by the need to avoid such problems, but also by considering what it would take to successfully engage the public.

To design programs for the public implies three immediate changes. In this section, I first discuss the attitude or disposition with which academic philosophy approaches public philosophy. This attitude must be changed from one of condescension to one that is community

[213] Jack Russell Weinstein, "Public Philosophy: Introduction," *Essays in Philosophy* 15, no. 1 (2014): 2, https://doi.org/10.7710/1526-0569.1485.

focused. Second, I argue that the norms of the profession should not be straightforwardly applied to public programs, but, instead, transformed into norms that serve and are accessible to the public. Third, I recommend that early-career philosophers should be taught foundational skills in the form of public outreach, including project planning, community engagement, and raising the right questions. Without these skills, successful public philosophy is but a chance mutation, destined to appear and disappear at random. Instead, these must be treated as necessary, useful, and philosophy-preserving tools and methods to the next generations of philosophers.

Attitude Shift: From Condescension to Community

The reluctant, condescending attitude described in the previous section is the first major obstacle to successful public philosophy and is, unfortunately, the most difficult to remedy. It will take both an internal shift on the part of professional philosophers individually and collectively. The demeanor of the philosophers who engage in public philosophy and their colleagues will have an impact on the reception of the communities in which they operate. The collegial support that public philosophers receive, or do not receive, will help or limit the reach of their work. Most importantly, however, public philosophy itself will not progress if it is done reluctantly, condescendingly, or selfishly. Public philosophy must be done with the community in mind, even if one's ultimate goal is to preserve philosophy itself. The benefits will follow, but public philosophy's north star must be the good of the public itself.

Keeping the good of the public as one's primary goal is difficult, partially because philosophers themselves are not quite sure what they can contribute. Sometimes this is admitted out of embarrassment and sometimes it is stated proudly in defense of the isolated ivory tower model of academic philosophy. It is a different project to articulate all the goods that philosophy might offer the public, but it seems clear that public philosophy helps the public become more

engaged in big question and ideas, think through their positions critically, and participate in the cultural health of their communities. One aspect that has been too often overlooked is that doing philosophy is a good in itself, a rewarding activity that should not be artificially restricted to only those with tuition in hand or advanced degrees. As Callard argues, philosophy need not be pejoratively reduced to the category of entertainment. Philosophy can be entertaining, of course, but not mindlessly so. Doing philosophy is a good, just as experiencing sophisticated art, hard exercise, or deep conversations is a good.

This shift in attitude must come at different levels. First, professional philosophers as individuals must recognize public philosophy's role in academic philosophy's survival. This is an internal, personal change that will result in a cultural shift, supporting and rewarding public philosophers for their service. Second, to accelerate this change, departments can make external efforts to engage the community by holding events designed for the public in a manner meaningfully accessible to the public. The details of these efforts are outlined below. Natural partners for these endeavors are state humanities councils, cultural non-profits, museums, and libraries. Third, departments and universities can operationalize this shift in attitude by rewarding public philosophy by increasing their worth in hiring, tenure, and grant considerations. Academic philosophers, too, must show regard for public philosophy. Kristie Dotson calls for a "culture of praxis," where "value [is] placed on seeking issues and circumstances pertinent to our living, where one maintains a healthy appreciation for the differing issues that will emerge as pertinent among different populations" and there is "recognition and encouragement of multiple canons and multiple ways of understanding disciplinary validation."[214] This shift in attitude and

[214] Dotson, "How Is This Paper Philosophy?," 17.

culture is necessary for public philosophy to do its work. For public philosophy to flourish, the soil out of which it grows must be favorable to it.

Professional Norms vs. Public Norms

Above, an abundance of philosophical expertise was listed as an obstacle for public philosophy. That is, the standard way that philosophers present their knowledge, argue skillfully with one another, and rely on encyclopedic knowledge of thousands of years of philosophical history has not, thus far, aided the project of public philosophy. This method alienates those outside of the privileged circle, rather than inviting them in. It gets in the way of outreach to, inclusion of, and connection with the public. While I agree that many of these professional norms can be valuable, they seem to be only instrumentally so. Aimed at the goal of serving the public, they seem to be the wrong tool for the job, or perhaps the right tool for a different job. Martha Nussbaum, in discussing a conference she had planned with others, described the difficulty in getting philosophers to adapt to norms other than academic ones:

> We also asked [the academics] to address an audience of policy makers and nonspecialists. Nonetheless, people have a marked tendency to present the work that they are doing anyway, and philosophers are in the habit of addressing their peers, rather than the general public. I see no reason why the issues of our conference cannot be discussed, at a high degree of sophistication, in a clear and jargon-free language, with concrete factual or narrative examples.[215]

In the context of public philosophy, other norms are needed.

It is fortunate that professional norms are not the only ones that philosophers are trained in. Most academic philosophers also teach. Public philosophy can draw great strength from the pedagogical wisdom gained by its excellent instructors. Collins, for example, has argued that

[215] Martha C. Nussbaum, "Public Philosophy and International Feminism," *Ethics* 108, no. 4 (1998): 778, https://doi.org/10.1086/233851.

teaching itself is a form of public philosophy.[216] Graeme Tiffany has also claimed that we can draw lessons from pedagogy: "A common conclusion is that acting upon pupils—'doing to'—is very different from 'working with.' Few teachers advocate the former, and yet few are immune to the pressures on them to 'deliver' the curriculum."[217] Pigliucci and Finkelman also draw from the lessons of teaching, suggesting that philosophers should seek philosophical "interactions at multiple levels of discourse" and that public philosophy is not "somehow below the professional philosopher's concern."[218]

It is a problem of the discipline that teaching is seen as secondary to research, but public philosophy must take a different stance. In the best practices of philosophy's teachers are the tools to help make public philosophy successful. Recognizing the needs of an audience, guiding conversations that illuminate rather than inhibit, and raising and rewarding curiosity are all skills that operate according to pedagogical norms rather than strictly academic ones.

Additionally, public philosophers need to recognize that they are in active competition with passive entertainment. Public programming needs to be designed such that a potential participant could reasonably decide to attend the program rather than sit on their couch and enjoy their favorite streaming service. One does not need to commodify philosophy to successfully compete, but it cannot leave what it offers a total mystery to the public it is trying to enthrall. Audiences are now used to being invited and thoroughly communicated to. Public philosophers must recognize that they enter a space heavily populated by entertainment norms and, even if they do not participate in those norms, bring something to the table that will outshine the

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[216] Brian J. Collins, "The Broad Nature and Importance of Public Philosophy," *Precollege Philosophy and Public Practice* 2 (2020): 73, https://doi.org/10.5840/p420204114.
[217] Graeme Tiffany, "Community Philosophy and Social Action," in *Philosophy and Community: Theories, Practices and Possibilities*, ed. Amanda Fulford, Grace Lockrobin, and Richard Smith (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 76, https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350073432.
[218] Pigliucci and Finkelman, "The Value of Public Philosophy to Philosophers," 97.

competition. Philosophy for children programs succeed in this manner by both going to the classrooms where their audiences already are and providing an antidote to the sometimes rigid instruction practices of K-12 schools.[219] "Cabin Fever Questions," a program designed to spark conversation in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, was designed to play well on social media outlets, but also framed as a slow, reflective escape from the lightning-quick pace of news feeds.[220] Public philosophy, unlike academic philosophy, is not sequestered away. As a result, it must learn to move and work in a competitive environment, one to which academic norms are not well suited.

Training

More than a matter of poor training, philosophers are not trained to conduct public philosophy at all. The variety of skills and depth of experience one needs to perform them well is great. Implicit behind this lack of training, of course, is the absence of widespread support or acceptance of the value of public philosophy. C. Thi Nguyen points out that among the barriers to entry is academic philosophy's negative stance, stating, "For most of us, writing op-eds and making YouTube videos doesn't help you get a job, get tenure, or get promoted. But it's worse than that. Our discipline actively resists public philosophy."[221] Above I argued that there should be widespread support for public philosophy, even if one does not care about providing the public with philosophy. In this section, I outline the main skills needed for successful public philosophy and some methods by which early-career philosophers might receive effective

[219] "Why P4C?," Center for Philosophy for Children, accessed January 31, 2021, https://www.philosophyforchildren.org/about/why-p4c/.
[220] "Cabin Fever Questions," Humanities Washington, March 16, 2020, https://www.humanities.org/blog/cabin-fever-questions/.
[221] C. Thi Nguyen, "Manifesto for Public Philosophy," Daily Nous, July 1, 2019, http://dailynous.com/2019/07/01/manifesto-public-philosophy-guest-post-c-thi-nguyen/.

training. It should be noted that these strategies might be adopted by lone wolf supporters of public philosophy, but will only have adequate impact if the discipline as a whole shifts its attitudes toward the public and toward public philosophy.

The most foundational, but least exciting, skill for public philosophy is project planning. This includes establishing reasonable timelines, developing accurate budgets, and communicating with all the necessary parties. This skill underwrites all the others, but it is only incidentally provided in philosophical training inasmuch as it contributes to dissertation prospectuses and syllabi for classes. This skill is largely logistical in nature, but essential to successful public programming. Without it, events are poorly managed, announced at the last minute, with confusing instructions to potential audiences and frustration for the contributing parties involved. In effect, it makes all the work that goes into public philosophy lose its potential impact. Philosophers need practice in defining the scope of projects, developing workplans with attendant budgets and timelines, and working with collaborators. This might be accomplished by courses or modules that involve developing public-facing projects for courses, applying for and reporting on grants, partnering with community organizations to serve as program managers or assistants, or evaluating existing public projects. At this early stage of public philosophy, the instructors of such courses or modules would learn a great deal as well and so must be comfortable leading without as much experience or knowledge as might be preferred.

The skill that most secures the efficacy of one's project is community engagement. That is, designing for one's community and communicating in such a way that they know about and are interested in the event. It is critical to note that this goes beyond sending an event description or article link to the department's email list, though social media and other internet-based

publicity are important means of communication. More critically, however, this means literally asking community members what they need, what they want, and what would benefit them in terms of content, structure, and execution. It also means contacting organizations and community leaders outside the university and listening to their recommendations and critiques. This requires the development of relationships, which in themselves require time, effort, and stepping outside of the university setting. This skill is the most important for designing programming for the public, rather than programming merely open to the public.

Within this skill, one should not dismiss the significance of successful marketing and communications. Project titles, descriptions, and marketing images are often treated as an afterthought, but corporations spend billions of dollars per year on such considerations for a reason. Philosophers must speak so that people can hear them. As a result, even a guest lecture, workshop, or book on basic marketing for early-career public philosophers would go a long way toward creating programs that are lively and engaged, rather than a room with mostly empty chairs.

The third skill is not foundational nor logistical, but it is essential. It is the ability to conceive of and develop ideas that are of interest to people outside academic philosophy. This a multi-faceted ability, mostly about judgment and integrity rather than work plans and budgets. It involves paying attention to context, leaving one's cultural bubble and understanding the world outside of academic philosophy and its idiosyncrasies. It is not that the average person is not interested in the questions of metaphysics, but it is the case that most people are not interested in metaphysics in the way that sophisticated philosophers frame and discuss metaphysics. Similarly with epistemology, aesthetics, the philosophy of science, and others. Ethics, as a subfield,

probably connects most naturally with non-specialists, with prominent figures like Peter Singer, but even so, the cultural uptake is woeful.

Much of this skill, of providing something that seems appealing to the people you wish to appeal to, amounts to properly framing and phrasing your questions. Dropping jargon, leaving the old, entrenched parties aside, and remembering what is essentially interesting about philosophical questions is critical. Philosophers would do well to remember what made philosophy attractive to them in the first place. For many, it was the big, universal questions and their provocative, liberating framing: What is good? What is real? What does it mean to know something? Even more specifically, questions that connect to the lived experience of the targeted audiences can generate lively and important philosophical discussions: is the internet ruining your life? What is the right way to act during a pandemic? Why is there so much suffering in the world? Questions are philosophy's great appeal, yet philosophers often forget both *to* ask questions of non-philosophers and *how* to frame their questions.

Teaching in universities and colleges can serve as a kind of bridge to public-facing work. The skills involved in introducing students to philosophy and attracting new majors to pursue philosophy degrees are at least analogous to the skills needed to frame philosophy for the public.

Without reaching out, meeting people where they are, and stoking their curiosity, we are only speaking to the people who have already committed to philosophy. That is simply not enough. It will neither serve the public, serve philosophy, nor even allow academic philosophy to continue to exist in the upcoming decades. If philosophy is valuable, we must share it. Contra Callard, the value of philosophy to the public is explicated by McHugh, Brister, and Olasov:

> Philosophers have useful skills: They can explicate concepts, draw useful distinctions, reason rigorously, and interpret difficult but rewarding prose. A lot of public philosophy

> consists in offering those skills where they're needed, whether to policymakers, professionals, or private individuals who want to pursue their philosophical questions.[222]

Philosophy is valuable and must be shared, but it must be shared in a way such that the public sees its value.

It might be argued that these skills are pragmatic and overly concerned with the logistics of events. An objector might claim that philosophy is concerned with questions, ideas, and arguments, not booking a venue or setting up registration pages and that these latter concerns are not critical to the success of public philosophy.

While this objection is right that philosophy is not, in the deepest sense, about these details, logistics are critical to a program's success across multiple dimensions. In order to engage the public, venues must be accessible to and comfortable for the public. This has a variety of implications—ADA compliance being the minimum requirement. It means that events should generally not be held on college campuses because they imply an exclusionary stance toward non-academics, are confusing to navigate, and are ill-suited to families with young children. Public spaces like restaurants, libraries, museums, and other community centers are more comfortable and accessible for the public. But because university spaces are comparatively easy to book for academics and comfortable to them, they are the default location for events that are intended to be public facing. Steve Bramall articulates the spectrum of community spaces:

> At one end of the scale are traditional colleges, schools, universities and sites of workplace learning. Here, community of enquiry pedagogy can be built into provision for the purposes of enhancing mutual mental stimulation, developing a more democratic, engaged and supportive ethos and generating philosophical questions, dialogue, knowledge and understanding. Towards the other end of this scale are a wide variety of repurposed places: rural spaces, squares, cafés, streets, churches, public houses, housing associations and many more. Philosophy in communities repurposes and revitalizes

[222] McHugh et al., "Public Philosophy Is Good—For Philosophy and For the Public."

> spaces. It reconstructs meeting spaces as informal learning spaces and asks us to consider the social and political suitability of novel spaces as sites for philosophical dialogue.[223]

Similarly, clarity of communications and the skill with which events are titled and described, the ease of directions and registration, and the relation of the venue to public transit all affect audience turnout, audience connection, and overall success of the event. Logistics matter, and hence the skills that determine the success of the logistical planning will affect the success of the overall program.

These three skills, project planning, framing questions, and community engagement are not specifically taught at any level of philosophical training. One receives bits and pieces as they teach courses or plan out writing projects or participate in conferences, but it lacks any systemization, rigor, and refinement. When projects are planned well, when communities are actually engaged, and philosophers approach public philosophy with an ethos of service, incredible, inclusive, and high-impact work can be achieved. For example, philosophy for children connects with countless students across the world. On the digital front, Natalie Wynn's YouTube channel ContraPoints produces videos with insightful and rich explorations of shame, beauty, blame, and other philosophical topics, while bringing in millions of views per video.[224] Well-crafted, far-reaching, and service-minded philosophy is both possible and necessary.

Conclusion

I have sought to argue for two claims. First, that public philosophy faces three obstacles, each of which makes the charge of pointlessness more likely to be true. Second, I aimed to show

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[223] Steve Bramall, "Understanding Philosophy in Communities: The Spaces, People, Politics and Philosophy of Community Philosophy," in *Philosophy and Community: Theories, Practices and Possibilities*, ed. Amanda Fulford, Grace Lockrobin, and Richard Smith (London: Bloomsbury Academic, n.d.), 11.

[224] Notably, Wynn describes herself as an "ex-philosopher." Natalie Wynn, "ContraPoints," YouTube, accessed September 5, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/user/contrapoints.

that for public philosophy to succeed, it must start designing its projects for the public and therefore engage in three reforms: a change in attitude from one of condescension to one of service, a change in norms from academic ones to publicly-oriented ones, and training for early-career philosophers in the skills that not only make public philosophy possible, but appealing, valuable, and service-oriented.

Public philosophy must be a part of academic philosophy's future, if the discipline is to have a future at all. As stated above, not every academic philosopher is well-suited for or should participate in public philosophy. Leave it to those who have the necessary passion and skills. However, all should support public philosophy, as it serves not only our communities, but also academic philosophy itself, aiding in its preservation. A discipline that is entirely self-indulgent, insular, and uninterested in the communities around them will not be supported by those communities forever. As Pigliucci and Finkelman state:

> …let us not forget that the academy as such largely exists because of the public purse (even private universities increasingly depend on public research grants to thrive), and that as the beneficiaries of such contribution it is a moral imperative for us to give something back to the public.[225]

In the absence of projects designed for the public, patience wears thin, an accounting for dollars spent becomes increasingly specific and terse, and communities might rightly say: what, exactly, have you done for me lately?

[225] Pigliucci and Finkelman, "The Value of Public Philosophy to Philosophers," 100.

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