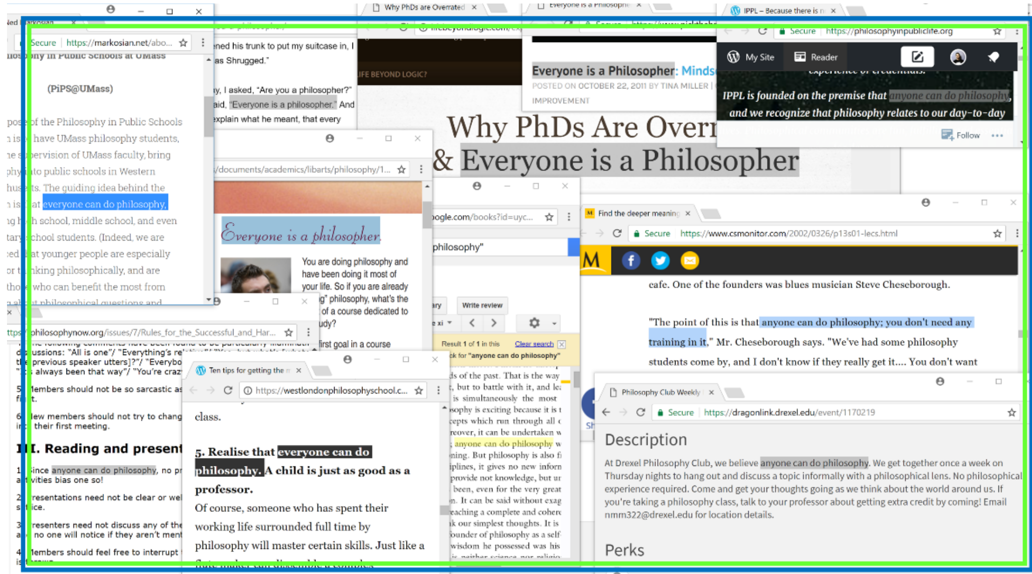

Selling Ourselves Short
(Adventures In the Philosophy of Public Philosophy)

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DRAFT

1. Introduction

A couple of years ago, after the very first meeting on the first day of an introductory level philosophy course, a student approached me as I was erasing the white board. “Do you know what the problem with philosophy is?” he asked me.

This was a hard question. I mean, it was hard in the same way that “which flavor ice cream would you like?” can be a hard question. There are just too many delicious answers to choose between.

Do I know what the problem with philosophy is? *Do I ever!*

Do I know what the problem with philosophy is? *There’s just one now?*

Do I know what the problem with philosophy is? *Social justice warriors armed with blogs, of course.*

Do I know what the problem with philosophy is? *That you feel comfortable asking me this?*

Fortunately, he spared me the trouble of having to choose. Before I could offer an answer he unspooled his own, which I had the privilege of untangling with him for the better part of the next hour. It had something to do with philosophy being unscientific.

I share this story because it, itself, represents a "*problem with philosophy*". This young, well-intentioned student has never had a philosophy course. Nonetheless, he is confident in his ability to do philosophy—so confident that he believes he can dismiss philosophical inquiry as relatively useless, in comparison to science.

Can you imagine a student in an introductory physics or chemistry or history or public health or engineering or political science course, after the first day of class, feeling confident enough to approach the professor to say that the discipline is of little value? There may be other disciplines that are susceptible to this, but philosophy is most at risk.

The occasionally overconfident skeptical student is not really the problem, but, I said, represents the problem, and the problem is this: people do not understand what philosophers do, how philosophy is important, and why we need experts in philosophy. And because of this, professional philosophers face certain challenges: limited funding for projects, shrinking space in school curricula, elimination of philosophy major programs, and job loss.

Why is there this ignorance and confusion regarding philosophy?

In this paper, I argue that it is (at least in part) because of three widespread ideas: (1) that anyone can do philosophy, (2) that intellectual achievement consists more in answering questions rather than in creating questions, and (3) that disagreement indicates the absence, not presence, of knowledge.

The prevalence of these three ideas—mistakes, really—is the result of failures of self-understanding by the philosophy profession as well as missteps in teaching philosophy and communicating its value to the public.

My aim is to show that forms of public philosophy, of which there is arguably more now than ever at any point in human history, are reinforcing these three mistakes. The result is a public understanding of philosophy that is in tension with most philosophers' conceptions of themselves as philosophers, at odds with an honest appraisal of what philosophy is about, and a threat to the future of academic philosophy.

Here's the plan for the paper: I'll first briefly discuss the varieties of public philosophy and considerations in favor of it. Second, I'll delve into the three

mistakes mentioned above. I then turn to some metaphilosophical considerations, because I think there is confusion among both philosophers and nonphilosophers about philosophical expertise, what philosophy can do, and why it is valuable. I then bring things back to public philosophy, and show how certain forms of public philosophy encourage these mistakes, and why this is not just an intellectual problem but a practical one for the profession.

2. The Varieties of and Cases for Public Philosophy

For the purposes of this paper I am going to understand "public philosophy" to be activities by academic philosophers (or those acting on their behalf) that are intended to bring philosophy into contact with people not affiliated with academia (or people whose affiliation with academia is not the reason for engaging with them).

There are different kinds of public philosophy that vary according to what we can call "format," "participation," and "capability."

Format speaks to what kind of thing the instance of public philosophy is. Some common formats are: essays in a newspaper or magazine or on a popular website, talks at a community center, youth summer programs, podcasts, café gatherings, courses for nonstudents (online or in person), blog posts, films followed by panel discussions, popular books and chapters therein, etc. Less common: skywriting.

Participation is about how the public is related to the instance of public philosophy. Are they largely being philosophized *to*—that is, spoken to or written at—by an academic philosopher, or philosophized *with*—that is, expected to be doing philosophy as well? For example, a column in the *New York Times's* The Stone typically involves one philosopher *philosophizing to* the public. A meeting of something like a Socrates Café, by contrast, is an event in which members of the public are expected to be doing some philosophy. Pedagogical programs are often a hybrid. A philosophy summer program for underprivileged youth involves them being witnesses to philosophy but also participants in it.

Capability is the level of philosophical skill or knowledge the target audience needs for the success of the instance of public philosophy. Some public philosophy is aimed at children who have never been exposed to anything like philosophy. Very little philosophical capability is presumed for such activities. Other forms of public philosophy, such as a chapter in a "crossover" volume might be aimed at adults who are not philosophers by trade but have some familiarity with its methods and figures.

I'm a fan of public philosophy in many of its forms. I'm on the American Philosophical Association's Committee for Public Philosophy, and as many of you know I promote many public philosophy resources, events, and writings at Daily Nous.

Part of being a fan of something is just wanting to share that thing with others as something you like, like when you hear a great new song and want to play it for your friends. I'm a fan of public philosophy in this way: I like this thing called "philosophy"; it's interesting and fun; here, give it a spin.

Yet the justifications for public philosophy are rarely so simple. I've found that there are generally three kinds of justifications for public philosophy: (a) it's good for the individual non-philosophers, (b) it's good for society, and (c) it's good for academic philosophy.

(a) Individuals
When we say that public philosophy is good for individual members of the public, what we tend to have in mind is the same kinds of things we say about why our students should study some philosophy. We might talk about the value of being able to think clearly, spot errors in reasoning, avoid being fooled, or being more thoughtful about what we believe and how we think we should live our lives. There may be more specific reasons offered for certain kinds of individuals (e.g., prisoners).

(b) Society
When we say that public philosophy is good for society, what we typically mean is one of two things: (i) something akin to the instrumental value of the humanities more broadly. In the spirit of someone like Martha Nussbaum, we talk about educating citizens for participation in civic and political life, so that our civic and political institutions are better, or more robustly democratic. (ii) philosophy can help society get clearer on the problems it is facing and agreement on solutions to these problems. A lot of public philosophy is on current events or emerging technology. There is often a concern about philosophy having a voice in public discussions about policy and law.

(c) Academic Philosophy
I've hear it argued that public philosophy is good for academic philosophy in two ways. (i) By engaging with the public, we stay connected to matters of public importance, and make sure that philosophy isn't a rarefied intellectual exercise. Plus, having to explain philosophical ideas to the public helps us with our writing and teaching. (ii) More cynically, public engagement is often seen as a way of shoring up university support for a department, a way of looking good and getting positive attention and seeming to be of practical use in a time when the humanities and philosophy are targeted as useless.

These justifications for public philosophy are not incompatible with one another. And they embody worthwhile ends. The question is how good public philosophy is as a means to them. We'll return to that later, with a focus on the last of them.

3. The Belief That Anyone Can Do Philosophy

A few years ago, hundreds of philosophy professors received a red box in the mail at work. In each was two copies of the book *Hating Perfection*, along with some supplementary materials. It had what seemed to be drawings of vampires on the front. And it was written by a non-academic who purported to solve many significant philosophical problems, and had self-published the book to let us all know.

At least one time per year a student in your class (I'm sure) describes a philosophical position as "just an opinion," or thinks that the correct approach to philosophical inquiry is to say, "who's to say?", as if any answer is as good as any other.

On a popular online discussion forum, someone says, "anyone can be a philosopher by thinking about shit and self-identifying."

These examples, along with the earlier student who approached me on the first day of class, are illustrative of the idea that anyone can do philosophy. And by "do philosophy" it's meant, "do philosophy as well enough as it needs to be done."

As people who are, or are on their way, to becoming professional philosophers, as people who have spent years reading, discussing, and writing philosophy, we know that this is not true. We have a certain kind of expertise. Not everyone can do what we can do, not even if they tried.

What is it about philosophy that leads people to believe they can? Several things.

We might first note that, insofar as philosophy is about questions such as "what can we know?", "what kinds of things are there?", and "how should I live?" it is about things that are relevant to all human lives. Of course, physics, insofar as it is about how matter is organized and operates, is also relevant to all human lives, as we are matter. Humans are living things, too, for at least a while, and so biology would also be relevant to all human lives. Yet we don't think that everyone can do physics or biology well enough. So relevance to all human lives does not seem sufficient to explain the belief that everyone can do philosophy. What does?

One plausible answer is that there are widespread norms that suggest that something like *philosophical thinking is good for humans to do*. That is, the appearance of some degree of thoughtfulness and wisdom, especially with regard to questions that seem difficult to settle, such as how to live, or whether there's anything supernatural in the universe, or what, essentially, we are, is appreciated. These are philosophy's questions. Philosophy is understood to be deep and pure thought (thought without the need of extra equipment besides the brain). And "thoughtless" is a common criticism. No one wants to be thoughtless.

That there are norms supporting the appearance of thoughtfulness may seem hard to square with how our world actually looks at the moment. But note that the *appearance* of thoughtfulness is not always generated by actual thoughtfulness, and further, there are plenty of competing and countervailing norms (be agreeable, obey) that limit the efficacy of such norms.

A second answer is that *people tend to be metaphilosophical egalitarians*: most seem to believe—if they've given the matter any thought at all—that any philosophizing is, at root, as good as any other. Note that I'm not saying that they are justified in believing this. I just think that, at least when it comes to more fundamental philosophical questions, people tend to think that the bulk of the answer consists in opinions they do not think are possible to comparatively qualitatively assess (even if they agree with some and disagree with others).

Metaphilosophical egalitarianism is also supported by the personal nature of some philosophy questions. Questions about how to live, or whether there is purpose in the universe, and so on, are questions which cultural norms, especially in the West, grant individuals considerable leeway in deciding for themselves. Even in many strongly religious communities, behavioral conformity is not mistaken for agreement—in one's heart of hearts—on religious tenets.

A third answer is related to the second: *the public's lack of belief in philosophical expertise*. Yes, there are philosophy professors (though most people, even most college students, have never taken a philosophy course), and yes, it will be acknowledged that they know more about what other philosophers have said. But popular belief in philosophical expertise does not, I think, extend much beyond that.

One contribution to the lack of popular belief in philosophical expertise is the lack of consensus on answers to philosophical questions, particularly among those who consider themselves experts in philosophy. That there is such a lack of consensus is perhaps the only thing in philosophy on which there is a consensus.[1] Now it isn't as if the public is keeping close tabs on philosophy, reading various books and articles

[1] See, for example, David Chalmers, "Why Isn't There More Progress in Philosophy?"

and inferring from their study the discipline's fractiousness[2]—that's not how the state of the profession affects the public's beliefs about philosophy. Rather, there is no popular belief in philosophical expertise because of the absence of the kinds of things that would follow from such expertise: common knowledge and its institutionalized maintenance and transmission.

Compare philosophy with mathematics on this count. There is widespread agreement on the existence of expertise in mathematics. There is consensus on the answers to innumerable mathematics problems. There is a common store of mathematical knowledge that most educated people have. And there are institutions in place to preserve and convey this knowledge: primary and secondary mathematics education. Philosophy, by comparison, is sorely lacking in these.

Another likely cause of the lack of public recognition of philosophical expertise is that philosophers lack the visible markers of expertise common to many other professions.

Musicians have their musical instruments. Scientists have their labs. Engineers have their inventions. Doctors have their white coats. Priests have their black shirts and white collars and churches. Mechanics have their tools and their shirts with their names written in cursive in ovals. In short, the public is reminded of the expertise of these professionals by their special appearance, or the special places in which they work, or the special outputs of their work—when these things are "visible" to the public.

Philosophers do not have this. We don't have uniforms, we don't have special equipment, and we don't have a visible product. Our products, to the extent we have any, are ideas—and anyone can have ideas—or articles and books made largely inaccessible through paywalls, price, obscurity, and jargon. We have offices, but we do not see members of the public in them, typically, nor do we engage in any distinctive behavior there: we sit, we think, we type. Philosophers have their doctoral diplomas, but when we do choose to display them, it is typically away from public view.[3]

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[2] Note that the rare appearance of a philosophy professor character on a popular television show—Chidi on NBC's "The Good Place"—is the personification of philosophy's lack of consensus.

[3] But aren't we recognized as experts in virtue of being teachers of philosophy? This deserves more of a response than I can issue here, but my view on this is that insofar as this contributes to the idea of philosophers being experts, it is somewhat limited, contributing more, I think, to the idea of them being experts at *teaching philosophy*. Being an expert in teaching something does not make one an expert in that thing, in the sense of knowing more about that thing than a competent adult. For example, the desired outcome of a high school English teacher imparting her expertise about grammar to her students is that her students write grammatically. That is, if everything goes well, her students will grammar as well as she does.

The lack of equipment or uniforms or visible products may seem superficial. But we know better than to mistake superficiality for causal inefficacy, especially when it comes to public opinion.

In this section, I've noted that the idea that "anyone can do philosophy" is fairly common, and identified three plausible reasons for this: something like philosophical thinking is thought of as a good human activity by most people, people tend to think that the relative quality of fundamental philosophical views cannot be compared, and that there is no belief in philosophical expertise (owing to disagreement among purported experts in philosophy, and lack of publicly visibly markers of philosophical expertise).

Ultimately, the extent of the belief that anyone can do philosophy, as well as its causes, are empirical matters, and proper studies of these matters ought to be conducted. However, I don't feel like my speculations on the matter are groundless. Rather, they are based on years of experience talking with philosophers and non-philosophers about philosophy, and years of reading about philosophy in popular media, often from the perspective of non-philosophers.

4. Philosophy's Unconventional Achievements

What has philosophy achieved? (How's that for a little question to throw into the middle of a paper?)

I'm not going to pretend that there is some noncontroversial way to answer that question. Instead, I'm going to paint in very broad strokes what I take to be one popular account of intellectual achievement and see how philosophy looks in that context.

The most commonly recognized form of intellectual achievement is the correct answering of questions. Of course, there are some conditions on this. It's not as if what we do is correlate people's intellectual achievement with the number of questions they successfully answer. For one thing, we don't keep strict count of that. For another, not all questions count equally. One doesn't get much credit, if any, for easy questions, such as "What is $n + 1$?" for any n, no matter how many of those you can answer, or for trivia, such as "since its formation nearly 50 years ago, how many people have been members of the progressive rock band Yes?"[4] But providing answers that add to the store of human understanding, understood broadly (and acknowledging that the mushiness of this deserves its own separate inquiry), do count.

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[4] 19 (or 22 if you also count those who only played with the band in concert).

We can see this at the level of individuals and also collectives, like academic disciplines. When I've asked people, informally, which academic discipline is particularly representative of intellectual achievement, in the sense that the people working in the discipline have accomplished a lot (which I've asked people only informally), the top answers have been physics, biology, and computer science.

These are disciplines that can be characterized as taking up questions that are important to advancing our theoretical and practical understanding, for example: What kind of stuff is the universe made of? How does that stuff behave? What can we do with this stuff? How did we come into existence? How do our bodies work? How can we fix our bodies when they are not working as we'd like? How can we use technology to make our tasks easier? How can we use technology to answer our questions? And so on.

Furthermore, these disciplines are good at answering their questions. We can look at the history of their inquiries and see improvements in their methods and in the justifiability of their answers. We see convergence on both methodological and substantive consensuses, including consensuses on what is sufficient to overturn existing consensus. Some of their answers have informed the creation of effective practices (e.g., medicine) and tools (e.g., computers).

How well does philosophy do, according to this "correctly answering questions" understanding of intellectual achievement? There are only overly clever ways by which the answer to that is not *terribly*.

I've already mentioned the lack of consensus on answers to philosophical questions.[5] It is not unheard of to hear this related complaint about philosophy's stagnation: they've been working on the same questions for 2000 years and still haven't made any progress on them.

We have about as much inductive evidence as one could reasonably hope for that, as an intellectual endeavor aimed at answering questions, philosophy is a failure. The more I think about it, the more I am surprised at how little impact this failure makes on what philosophers do, or how they understand what they are doing when they do philosophy.

Many philosophers see philosophy as a truth-seeking enterprise, and see its value in that. David Chalmers, who in virtue not just of his intellectual interests but his running of PhilPapers, and who has perhaps a more informed view of the discipline than most, says:

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[5] See *all of the history of philosophy,* as well as, say, the disagreement registered in the PhilPapers survey, 2009. https://philpapers.org/surveys/results.pl . Michael Dummett, in "Origins of Analytic Philosophy" says, "It is obvious that philosophers will never reach agreement."

> *I think a case can be made that attaining the truth is the primary aim at least of many parts of philosophy, such as analytic philosophy. After all, most philosophy, or at least most analytic philosophy, consists in putting forward theses as true and arguing for their truth. I suspect that for the majority of philosophers, the primary motivation in doing philosophy is to figure out the truth about the relevant subject areas: What is the relation between mind and body? What is the nature of reality and how can we know about it? Certainly this is the primary motivation in my own case.*[6]

Widespread disagreement among philosophers over answers to these questions, and even over the methods by which to approach them, should make us skeptical that philosophy is really about figuring out true answers to them.

My love of philosophy and my love and respect for philosophers has motivated me to try to make sense—in a charitable, positive way—of why there are still people going into philosophy, or continuing with it, despite its apparent ill fit with its practitioners ostensive goals.[7] These are smart, interesting, and creative people. They've made philosophy their lives' work. Start with the assumption that this decision makes sense and work backwards: what explains it?

The money? *No.* The fame? *No*. The power? *No*.
Rather, I think there is a form of intellectual achievement according to which philosophy does well—even though it is one that philosophers themselves do not typically emphasize.

A form of intellectual achievement that philosophy succeeds at is the *creation of questions*.

It's actually misleading to say that philosophers have been working on the same questions for 2000 years. It is true that there are some questions philosophers have been working on for that long, but it is also true that there are more philosophical questions being studied today than ever before—because what philosophers have been doing all this time is creating questions. And when these are interesting and important questions, their creation, along with the hints we can provide about how to try to go about thinking about them, should be understood as intellectual achievements.

(A wonderful service project in the history of philosophy would be to timeline the creation of questions in the history of philosophy—if anyone is looking for something to do.)

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[6] David Chalmers, "Why Isn't There More Progress in Philosophy?", p. 11.
[7] Uncharitably: These people know the history and the relevant facts. How special must they think they are, that they are going to be the person to finally, at long last, get it right? This may say something about the character of the discipline.

There are at least four (non-exclusive) kinds of question-creation going on in philosophy, which I describe and provide brief examples of:

Reinvention – bringing attention to a forgotten or neglected question by asking it in a new way.

> -- Rawls's asking of "what type of agreement can justify a coercive regime?" was a reinvention of questions about political authority raised by earlier social contract theorists, but which in the decades leading up to *A Theory of Justice* had largely been neglected. It also constituted an innovation in the approach by explicitly bringing normative considerations to bear on the structuring of the initial choice situation.

Application – reformulating a version of a known philosophical question so as to apply it to a new domain and in doing so bringing new considerations into play.

> -- The question of what counts as appropriate behavior in war, as applied to autonomous robots and artificial intelligences. From what I can tell, few who work on this problem think that this question can be approached in the same way as it has been for humans.

Specification – showing that a known philosophical question is ambiguous or incomplete by making relevant distinctions and articulating the other questions whose answers are needed in order to clarify or complete the first one.

> -- multiple questions from the history of metaethics over the last century. See the flowcharts depicting the disambiguation of the question "Is morality real?" into a dozen or so further questions, in nearly every metaethics textbook.

Inauguration – asking a question that creates a new area of philosophical inquiry

> -- Thomas Schwartz and Derek Parfit's asking of what has come to be known as the "Non-identity problem" in the 1970s.

Those reading or hearing this paper have their own examples, I'm sure.

It is one thing to identify questions. It is another to explain why their creation should be understood as a kind of intellectual achievement.

We can start by noting that creating good philosophical questions takes knowledge, skill, ingenuity, and hard work. It is usually difficult. So it fits with common understandings of achievement.[8] But that is not all that needs to be established.

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[8] This aspect of it fits with the account given by Gwen Bradford in her *Achievement*.

I've been glossing "achievement" positively here,[9] so we can ask why creating philosophical questions is something worthwhile. For one thing, formally, it if the answers to questions are valuable, then the questions, insofar as they led to the answers, are themselves at least instrumentally valuable in that way.[10] Second, insofar as people value something like philosophical thinking, the creation of these questions is valuable insofar as they help structure and encourage such thinking. Third, unanswered questions indicate what we do not know. So insofar as knowledge of what we do not know is valuable—which it is, in various ways—such questions are valuable. Fourth, answered questions are valuable insofar as they provide examples and guidance for further inquiry.

Additionally, the idea that creating questions is an intellectual achievement is bolstered by an explanation often given for philosophy's lack of progress, what Chalmers calls "disciplinary speciation":

> *many new disciplines have sprung forth from philosophy over the years: physics, psychology, logic, linguistics, economics, and so on. In each case, these fields have sprung forth as tools have been developed to address questions more precisely and more decisively. The key thesis is that when we develop methods for conclusively answering philosophical questions, those methods come to constitute a new field and the questions are no longer deemed philosophical.*[11]

If the disciplinary speciation account is part of the truth about our intellectual history, then, if the other disciplines that have emerged from initially philosophical questions are of value, then the creation of the questions that prompted that emergence are thereby valuable.

Now, I'm not saying that the only way in which philosophy is an intellectual achievement is in its creation of questions. I'm just saying that it is truly excellent in this respect, and further that it is a valuable type of intellectual achievement.

Two further observations here. First, the idea that the value or importance of philosophy lies with its creation and posing of questions should not be all that unfamiliar, as it is akin to how Socrates understood the value of what he was doing.

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[9] This is not to say that whenever we use the word "achievement" we are praising what we're identifying, just that that's one way we use the word, and it's the way I'm using it. (Contrast: Hitler's extermination of six million Jews was quite an achievement.)

[10] One might press this analogy: does the value of a cure of a disease imply that the disease is instrumentally valuable? I think the answer is Yes. Does the instrumental value of the disease give us a reason to bring it about? Not if the only valuable thing it's instrumental to is its own elimination. It's in that way that the analogy is inapt to most of the questions philosophers create. The value in answering the questions is not just that it eliminates the badness of the question's being unanswered (indeed, it's not clear that they're being unanswered is at all bad).

[11] David Chalmers, "Why Isn't There More Progress in Philosophy?", p. 21

Second, I do not often hear philosophers today describe the value or importance of philosophy in these terms; rather, many philosophers understand a significant portion of the value of what they are doing as figuring out the true answers to philosophical questions.

5. Disagreement and Knowledge

Expertise in a domain involves knowledge. When those who claim to be experts in a domain disagree over central matters within that domain, that is often taken as evidence that the experts lack knowledge. Further, the lack of knowledge among experts in a domain is often taken to be evidence that there can be no knowledge in that domain—that is, that while the experts may have various domain-relevant opinions, there are no facts.

I believe this is what philosophy looks like to many outsiders, and that it is a mistake, as it overlooks a significant amount of substantive agreement and practical knowledge held in common by philosophers—even if we just look at what goes into the creation and recognition of philosophical questions.

People get distracted by the more visible disagreement. And that includes philosophers, who for various reasons (ranging from personality and interests to institutional influences such as the pressure to publish) focus more on what they disagree with each other over.

This more visible disagreement overshadows widespread (though of course not unanimous) agreement over philosophical tools (e.g., logic), the significance of some particular philosophical questions, the reality of particular philosophical problems (including the problems that a satisfactory philosophical account of X must address), the recognition that particular philosophical views are almost certainly false, and that we can get better at asking philosophical questions.[12]

6. Public Philosophy and the Three Mistakes

What does the foregoing have to do with public philosophy? Some forms of public philosophy contribute to each of these mistakes. In this section, I'll say how, and in the next I'll discuss why this is a problem for public philosophy.

Certain forms of public philosophy, especially but not exclusively those with low capability demands, reinforce the idea that anyone can do philosophy. The Institute

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[12] See *Philosophical Progress* by Daniel Stoljar.

for Philosophy in Public Life, for example, says, "anyone can do philosophy."[13] But individuals and organizations need not say those words to convey through their activities the idea that anyone can be a philosopher. At the extreme we have the idea that children are "natural philosophers."[14]

Off the bat, a skeptic might note that forms of "public science" do not appear to convey the message that anyone can do science. It might be asked, why is philosophy different?

It's different in just the ways I discussed when I first introduced the worry about "anyone can do philosophy." Philosophy is thought of, to some extent and at some level, as something everyone should do. People tend to think that philosophy isn't the kind of thing that, fundamentally, can be done better or worse, so quality-inspired barriers are low. And there is a lack of belief in philosophical expertise. That is a specific social context in which public philosophy takes place, and it is one that is relevantly different from analogous context for something like physics, or even music performance.

Consider an orchestra that puts on a free performance at a public park, and afterwards, they let members of the audience come up and play some instruments. This is an instance of "public music." Someone bangs on the timpani, someone else makes a squeaking noise on a clarinet, a third person waves a bow in the air as if it were a baton. Are these people making music? Probably not, but suppose we grant that they are. Even so, no one mistakes that concession for thinking that they are making music *well enough*. The sense in which post-concert audience participation suggests that "anyone can make music" is quite clearly not the sense of "anyone can make music *as well as it should be made*." If any of these audience members, in virtue of these activities, declared themselves musicians, they'd be thought quite mistaken.

Note how music differs from philosophy, culturally. There is no cultural expectation that everyone be musical. While people may think that taste in music cannot be adjudicated, there is nonetheless widespread acceptance of the idea that some musical performances are better than others. And there is certainly belief in musical expertise. There are various public forms of recognition for the adjudication of an honoring of musical talent. Further, musicians have visible markers of expertise: instruments, venues, performances, recordings, etc.

The same is true for instances of public science. Even if they exist to promote the idea that "anyone can do science," the context in which they take place make clear that "do science" here does not mean "do science well enough."[15]

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[13] https://philosophyinpubliclife.org/

[14] Pretty much every philosophy program for kids ever.

[15] Note, too that the sense (and examples) I have in mind of "anyone can do X" is not that of a lack of barriers to the studies required for X.

Philosophy lacks the contextual pushback that bolsters expertise in other domains. So when we hear that anyone can do philosophy, or that everyone is a philosopher, as we do, what's reinforced is that anyone can do philosophy, and that everyone is a philosopher.

Some advocates of public philosophy stress that philosophy doesn't become public philosophy simply when it is done near the public. Rather it has to be done *with* the public, that is, in a format that allows for the public to do philosophy in conversation with (at least in the abstract) the philosopher. That is appealing, but it is worth noting how this plays out in practice, and supports what I referred to earlier as metaphilosophical egalitarianism.

Consider essays at *The New York Times'* philosophy column, "The Stone." These are often accessibly written in engaging ways by professional philosophers, and sometimes receive upwards of 500 comments. From what I've observed, most authors do not engage with the commenters. Rather, the columns function as prompts for "philosophical" discussion among novices on a highly visible public platform free from any kind of expert assistance or adjudication. Success in this platform means garnering the "likes" of fellow readers, and so philosophical offerings are compared on the same basis as comments on a Facebook status update.

More interactive forms of public philosophy have to walk the balance between being sustainably populated—that is, typically, friendly and encouraging—and being critical. My evidence on this score is limited, but what I've observed (at philosophy talks for the public, at post-film panel discussions by philosophers, and philosophy sessions for children) is that these kinds of events regularly err on the side of sustainability, with little to no criticism of any member of the public's contributions. This failure of critical adjudication gives the impression that philosophically, everything that's said is on a par.

Many pieces of written public philosophy are on controversial topics. How is our society racist? Should we euthanize terminally ill babies? Should the cognitively disabled be thought to have the capacity to consent to sex? Those are topics taken from three Stone columns over the past few months. Not only are these topics controversial among laypeople, they are controversial among philosophers.

When philosophers take up these questions in public venues, they most often do so in order to answer them. But these are not easy questions to answer, even for philosophers, and even if the philosophers themselves find them easy to answer, there is no shortage of public and professional disagreement. On well-known topics non-philosophers may be able to pose plausible significant objections. That is a disaster for the public perception of philosophical expertise. If the philosopher is an

expert, and the activity the philosopher is engaged in as an expert is the answering of a question, then his or her answer to the question should be, from the point of view of the public, very difficult to object to well. Instead, on the topics on which philosophers seem most eager to stick their necks out on, well-known controversial topics, it is not unusual for it to look like (from the public's point of view) the philosopher is facing a serious challenge.

Note, too, that the choice to defend an answer to one of these kinds of questions, rather than to emphasize what kinds of questions need to be asked, often when the former can only be done more poorly than the latter, shows that philosophers themselves sometimes buy into the idea that we are in the business of providing answers. And this choice to do the thing we're worse at—answer questions—reinforces the idea that answering is more important.

When such topics are taken up in forums which allows for different philosophers to offer and defend competing answers, such as in public debates or in collections of essays in magazines or in online forums, the lack of consensus among "experts" is made even more vivid. Very rarely are steps taken to counter the impression this lack of consensus gives, that there is no real philosophical knowledge to be had.

I take it that in most instances, eroding the public's belief in the idea of philosophical expertise is an unintended (and even sometimes unforeseen) consequence of a philosopher's choice to engage in public philosophy. But others see the erosion of philosophical expertise as integral to the very idea of public philosophy. Sharon Meagher, co-founder of the Public Philosophy Network, says that "public Philosophers should not be understood as 'experts'":

> *At a time when philosophers often feel underappreciated and largely discredited by the public, it is tempting for philosophers to try to reassert themselves into various public domains by claiming to be experts in some subfield or another. For in our technocratic age where positivism still reigns supreme, credentialed, authoritative claims to knowledge tend to hold the greatest influence. Yet part of the role of the philosopher is to question the encroachment of science and positivistic understandings of truth into domains where it should have no or a limited role. In other words, philosophers should resist the label of "expert," given its technocratic valence, as public philosophy promises to provide an antidote to technocratic thinking. Indeed, the philosophers' public role should in part consist in encouraging public questioning of all authority, and such cannot be done if we claim expert authority ourselves.*[16]

[16] Sharon Meagher, "Public Philosophy: Revitalizing Public Philosophy as a Civic Discipline: Report to the Kettering Foundation" (2013) (p.9)

Presumably, Meagher and those who agree with her take explicit steps to weaken the whatever slight impression the public still has that the academic philosopher is an expert.

7. Why These Three Mistakes Are a Big Deal

I've described what I take to be three mistaken ideas about or related to philosophy, and how public philosophy contributes to them. Why should we care about any of this?

One reason is that philosophers *do* see themselves as experts. We believe that our training, study, knowledge, skills, methods, dispositions, and intelligence contribute to our superiority at thinking, talking, and writing about philosophy. Imagine we did not believe this. What sense could all of the time and effort put into our studies make? To the extent to which public philosophy encourages the view that there is no such thing as philosophical expertise, it encourages the public to see us in a way that does not fit with our self-understanding. It is disrespectful to ourselves and to each other to promote this idea. And in some cases it is disingenuous, a false modesty that ends up undermining our standing.

A fair amount of public philosophy involves philosophers attempting to offer and defend answers to highly controversial questions. Why should they think their answers are the correct ones? Well, for one thing, they have what they think are good arguments for their view. But of course, that is something they have in common with pretty much every other philosopher in history, including those who defend answers incompatible with theirs.

If we are honest, we must recognize that the apparent soundness of our arguments for our answers to philosophical questions is insufficient evidence for believing in them—because we know that most of the arguments in the history of philosophy appeared sound to their authors, and that most of the arguments in the history of philosophy cannot be sound. We need something in addition to apparent soundness, something like convergence or consensus.

But we also have excellent inductive evidence that we will not get convergence towards or consensus on a specific set of answers to controversial philosophical questions.

Philosophers know these things. Such knowledge should make us pessimistic about the prospects for an adequate defense of any answer to any philosophical question, and it should make us extremely cautious in publicly presenting any such answer. When philosophers engage in public philosophy to defend some controversial view

there is an almost inherent carelessness to it, or some egocentric bias, or some kind of dishonesty about the limits of philosophy.

If the foregoing worries are too precious for you, I've saved what may be the worst for last: that these mistakes are a threat to the future of academic philosophy.

Now you may be worried about the future of academic philosophy because you think academic philosophy is valuable. Or you might be worried about your future career. Whatever the reason you're worried about the future of academic philosophy, you should be fighting against these mistakes. For these mistakes together pose the question:

Since anyone can do philosophy, and since philosophy isn't that important, and since the so-called experts don't agree on anything, why should anyone support academic philosophy?

I've documented at Daily Nous too many cases of philosophy departments being threatened with closure. They are among the first to be looked at in times of academic budget trouble. This is no surprise when looked at from the point of view of the value of expertise, expertise which is undermined by some public philosophy. Philosophers have not promoted the idea that questions are valuable products of academic expertise. The public knows we disagree without any hope of resolution. So perhaps it is no surprise for people to be skeptical that it is worth paying us to do anything but teach.

I've also discussed at Daily Nous how philosophers fare relatively poorly compared to other humanities disciplines in grant competitions. Lately, philosophers did not even manage to snag 3% of the total humanities grants offered by the NEH.

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. I'm not saying we need special philosopher uniforms. But if you have any ideas, let's hear them.