

"The point is to change it"

Of weasels and women, or, what is public philosophy anyway?

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When I was asked if I would like to write something about public philosophy for this volume, my initial thought was: *OK, yes, I've done enough public philosophy to be in a reasonable position to say something about that.* Implicit in this thought was the idea that I had a fairly good handle on what 'public philosophy' was — good enough, at any rate, to be confident that I had done some. Like the hapless dinner guests hanging out with Socrates in one of Plato's dialogues, however, I swiftly came to realise that it wasn't this simple. Not only could I not come up with an explanation of what I meant by "public philosophy", but when I tried to think about the different occasions on which I have "done some public philosophy", I immediately ran into difficulties figuring out which things should count, and which should not.

For example, I specialise in the philosophy of gender, and in 2018 there was a public consultation running on reforming the Gender Recognition Act 2004, the legislation that enables some trans people to change the gender marker on their birth certificate. Together with two other philosophers, Lorna Finlayson and Rosie Worsdale, I wrote an essay aimed at the public that ran on the blog of the left-wing publisher Verso (Verso, 2018). We argued in favour of reforming the act to enable people to change the gender marker on their birth certificate based on a simple declaration of their self-identified gender, rather than having to submit 'evidence' to a panel of 'experts'. With the support of the Nottingham Institute for Policy and Engagement, I ran a session in Westminster for civil

servants, MPs, members of the House of Lords, and their staff, and co-wrote an associated briefing document with Ruth Pearce, a sociologist and an expert in trans health (Jenkins and Pearce, 2019).

I also met individually with civil servants from the Government Equalities Office to discuss the consultation. A key philosophical point that I made on each of these occasions, as well as in a subsequent book, is that we should not think that questions about how society should handle gender recognition can be settled by working out what a woman ‘really is’, and thus which people ‘really are’ women (Jenkins, 2023). Rather, it should be approached as a pragmatic and political question: which of the arrangements around gender recognition that we could adopt at present best promote people’s safety and dignity? This question, I have argued, is much simpler to answer, and points firmly towards reform.

Before thinking about it too much, I would have said that each of these activities should count as public philosophy. Yet in terms of their format, they were certainly very different. Some were in-person activities; some were written material; some were on the internet for anyone to read; some were open to a specific group of people; and some were literally me and two other individuals in a room. If we think that ‘public philosophy’ is philosophical activity that somehow involves ‘the general public’, then most of these activities wouldn’t count.

Perhaps, though, public philosophy is not about *reaching* the public directly — that does seem a bit too literal — but about something like ‘influencing public life’. That would include things like meeting privately with civil servants, because the work of the civil service is surely part of public life, if anything is.

But there’s a hitch here too — in fact, there are several. For one thing, some philosophy that has had a very great influence on public life doesn’t seem appropriately described as public philosophy. Especially with quite technical areas of philosophy, it is possible for philosophical work to influence people’s everyday lives significantly, but in an indirect way. Think of Alan Turing’s philosophical work on computation, which has had a far-reaching effect on so many aspects of society via its impact on computers (Wikipedia says he is ‘widely considered to be the father of theoretical computer science’, which sounds about right). I’m not an expert on his work by any means, but I’ve read some of it, and it’s hardly something most of us would consider to be public philosophy.

In the other direction, what about cases where a philosopher doesn't manage to change the direction of aspects of public life as intended? This is, for the most part, the case with the activities mentioned here. My impression — doubtless fallible — is that the responses to the public consultation around the Gender Recognition Act pointed towards reforming it in the direction of self-identification, which is also the outcome that my interventions sought to promote. This reform then didn't happen because it wasn't politically expedient for the government of the day — trans people are a convenient football in the 'culture wars' — and, unfortunately in my view, subsequent political dynamics have shifted us, if anything, even further away from reform.

If we want to think of public philosophy in terms of influencing public life, then, we will end up including more than perhaps we bargained for, and we will need to be happy with a pretty homeopathic understanding of 'influencing' for many of the things that we usually think of as public philosophy to count. Either that, or we will need to appeal, not to the philosophy's effect in the world, but on the intention of its originator. That, however, seems much too cheap.

For example, a scholar penning a convoluted and pedantic treatise that only a handful of their fellow academics are likely to read, let alone understand, might be convinced that a proper understanding of their views on justice would change the course of global politics, and might fervently hope that this will come to pass. But it doesn't seem right to say that they are therefore doing public philosophy.

Equally, someone might blithely jot down an argument about something like land rights or just war theory that, while fairly abstract on the face of it, is seized on by those who seek to dispossess or even exterminate a particular group of people, and used to lend an impression of legitimacy to their genocidal campaign. The philosopher here might be able to quite sincerely say that they didn't mean anything to *come* of it; they were simply working through a philosophical view. Now, suppose that this genocide was a well-known risk at the time the philosopher wrote, and that the philosopher was either aware of the potential connection to their work, or would have been aware if they had taken the time to think about it. In cases such as this, talking about the philosopher's *intentions* seems rather beside the point.

The philosopher's protestations might seem both more relevant and more reasonable if we imagine that the risks of wrongs to the targeted group of people were not knowable at

the time the philosopher was writing, but only emerged later on. Still, even in this scenario, the philosopher's work *did* influence events in the world at large, and it seems wrong to completely discount this fact when it comes to thinking about what kind of philosophy it is.

Overall, then, one's philosophical work can fail to have the effects one intended, and can have effects one did not intend, or even foresee. So there seems to be something odd about treating my intentions about my philosophical work's effects as decisive when thinking about its status as public philosophy or not. In fact, this seems like giving philosophers licence to be out-and-out weasels, sneakily disclaiming responsibility for the predictable consequences of what they say and write on the grounds that they didn't *mean* for those things to happen.

A similar worry also occurs if we think, not about a work of philosophy's intended *influence*, but, perhaps more simply, about its intended *audience*. Going back to the activities listed earlier, one thing they have in common is that they were not intended to just reach other academics. By contrast, when writing an academic journal article, one is usually anticipating that its only readers (if indeed there are any at all) will be other academics — and one writes accordingly. Similarly, when writing something like a textbook, one is mostly anticipating that it will be read by students. So maybe that's a simple, and fairly modest, way to characterise public philosophy: it's philosophy that's aiming to reach *at least some people who are not academics or students*. But of course, the mere fact that I wrote something with a wider readership *in mind* does not guarantee that what I write is at all *suitable* for this purpose or *likely* to indeed be widely read.

Might we try once more to get away from intentions? We could simply say that public philosophy is philosophy that *is in fact engaged* with by people outside the academy/higher education. As before, this opens up a potentially troubling amount of uncertainty. In my own case, for example, of all the philosophical activities I've engaged in, the one that attracted the most public attention was something that I hadn't been thinking of as public philosophy at all. In 2022, I organised, along with the philosopher Alexis Davin, a small online conference on trans philosophy. Although it was open to all — anyone could submit an abstract or sign up to attend — we felt it was unlikely there would be very many participants who were not academics or graduate students, and we certainly didn't advertise it much beyond the usual channels that such people tend to keep an eye on. However, a former philosophy academic made disparaging remarks about it on social

media, and this somehow became a news story in a national broadsheet newspaper (the substance of which really was as minimal as: an event is happening, and a person thinks it is silly).

I'm not sure what to make of this — was the conference not public philosophy to begin with, but then became public philosophy after the news story ran? That would pre-suppose that organising an event along the lines of a conference is the sort of thing that could in theory count as public philosophy. That is, we're not restricting the idea just to instances when one engages in an act of philosophising, such as giving a talk oneself. But even if we grant this assumption,¹ it seems peculiar to say that the publicity itself made a difference to the type of thing the event *was*, given that the conference itself proceeded in pretty much the same way it would have done if the newspaper story hadn't run (zoom security was little tighter, due to risks of trolling, but that hardly seems like the right kind of difference).

So it's a complicated question — perhaps even philosophical question — what counts as 'public' in the context of public philosophy? Does it mean addressing some philosophical work to (large audiences of?) non-academics? Or to people with some kind of public role, such as policymakers? In either of these cases, at least you would normally know whether you're doing it. But what if it is more to do with having influence? Or actually reaching a wide audience? In either of *those* senses, you could do public philosophy without knowing that you were doing it — at least, not until some (possibly quite distant) later date — and you could also find yourself doing public philosophy of quite a different kind than you would ever have intended (as when your work is used to support some policy or action that you in fact deplore). And all of this is without our even beginning to wrestle with the question of what makes something — some writing or activity — *philosophy* in the first place.

At this point, you might be wondering whether the difficulty of defining public philosophy is an *interesting* difficulty. It is fairly simple to point to something — anything really — and insist that we do not have an adequate definition of it. In fact, this might seem like the pet hobby of the philosopher with too much time on their hands. *So what, you might think, if we cannot give a definition of public philosophy? We know it when we see it, and that is quite enough to be getting on with.*

It's a good question to ask; sometimes, things don't admit of a clean definition, and pointing out that we can't find one doesn't really have any practical implications: a niche pastime

at best, and a waste of time at worst. It might even seem like its own brand of weaselling: *Making a difference in the world? No thanks, I'll just stay in my comfy armchair and think about what public philosophy really is.* I don't think this is one of those cases, though. As I've tried to demonstrate, we don't always know public philosophy when we see it; I don't, at any rate.

More importantly, if we find in the end (as I suspect we will) that no neat account can be given of public philosophy as some cleanly separated type of philosophy, then I think this *would* show something interesting, namely, that all philosophy is at least *potentially* public philosophy. This stance aligns to at least some extent both with philosophers known as critical theorists, who think that the job of the philosopher is to theorise the society they are in, which includes them and their philosophical activities; and with feminist philosophers, who have been sceptical of a sharp distinction between 'the public' — often associated with men — and 'the private' — often associated with women (Jenkins, 2024).

So the trouble we face in defining public philosophy should, I think, lead us to the view that it is wrong to think that philosophy happens in a bubble separating it from society, or that the ways in which our philosophy connects with society are totally under our control. If philosophers are thinking otherwise, we're really just kidding ourselves. And that way lies weaselling, for this self-deception may well be a convenient one, in that it seems to exempt us from the messy and often dispiriting business of thinking about how what we're doing fits into the world around us. Only it doesn't exempt us; nothing can.

If this is right, then it's *not* trivial or cheap to point out the difficulty of defining public philosophy, because it leads us to realise that it is not some distinct thing that can be neatly hived off from philosophy in general. Avoiding this mistake should help to keep us honest about the philosophy we do — *all* the philosophy we do.

What does it look like, then, to do philosophy in the absence of a fairy-story of separateness? This is a complicated question, and deserves a more thorough treatment, but here's the best I can offer right now. Although we may at times deliberately seek to contribute to public discussions we consider important, we should also understand all our philosophical work as at least potentially interacting with public life (whatever exactly that is), even if we feel this is unlikely in a particular case. And yes, I really do mean *all* philosophy, on any topic, however esoteric. Even if there is some philosophical research that in fact has no chance whatsoever

of impacting public life — and I think this is likely — my point has been that we are not in a good enough position to reliably identify it in advance.

Where we can discern points of connection between our philosophical investigations and our social context, or suspect there might be some, we should take the time and trouble to inform ourselves about this context, considering this to be part of our core task as a philosopher. We should write to be understood as widely as possible, on the grounds that we cannot predict who it will be relevant to. And we should remember that what happens next really isn't up to us.

Notes:

- 1 It seems like a pretty reasonable assumption to me, but if you don't agree, then think about one of the talks that was given at the conference, and transpose my questions to that instead of the conference as a whole.

References:

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