What Good Is Public Philosophy?

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October 19, 2019

Contents

Wikipedia, online magazines and newspapers, social media, and the podcast have, in a short time, rapidly increased the level of intellectual engagement the public wants and expects.

More than ever, those outside academia want to know what is happening in it—and, unsurprisingly, many of us on the inside are moved to cater to that desire.

Is that always a good thing? What are the perils and pitfalls of being a "public intellectual"—both for the intellectual herself and for the public she serves? And what is the distinctive good that public philosophy, in particular, can achieve?

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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ckHNqRM2HOk

So last year there was this thing called the college admissions scandal.

You probably heard of it.

50 or so parents were found to have bribed administrators and coaches to have their children accepted to colleges all around the country.

The reason you probably heard of it is that the story got drawn out in the op-ed section and the blogosphere because as each pundit tried to teach us, the fact that a bunch of people broke the law was not in fact the real scandal.

The crimes were only the tip of the iceberg.

The real true scandal was so enigmatic, so elusive, so deeply buried, that even after weeks in the press, commentators still felt called upon to dig some more.

In case you've forgotten, let me refresh your memory as to what the real college admission scandal was.

It was the problem of legal donations and the fact that they are tax exempt.

SAT prep classes, The fact that universities perpetuate a governing elite.

The fact that universities fail to perpetuate a governing elite.

Grade inflation, college sports, the corporatization of the university, celebrity parents using universities to launder economic status into social status.

The racism our universities fail to fight.

The economic inequality our universities fail to fight.

The fact that universities are not meritocratic.

The fact that universities are meritocratic.

The creeping credentialization of US society.

Rich parents spoiling their children.

There was more, a lot more actually, but I think you get the idea.

No one was going to be satisfied until the analysis of the scandal showed that universities were responsible for every ill of contemporary society.

That is somehow what the stories about the college admissions scandal had to prove.

The whole thing really upset me.

So I wrote to an editor I'd worked with at the New York Times proposing a response piece.

He said, go ahead.

I wrote and I wrote.

I wrote impassioned, defensive rants.

I vented my anger.

I sought revenge.

Sometimes I veered from indignation to optimism so quickly that the essay I was writing could count as a kind of record of the dissolution of my own mind.

I cried.

I lost sleep.

I was in fact too upset to write anything worth publishing.

The press on the college admission scandal broke my heart because I love the American university.

I owe my life to it.

Not my existence, that I owe to my parents, but my life, the way I live it, the things in it I care about.

I was heartbroken over the attack on the university and heartbroken over my own inability to stand up for what I believed in.

So let me not beat around the bush anymore, and let me tell you what I should have shouted in print a year ago.

I'll start with what universities are not for.

First, they are not for perpetuating the ruling or elite class.

Second, they are not for achieving social justice.

Perhaps they do perpetuate the ruling class.

I leave such pontificating to others. And maybe they ought to do more to establish social justice.

I leave such moralizing to others.

But those things are not what they're for.

Third, universities are not for making money, though they do call for careful financial stewardship.

Fourth, they are not for producing better citizens.

Fifth, they are not for producing happier human beings.

If I had to measure the worth of my classes and my students' subsequent civic virtue or life satisfaction, I couldn't afford to lose touch with most of them after graduation.

I'm sometimes saddened when that happens, but it never causes me to wonder whether their education was worthwhile.

Okay, those five points cover basically all of the criticisms levied against the university, which means that all the critics who said it was not doing its job had first failed

to identify what its job was. And as a professional philosopher, I can tell you that is step number one of the criticism process.

You can't be bad at something you're not doing.

Now, I want to grant that a university is easy to misinterpret because its innermost parts are hidden from view.

What's visible is who gets in and who's excluded, the fates of its graduates, clashes between townies and gownies, five-year completion rates, public relations catastrophes, IRS 990 forms.

If you go on a campus to visit, you see the buildings, but you don't see what happens inside them.

So imagine if you tried to understand museums by sitting outside and studying the demographics of who enters and who exits.

You might conclude that they existed to perpetuate the elite and that they should work more to achieve social justice.

Perhaps they do, in fact, do too much of the first thing and should do more of the second.

Nonetheless, your research will be missing something, very important about what museums are for, something that requires entering the museum and looking at the art.

Now, that doesn't really get the pundits off the hook because they tend to be college educated.

The real college admissions scandal, if I may, is the fact that so many people who attended them appear to have no idea what they're for.

So let me come out and tell you what a university is for.

A university is a place where people help each other access the highest intellectual goods.

A university is a temple to heterodidacticism.

Okay, an autodidact is someone who learns best on their own by teaching themselves things.

Heterodidact is a word I made-up, so don't feel bad if you don't know it. And it describes the rest of us, for whom learning and knowing is a social activity.

So while the college admission scandal was happening, I was teaching a class on Aristotle's scientific system.

What a crazy thing to teach, you might think.

Hasn't it all been surpassed by modern science? No, as a matter of fact.

But even if it had been, it's truly amazing to witness the birth of scientific thought.

Aristotle was the first to conceive that the changing, sensible, empirical world around us could be rationally systematized. And he did this in opposition to a tradition, beginning with Parmenides and culminating in Plato, that insisted such a project was in principle incoherent.

The world around us is unknowable.

Thought, Parmenides through Plato.

Aristotle proved that science was possible.

His books on physics, parts of animals, on the soul, on generation, corruption, et cetera, taken together constitute the most ambitious intellectual project a human being has ever undertaken. And he succeeded to an astonishing degree.

His most radical moves against his contemporary interlocutors are the ones that we've most tenaciously internalized.

The biggest intellectual victories are the silent ones.

They erase their own footprints.

So you might think Aristotle's irrelevant because he so thoroughly colonized your mind that his ideas just seem to you to be the way things are.

Aristotle is why you categorize things by quality, quantity, place, time, et cetera.

Why you see a sharp difference between the is of existence, something is in the sense of it exists, and the is of predication, something is blue.

Why you think of causation as a form of interaction.

Why you distinguish between destruction and other kinds of change.

Why you aren't bothered by Zeno's paradoxes of motion.

why you think something can be real and changing at the same time, why you divide reality into what's actual and what's potential, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

So in ethics, there's such a thing as Aristotelianism, right? Aristotelian ethics, which actually reflects the fact that Aristotle had a peculiar set of ethical intuitions that represent an alternative to the modern human rights-based ethical consensus.

In science, there is no such thing as Aristotelianism.

His victory there was so complete that he has erased the alternatives and erased his own name from the theory.

Okay, I'm now going to make a confession about that class.

I did not know the material I was teaching very well.

Aristotle's natural philosophy is not my specialization, and I intentionally chose readings among that material that I was least comfortable with.

Minutes before I walked into the classroom each Tuesday and Thursday, I had been buried in commentaries and confusion.

There was so much I did not understand about Aristotle's arguments against atomism.

But time was up.

I had to get in there and say something.

If you were in that class, you probably thought what I said sounded pretty good, pretty coherent.

Actually, it was.

But it wasn't all me.

I was looking at the students' faces, noticing how they paid attention when I was making sense, noticing when they didn't follow.

Their interest drew me out.

I listened to their questions and reframe the argument on the spot.

Sometimes an objection was so devastating, I had to reorganize a whole lecture on the fly.

Sometimes, when I just plain didn't know the answer, I'd just ask the question back to the class.

It's a little trick.

So teaching involves lots of tricks like that.

There's a kind of sleight of hand when you're teaching, where the part of the student is erased, and the teacher ends up getting all the credit.

Actually, that's a point from Aristotle's Physics, book three.

He says, the teacher isn't teaching if the student isn't learning, because it's only one activity.

Okay, don't go thinking this was some kind of subpar, slap-dash course.

This was one of the best courses I've ever taught.

Good courses have all the messiness of human cooperation baked into them.

That's what I wish I could have communicated to those embroiled in the emission scandal brouhaha.

I wanted to break down the walls around my classroom and throw a spotlight on it and tell everyone to stop talking, look, and listen.

It's happening right here.

This is what universities are for, reading Aristotle together.

All the arguments about elitism and corporatization and donations were as irrelevant as the ivy growing on the walls.

Okay, I can give you 100 more examples just like this, but I'll restrict myself to one more.

The previous quarter, I taught a class on courage, and we read Homer's Iliad.

I think the Iliad is one of the greatest things ever made by a human being.

But I hadn't read it in at least seven years.

Why not? What had been stopping me from picking it up? For that matter, why aren't I rereading it right now? The answer isn't that I'm too busy.

Professors are some of the least busy people in the world.

That is a dirty secret of academia, topic for another occasion.

The reason I don't read The Iliad all the time is that it is hard to read The Iliad.

Have you ever tried? It takes so much energy.

All those epithets, so many tendons being unstrung by spear points.

I mean, maybe you thought I was some kind of special human who just sits around reading The Iliad for fun, but I'm not.

I'm not that different from the students that I teach.

They get their energy from me, I get my energy from them.

That's how university works. And it's totally amazing that human beings can do this, that we can form intellectual communities.

If we didn't actually see it happening, human beings collaborating with nothing to bind them to one another but a shared intellectual interest, I think we would doubt that such a thing was possible.

These communities are far from perfect, a fact they inherit from the creatures who compose them, but they're wonderful.

Most wonderful is the manner in which the interest is shared, how the whole of energy and enthusiasm becomes more than the sum of its parts, eventually growing strong enough to vanquish a foe as formidable as the tedious, confusing intricacies of Aristotle's argument against atomism and on-generation and corruption.

A university is a world inside the world.

It's a haven, a bubble, and the college admissions scandal was about trying to pop that bubble.

My initial impulse was to see this as an act of aggression and hostility.

They're trying to blame us for everything.

But with almost a year of hindsight, I have begun to entertain the possibility of a different interpretation.

Maybe the sentiment driving the scandal mongering was not a destructive impulse at all.

After all, one reason you might try to pop a bubble is that you want in.

As I mentioned, the journalists and pundits spearheading the attack did not lack for experience of the academic world.

They had all been to colleges, good colleges, most of them.

One of them, the New York Times journalist Brett Stevens, went to college here at the University of Chicago with me.

We were in classes together.

I remember one class in particular with Leon Kass on Aristotle's Nicomachean ethics.

It was one of the best intellectual experiences of my life. And so at first I thought indignantly, people like Brett Stevens should know better.

But then I realized, People like Brett Stevens do know better.

Maybe that's the whole problem.

Maybe they feel left out.

As college education spreads to a wider and wider swath of the population, we end up with a larger and larger population of non-academically employed college graduates, which is to say, exiles from academia.

I guess many of you are such exiles.

Maybe we've underestimated the longing, the nostalgia, the feeling of being shut out of the party.

A lot of the animus directed against colleges and universities invokes the word exclusivity, usually on behalf of the many qualified undergraduates who are not admitted to, say, this school or Harvard or Princeton.

But the people invoking the word are never the excluded teenagers, but rather the elite adults, many of whom spent their formative years at such schools.

What I'm saying is maybe there's a reason why they're so able to channel feelings of exclusion from academia.

They miss us.

Okay, one of the hardest questions in political philosophy, considered quite generally, is about the relationship between exclusivity and community.

We face it now with immigration being arguably the single most sensitive political issue worldwide.

Both Aristotle and Plato agreed that you had to limit a city-state to a reasonable size by which they meant somewhere in the vicinity of 10 to 20,000 people in order to make shared governance and genuine community possible.

UChicago currently clocks in at about 17,000, and that number only includes students.

If Plato and Aristotle are right, we can't keep growing without losing something.

But we don't always have to face the exclusivity question in its sharpest form.

Technology in the form of social media, podcasts, online newspapers, e-mail, and blogs has allowed many of us to reach out without leaving our bubble.

The most amazing thing about the internet, in my view, is the way it allows us to layer communities on top of one another, so you can live in two worlds at once, or more than two.

So I've come to think that one intelligible response to the college admissions scandal is for those of us who can do so to reach out, to share our intellectual energy with as many people as possible.

We can welcome you, even if you're not on the inside. And while it's true that social media can be a nasty place, You could hardly be in a safer position than being a tenured professor.

If anyone should be emboldened to speak out, it's us. And for a philosopher, the opportunities to speak out seem to grow by the month.

People want to hear from us.

There's a weekly philosophy column in the New York Times.

It's amazing if you think about it.

Like 20 years ago when I was in grad school, such a thing was unimaginable. And it attests to a kind of appetite for philosophy that's out there now.

It's really something new, and I guess not.

My guess is it's not unrelated to the exiles from academia problem.

You all want to hear from us.

That's great.

I think being open to forming new layered communities is the best way to preserve the walls of the old precious one.

So I do lots of public philosophy writing, including a monthly column at The Point.

I'm on Twitter.

I appear on podcasts.

I give talks like this one.

My next book will be Public Facing.

A few hours ago, just before this talk, I got the following e-mail.

This is representative of the kind of e-mail I get flowing in like a steady stream.

Okay, here's the e-mail.

Dear Dr.

Agnes Callard, hi, I'm an undergraduate philosophy student at Tehran University.

I want to know, how do I have to read Plato? I mean, which dialogue I have to read first and which one last? And which of his translations in English is more valid and reliable? I have to tell you, we enjoy reading your ideas in the column of the Point magazine, the public philosophy, especially the one called Persuade or Be Persuaded.

That's an e-mail I got today.

So my feeling is if I get and answer emails like that, I'm doing my part.

But if I'm honest with you, it's not out of moral obligation.

I'm not a very altruistic person.

Ask anyone who knows me, there's people who know me in this room.

So if I'm standing here talking to you, know there's an ulterior motive.

There must be something in it for me.

Is it honor, fame, and money? I do not get paid to give this talk. And when I am paid, the sums are not large.

I will admit, I like being in front of a room.

But if I had really wanted a life of wealth and fame, I would have chosen a different career.

Fame is clearly in some ways good in that it can indicate the value you have for other people.

But fame is also noxious.

It has a tendency to corrupt one's priorities, poison one's relationships, and make a person incurious, hypersensitive, and defensive.

Living in the public eye, I haven't done it, but it looks exhausting.

I don't want it.

Augustine said, give me chastity, but not yet, and I feel that way about fame.

I'd like to be famous after my death.

Ideally, I'd like my fame to begin about 50 years after I die.

That way, my children and grandchildren are also spared the impact.

Posthumous fame has all the benefits and none of the dangers of living fame.

That's the best of both worlds in my view.

So my hope is to do really exceptional philosophical work worthy of being remembered after my death.

Okay, but where does public philosophy come in there? So first of all, if I'm trying to talk to people who haven't been born yet, it helps not to be too parochial.

When I do academic philosophy writing, I'm addressing people who are in many respects similar to me.

This allows me to presuppose a lot, which is helpful communicatively, like talking to your close friends.

But the result is that I'm inside of a framework that is sure to sound dated in 100 years.

Communicating with people you've never met is good training for communicating with people you will never meet.

But the point is deeper than that, and it has to do with this sort of immense value, but also extreme elusiveness of simplicity.

So let me illustrate it by giving you a whirlwind tour, like two-minute tour, of what you could call the hyper-simplified history of philosophy.

If I say Socrates, a likely association is the unexamined life is not worth living.

For Plato, maybe it's the forms.

For Aristotle, empirical science.

Augustine, the will.

Descartes, I think, therefore I am.

Hume, reason is a slave of the passions.

Adam Smith, the invisible hand.

Hobbes, you got to get out of the state of nature by any means necessary.

Locke, human rights.

Leibniz, we live in the best of all possible worlds.

Spinoza, God is nature.

Kant, the categorical imperative.

Hegel, thought is historical.

Mill, utilitarianism.

Nietzsche, the revaluation of values.

Wittgenstein, philosophy is when language goes on holiday.

That's totally false, by the way, but that's what he thought. Okay.

Sartre, bad faith.

David Lewis, modal realism. Okay.

If you're a historian of philosophy, you spend your whole life fighting to complexify the caricatured, simplified version of each of those philosophers that I just kind of telegraphed to you.

But if you're not a historian of philosophy, those simple caricatures are what you're likely to know about each philosopher, which tells you something.

We hold on to thinkers when they offer up one big, simple idea.

Okay, maybe two if you're really lucky.

But that's what you contribute intellectually to the world.

Now here's the thing.

If you write for an academic audience, you become something like a historian of yourself.

You get lost in the intricacies of your own ideas.

It's not that you can't see the big picture.

You can probably see many big pictures, many ways of framing or boiling down your ideas to a variety of essential points.

It's really hard to know what the world will take away from oneself.

A lot of those thinkers that I listed would be surprised to learn what they ended up contributing to posterity. And that's kind of tragic, like Moses not being allowed to enter the promised land.

I'm fine with my fame coming or not coming after my death, but I'm not fine with never knowing what my big new idea is.

It would be sad for me to die knowing Kant's idea and Aristotle's idea, but not Agnes Kellert's.

I don't want to be left out of my own party.

So I need to put myself in a context in which I'm regularly challenged to say what I think as simply and compellingly as possible.

So my selfish motivation for doing public philosophy is that it offers up for me the possibility of peering around the corner of my own annihilation.

Thanks.

Audience questions

And now I'll take questions.

Yeah, Abe.

Abe: This wasn't the point, but what you were saying about the college admission scandal, I didn't quite get because Basically, the point was, people are focusing on all these things like corporate interests, a non-jeric system of how colleges work.

But what they should be focusing on is what the point of universities is, and the fact that so much great stuff goes on in them.

But say the university didn't let in anyone with an Audi belly button.

you know, a lot of people would probably write columns and say they should stop prohibiting people without e-bellybuttons from coming to universities. And then someone could say, you're missing the whole point here.

The point is, look at all this great stuff that's happening in universities with all these e-bellybutton people. And they wouldn't be missing the point, the people criticizing universities, because they're not talking about the point of the university, they're talking about how it's managed.

Agnes: Good, fair point. And so I think it's totally legitimate to criticize the management of the university on many, many points.

But what I was specifically addressing was the sort of scandal mongering.

So there in fact was a very concrete criticism that could have been made, namely a whole bunch of people broke the law.

That was the problem. And then they were in fact caught and tried and et cetera, right? So that's like what happened.

But then people were like, no, look, the university system is broken.

There's something fundamentally wrong with it, right? It's not doing what it's supposed to do. And there, I think it is important to think about what is it actually supposed to do, right? If we're going to criticize it in that kind of fundamental, like fundamentally broken way, and the All the criticisms were really criticisms about the relationship between the university and the sort of society in which it's situated. And the ways in which the sort of problems that infect one can also infect the other. And I think those are, it's not that one can't make those points, one can, right? But there's a way, the diversity of diseases, right, pointed to like a failure to start with saying, okay, what are we trying to do with the university? And then how can we do that well?

Abe: But don't you think part of the point is social justice? Like, where it started is giving people knowledge and helping them foster a community in which they can understand stuff.

But I mean, there's other concerns to be had, including social justice.

Agnes: Right. And I granted that.

I said, maybe universities should do more to, you know, try to mitigate some of the problems in the society at large, in particular, maybe they should be worried about ways in which they might be amplifying those problems, right? So I think that that's right, but in some way I think even if they didn't do any of that, it would be a problem, but it wouldn't be a basic brokenness of the university because that's, yeah, that's the point.

Okay, other questions?

Audiance member #1: You tried to suggest that we could have multiple communities at a time, that we could live in multiple...

You said that some technologies can help us do this.

Can we actually replicate the settings of a university via the internet and things of that nature? I do not think I will be reading as much Aristotle as I'm currently reading 40 years from now, no matter what I'm doing.

Agnes: Right.

I think that's, so one thing is like, I think the most honest answer is that I don't know.

But it's not as though, we certainly haven't done it yet.

So I'll tell you about various kinds of experiments that I've tried.

So I taught an online course for alumni once in which we had online discussions via like Zoom, do you know Zoom? Like it's like this sort of, it's like Skype, but there's like a lot of faces in boxes.

Kind of like, no, you're not going to get the reference.

Okay, forget it. Yeah.

You can imagine that.

So it's sort of like an attempt to have like a kind of online like group conversation, right? And I found, for that same course, we had a chat board where people could post stuff, and the conversation was better than the chat board, but it was nowhere near as good as a conversation in which people were actually present in class. And it was interesting to me, like, why would it matter whether the faces were on a screen or in front of you? But... And there are actually a lot of people studying this right now.

It's like a really hot topic in Silicon Valley because they're like, we'd be so much more efficient if we never had to meet each other.

So can we try to understand why in-person meeting makes any difference at all over Skype or whatever? I personally have a theory about one thing that people have not noticed about that, which is that I find that with meetings that take place either by e-mail exchange or by Skype or by Zoom or whatever, I form way fewer memories about those than I do with in-person meetings.

I don't know why that is, right? So it could just be me.

But I have this feeling that the kind of poverty of the sensory information just means that the experience has a less impact on us. And so even things like color and smell and all this stuff that's coming in here that has a kind of cognitive, lasting cognitive effect, at least on me, right? So that would be one, a little theory, and that also suggests like, it's going to be hard to fix that, right? So I don't tend to think that there's going to be a solution where the internet sort of just plays that role.

However, like that student from Tehran who emailed me, right, what I told him is, first and foremost, in terms of how you read Plato, you need to find some people to read it with you, okay? And you'll be surprised if you just approach them and like someone in your class and say, do you want to read Plato with me? They'll probably say yes, right? Just because they'll be surprised. And they'll be like, you know, if you can't catch people off guard, they'll agree to a lot of stuff, right? So, one question might be not how does the sort of the online community function as a replacement for in-person community or a version of in-person community, but how can it like foster those sorts of communities? Like how can we create things online that get people...

So like there's the thing that made me happiest when I heard about my point column is that there's a bunch of grad students at the University of St.

Louis who have a reading group where they get together to discuss my point columns. And that made me so happy.

Like that's the sort of thing I think needs to happen where it's like, okay, I wrote this thing, I write these columns, but just reading a column isn't philosophizing, right? But if people, if that provides an occasion for people to get together, that's, and those people would, I mean, okay, these are all philosophy grad students.

But yeah, I think what we need to do is then also think in terms of how the internet can reorganize society to create Sort of like actual in-person communities would be my view, but maybe we'll come up with some version of the internet that doesn't have that problem, but I sort of agree with you, I'm skeptical.

Audiance member #2: Yeah, I think it's a very difficult task to try to...

14

state what a university is for in a prespicuous way.

Agnes: I agree.

Audiance member #2: The way that you presented it, you said it's not for this, it's not for this, it's not for this.

Agnes: Yes.

Audiance member #2: And then you stated what it's for.

Agnes: Yes.

Audiance member #2: But in the way that you present what you stated as it's for, I couldn't come up with a way to figure out when a university has failed a student.

Agnes: Yeah.

Audiance member #2: Could you say a little bit more about when you can recognize that a university has failed in its responsibility?

Agnes: That's a really good question.

So I think that the, so what I said universities are for is learning together. And I suppose a university would fail a student if they weren't learning, because in effect, like both parties have to be participating in order for the learning to be happening.

But there are lots of reasons why a student might not be learning.

But I think that kind of almost all of them in one way or another do fall under the scope of the university in the sense that like, suppose a student has mental health issues, right? Well, there's a reason why we have mental health services on campus.

Like because mental health issues can get in the way of learning. And so it's our responsibility to deal with that, to make sure that they can learn, right? So I would say the university is failing if the student isn't learning.

But now you might ask, okay, how do we know whether the student is learning or not, right? And that is hard. And I think that like at that point we need, we're gonna need, if we wanna be able to answer that question and to sort of like measure the success of the university, which we may have reasons for wanting that, I'm not completely sure.

I suppose we would want to get better at it, so that would be a reason why we would want to know, but there's a question whether sort of whether that project of wanting to get better is 1 that the university engages in at that level, or is it just like me wanting to get better? So, like...

I get information about what my students are learning or not from talking to them, right? And from course evaluations, but also just from them coming to my office hours and being like, I didn't understand that.

I get it in during class when there's a sea of confused faces, right? That's information for me that I'm not doing my job, that I'm failing the students because they're not learning, right? So there are a lot of different forms of feedback, but at the top university, at the sort of the top level of like, is the university as a whole potentially failing the students? I guess I think maybe that's sort of a question that's a little bit above my pay grade in the sense that I would need to be an administrator who thinks about that question.

You see what I mean? I don't think about that question.

I think about the question, am I failing my students? And I have ways of judging that. And so it's not that I think there aren't ways that the university can fail.

I think there are.

But in order to be an expert in that question, you kind of need to be an administrator.

Audiance member #3: Yeah.

You said one thing a university does not is to promote better citizenship.

Agnes: Correct.

Audiance member #3: Can you say something about the, do you think there's any kind of political content at all there or any sort of public responsibility, some sense of the public good? I mean, just not a very good example, but you would probably You teach Plato, you teach Aristotle, maybe you would teach The Souls of Black Folk by W.E.B.

Du Bois and prefer that to teaching, say, Mein Kampf.

There would be, is there no notion of content that leads in one direction or another?

Agnes: So there's a lot of ways in which There's stuff in Aristotle's ethics that's in some ways more objectionable than Mein Kampf.

So let me give you one of those views.

So Aristotle thought that not all human beings could be ethical creatures or have ethical worth or value.

Now, he didn't think that you could be ruled out on racial lines in particular, but he thought it was climate, people who were born in certain places, because people who were sort of too far north, like European people, they were too, the climate was too cold and it made them sort of bold but stupid. And then people who were from warmer, sort of Mesopotamian places where climate was too warm and so they were smart but cowardly. And Greece, luckily, was the perfect environment for virtue.

Okay, so this is from the Politics, Book 7, I think.

He thought of virtue as something that you acquired, and some people just don't acquire it.

If you don't acquire it, your life just doesn't have value or worth.

So the kind of post-enlightenment basic ethical principle that I think is even shared by Hitler, okay, it's just the principle of, is that in some way, moral worth is something you get for free just by being born as a human being.

Now, certain someone like Hitler might say, but there are certain things that could then disqualify you, right? If you belong to certain groups, that then counteracts.

But for Aristotle, it wasn't that there were certain things that could counteract it.

was just like you never had it in the 1st place, right? And for a while, actually, when I first realized how deeply this was ingrained in Aristotle, and so in terms of the people who can't have virtue, in addition to people born in certain places, it's also true of all women, but then also most of the people who live in a city, even the men who are born in the right place, because they never get educated, the sort of manual laborers. Okay.

16

When I first sort of realized the extent of this view in Aristotle, which wasn't until I was like my second year teaching here, I thought I shouldn't teach it anymore. And not for civic reasons, but just because I'm like, well, this isn't an immoral theory, so I shouldn't teach people to be immoral, so I shouldn't teach it. And then over time I came to change my mind about that, because I thought, I realized we can actually learn a lot from it.

There's a problem with our own ethical understanding that there's a kind of lacuna that Aristotle can help us fill in, even though we don't want his theory, because it has a lot of objectionable bits to it.

But any case, this is just to say, I am sort of alive to these questions of like, is the moral theory corrupt or not? But I'm not necessarily averse to teaching something that's corrupt.

I've never read Mein Kampf, but I I've heard enough about it that makes me think it would have very little intellectual value to teach it.

Like there wouldn't just wouldn't be much of interest in it.

Though I could imagine it being taught in certain courses here that are focusing on like a certain kind of historical angle or whatever.

So I don't think it would be ruled out that book could be taught at this university.

Does that show that I'm not trying to create good citizens? No, actually.

I mean, Because you might well think that good citizens are able to approach a variety of texts and take a certain critical stance and all that.

Look, I would hope that universities make people more fit for citizenship.

This is related to the question ABAS.

Just like I would hope they would improve things, social justice.

It's not that I think those aren't potential benefits that they can provide.

They are, and we should try to provide them to some degree, but it's not fundamentally what they're for.

It's almost like you could imagine if you have a laundromat or something on the block, the laundromat, by existing on the block, stands in all sorts of relations, political relations to the community, and they might support certain charities, and they might, right? But then there's something fundamentally that they're doing, which is laundry. And so I think there's something that we're doing, and it's pretty specific, and it's education. And we think it's good to be educated for a bunch of reasons, but there is, I think it's important, I guess, It's important in resisting the tendency to blame universities for everything to get clear on what exactly they're trying to do. Yeah.

Audiance member #4: So your response to the question, when is a university failing its students, specifically that if maybe they're not providing the mental health services that they should be, then they might be failing their students, made me think and realize that the real college admissions scandal was saying, In the same sense that students with mental health issues are not getting the education they should, students without $1,000,000 to bribe the university are not getting the education that they should.

There's this class of potential students who the university is failing by not educating them. And that kind of made me think that maybe the level of this criticism of the university is precisely at the administrative level that you kind of wanted to remain agnostic about.

So maybe you're very good to speaking to what is the point of, you know, Professor Keller teaching philosophy, and that is educating her students.

But, you know, someone in the business school at this university, the professor there has a rather different objective in some senses.

yeah, they're educating their students, but they might also be interested in having research assistants help them sharpen a model that they have, or something like that.

So maybe I'm wondering if maybe what you're asserting is the goal of the university at large is actually the goal of specific departments within the university.

Agnes: Good.

So when I said heterodidacticism, I meant that to include a bunch of different relations of which I only illustrated one.

So I think that, so first of all, it's not true that my only kind of learning thing that I engage in is like teaching undergraduates.

For one thing, sometimes I engage in just learning from undergraduates.

But for other thing, I teach graduate students, but I also write and I do lots of stuff that some of it is not that connected to my teaching here, but much of it is connected.

And, I think likewise for a business school professor who, a couple nights ago, I had this sort of like public conversation with a business school professor.

Maybe she's a bit unusual because she's a kind of psychologist who works in the business school, right? But, she's asking questions about the nature of human motivation and how it responds to incentives. And she's doing like empirical work on that, and she's teaching classes on that, right? And like she's in a university because she feels she can understand that stuff better with other people, right, by in some ways collaborating with other people.

So I think of the university as a kind of collaboration for the sake of knowledge, intellectual collaboration that happens at a variety of levels.

Now, I guess I don't think, so maybe it was wrong if I led the impression that the administration has some other project besides that.

I think it's more like the administration has the job of supervising that at a very, very high level.

That's the only project, like, the administrators are not allowed to have their own goals for us, because they're not really doing the thing.

In some sense, it's the students and the faculty, whatever, who are, like, engaging in the activity, and then that's being like that has to be sort of monitored and make sure that it's functioning by the administration, but doesn't have independent, I don't think they have independent goals, but that doesn't address your question about the other students that we're not teaching, right? So, I think that...

18

I guess I think that the job of the university is to teach the students who are the students of that university, not to teach all students or to teach all possible students, or to teach all students who are at the intellectual level of this class of students. And in that way, the university wouldn't be that different from the laundromat, where the job of the laundromat is to clean the clothes of those people, the people who bring their clothing to that laundromat, right? Not to clean all the clothing in the world.

So I guess I don't think that a university is failing in its mission if there exists students who are not educated by that university.

Though I think there could be forms of like deciding who gets in and who gets out that might be wrong or unjust in some ways.

So I want to grant that.

But I don't even know, like suppose we could double the size of the University of Chicago without losing anything.

I suppose we could do that.

The University of Chicago, by the way, more than most universities of its caliber has expanded. And I take that to be good.

I support the expansion, though not unlimited expansion.

But suppose we could double it.

Would it somehow be pursuing its mission twice as well? I don't know, because I guess I'm not sure that sort of we can aggregate education in that way.

Like, well, now we've done twice as much educating.

It might just be a good thing to do because in general, I don't know, if you have a good functioning organization and you can keep it functioning at a larger level, maybe there's a general principle you should do that.

But I don't think it would somehow be a failure to not do it or something like that.

So I guess I think, I guess I think, I still think that the goal is this kind of shared collaborative intellectual project. And the job of the administration is to make sure that that's functioning at the highest level. And then, there are justice issues that are going to show up with respect to who gets to participate and who doesn't.

But those are in some way tangential.

Agnes: Yeah.

With respect to the people who are alumni, no longer involved, but might have a yearning.

get back in the ring, so to speak. Yeah.

I was wondering if their motivations are more that they want to engage academically speaking, or it's more they want to be able to see themselves as an intellectual. And I understand that posturing might be a stage on the way to, you know, understanding the value of academia.

But there's a worry with respect to public philosophy that they get stuck somewhere in the middle.

They see themselves as an intellectual, but they don't get all the way to seeing the value.

Agnes: Yeah, good.

So yeah, so you've kind of predicted my response a few ways in, I mean, in terms of I'm a fan of posturing in the sense that I think posturing is how we get to actually doing the thing.

I think that I guess I sort of suspect one would need actual data to support this kind of claim, but I sort of suspect it's not an accident that it's of journalists who are feeling the pain here.

Like being a journalist, and I know this because now doing some public philosophy writing, it's sort of like being a little bit like a journalist, right? there is, it's a kind of intellectual pursuit.

Like it's kind of close to academia, but not quite there, right? Like when I write a column or something, there are always so many arguments and problems that are just right in the background. And I could go on and on, this could have been the paper, but in the column I get to just ignore all those, like with a little bit of kind of fancy rhetoric and oratory, right? And I'm kind of good at that particular thing, right? So that when the person reads it, they're like, they think I've sort of achieved something.

argumentatively, but I can see all the holes.

If this were a philosophy article, there's just holes everywhere, right? And so there, that's sort of me saying, oh, I get that if I were just doing journalism in a way, I would feel like there's something more that I should be doing. Okay. And am I in some way, by producing this kind of journalistic philosophy, am I supporting people in kind of getting only to that stopping point? Maybe. And I think there are real questions here about demographics and age.

So I suspect that if I were to look at the impact of my writing, it's going to have the most chance of having a genuinely philosophical impact on younger people. And that The older you are, this is actually true of academics too, not just, like one gets fixed in one's ways.

I can feel it happening to me. And I fight it. And the more susceptible you become to a kind of thinking that you've achieved something and you can be done there. And that's because you feel death coming and you're like, I better achieve something before then.

So I bet, at least now I know this.

So the temptation to be like, at least now I know this gets greater and greater as you get older, right? And so in terms of like, who is going to be benefited, I think I would, people are really different. And so I think, but I do think that like it's people who would think of having a discussion group about it that are more likely to get something out of it.

But also, what really helps for me is like Twitter, because I can write something and then people will just get up in arms about it and to kind of start yelling at each other about it. And sometimes I can just step back and kind of watch.

It's fun. And there, so what Twitter does is it creates at least sometimes a kind of space where like it opens the piece of writing.

It prevents it from being sort of sealed shut on itself. And so, the more we can have that an interplay between sort of pieces of writing and then conversations, and the more it would be great if a lot more of our conversations on Twitter were about those sorts of things, right? And so that it could be like...

Maybe there is some posturing and maybe there is some sealing oneself in, but sort of along the way, if people are doing that and bouncing off each other, there could still be a kind of, that it wouldn't be the piece itself that helps, but it would be the engagement that it makes possible, say.

But honestly, I'm not sure.

It's an experiment for me.

In my first column, I basically raised this worry. Yeah.

Audiance member #5: Okay, thank you.

I was just not sure I felt like you really answered for me the question, what is the good of public philosophy? And so I guess like, I think it sounds like what you're saying is that it's something like extending the role of the university as facilitating this kind of cosmopolitanism in a larger.

Agnes: Yes.

That's the good for other people.

I also discuss the good for me.

Agnes: Yeah.

Audiance member #5: But I'm just wondering if like that's a good thing and if it's true and I guess like sort of like throw in a smattering of like historical sort of concerns, right? So like funnily enough, I'm TAing right now a class in which we just read MineConf. Okay.

astonishing in a way how there's this kind of like smattering and kind of like amalgamation of kind of Kantianism and Nietzsche and sort of ideas that are employed within it. And kind of like there's some sophistication to it.

It's not just like a stupid text. And then of course you've got like Plato and Dionysius or whatever and then Aristotle.

Like there's this question of whether or not like the philosophy in the public sphere has good effects.

Agnes: Yeah, good, right.

So maybe if Nietzsche, maybe if, sorry, maybe if Hitler had a little less philosophy, right, he wouldn't have produced Mein Kampf. Yeah.

So I suppose that for me, the question, the way I would first pursue that question is like, what is a good effect? Like, that's a philosophical question, right? And it's sort of, I think it's easy to think you don't have to ask that question when you are discussing a text like MineComp, because you're like, well, look, here's a guy who murdered millions of people.

That's clearly bad.

So now we know what bad is, so we don't know, we don't need to worry, we don't need to think about that anymore.

Let's just figure out how to not bring that about or something.

And, you know, I think It's less that I think learning and knowing improve the world.

I hope they do.

But that presupposes an order of priority.

Like it presupposes that there are other things that are more important than learning and knowing. And that we're trying to bring those things about.

like non-killings. And it's more like, I think that understanding like the world, the universe, the human condition, our place in the universe, everything from all to our emotions, all that, that's like a basic function of what it is to be human. And to engage in that is like to live well.

But sometimes, particular acts of engaging in it might have bad results, right? So, it's I don't like I think it's reasonable to ask whether, in a way, Indigo's question about...

are you sure that doing public philosophy actually does lead to heterodidacticism, right? That I think is like, I'm very vulnerable on that point and be like, yeah, maybe it's an empirical question.

How does one know? Because one doesn't get the kind of feedback that one does with students, right? But the question like, does it improve the world considered independently of whether there's learning? I'm less worried about that because it's like, I think learning is intrinsically valuable.

So in effect, it's an improvement in and of itself, I guess I would say, if I'm achieving it.

Agnes: Yeah.

Audiance member #6: For me, if I could think about this scandal that you were first talking about, the principal concern for me is exclusion.

Agnes: Right.

Audiance member #6: And I think that's where a huge amount of the anger in our society is right now.

Agnes: Right.

Audiance member #6: And so for me, this question of whether the university doesn't perpetuate exclusion, exclusion from exactly the kind of thing you're talking about, that is conversation.

collaborative learning, whether the university doesn't have a responsibility to somehow think about that and how to ameliorate this exclusion that is such a profound bill.

Agnes: I agree.

Audiance member #6: So, yeah, I applaud the fact that you were doing this blogging and all of this other stuff, but then I'm thinking, well, who exactly has access to blogs? And who exactly is are your interlocutors.

Agnes: Well, that's why I gave you that example from today.

This is a student from Tehran, okay, who I wouldn't have, there are students in St.

Louis who e-mail me.

Last week I was at the University of South Dakota in Vermilion, okay, where it's a big university, but they have 10 philosophy majors. And 150 people came to my talk, most of them not philosophy majors, people who otherwise wouldn't have access to me, say, right? Because they go to the University of South Dakota, not here, and they don't study philosophy. And so it's not just blogging, it's also, I think, giving talks is also a big part of it.

Even I run a late night debate series called Night Owls here at the university where a lot of students who aren't philosophy majors come and engage in philosophy, right? So I think there are a lot of different ways to break down walls, right? But there is a tendency with respect to the way that got discussed in the media to focus on the question of admissions, right? And I guess my thought is like, look, if you put all the pressure there on admissions, you can have discussions about social justice, right? But we're not going to be able to let everyone into the University of Chicago.

That's just not a plausible way to remedy the exclusion problem.

That is, these kinds of institutions are by their nature exclusive in that way.

Now, how can we be less exclusive given that fact is sort of my thought.

My thought is we can use technology, but also, I mean, the technology of airplanes too, right, of going somewhere and giving a talk.

So I think you're absolutely right.

It is a real problem.

But I think that the sort of exclusion that you're talking about, I guess my thought is that it isn't just about an exclusion of status or posturing, that there's actually a deep desire on the part of many people to share an intellectual life. And that we should think about this sort of exclusion problem at that level of abstraction.

Agnes: Yeah.

Audiance member #7: This is kind of pushing on similar lines, but I guess I'm wondering, so given...

If you adopt the view, as you seem to be doing, that education is and ought to be just about the intrinsic enjoyment of the intellectual experience, what is the justification for having a selective admissions process based on academic merit at all? How does that change? If we're not here to be trying to do something that goes beyond the walls of a university, why not just let Why not just have an open lottery process or like a first come, first serve? How do you square your account at the university with the current way that it's set up?

Agnes: Yeah, that's a great question.

So, and I'm not sure that I can.

That is, I'm not, as far as what I've said, so like here's something you might think.

You might think some people are better at learning than others. And so you're going to have a better university if you get better learners in there. And that admissions picks out those better learners.

I don't actually think this, but I'm just saying that would be a justification for the current procedure.

Suppose we couldn't justify the current procedure.

That is, suppose, as I think in a certain way, there isn't really such a thing as better learners.

There could be a lottery or there could be this other system.

It's not clear that one would be better than the other.

So it's not clear the current system would be wrong or problematic.

It's just that it would be equally good to have a lottery.

So recently, there was a forum in the Chronicle of Higher Education that I participated in on meritocracy, but not my piece I'm referring to.

Another person, Anastasia Berg, who's a grad student, graduated from here, wrote about admissions lotteries. And she argues in her piece like we should have admissions lotteries.

So I commend that to your attentions if you're interested in that question.

So it's a nicely argued piece.

You're only going to be able to, if you have UChicago, you have to log in through the thing, because otherwise you won't get, it's gated, unfortunately.

But let me say something about the question of being good at learning.

So it's something I think about a lot. And right now, oh, Marin was there a few days ago.

I gave a talk called There's No Such Thing as Being Good or Bad at Philosophy at Northeastern University Downtown.

I mean, uptown on the north side.

So I think, at least with respect to philosophy, I don't believe in the idea of there's being such a thing as a talent or a skill at philosophy. And I have a big argument as to why that's true.

But that's what I do, philosophy.

Maybe there is such a thing for math.

Maybe there is such a thing for other subjects.

Maybe I have to say with respect to learning languages, right? As someone who's pretty good at learning languages, but who has spent a lot of time around people who are really, really, really good at learning languages, It seems to me there is such a thing as being good or bad at learning languages.

So it may be that whether someone is good or bad at learning actually depends a little bit on what subjects you have, right? And how you think about those subjects. And one reflection you might have as a result of that is maybe we should have more of the subjects that you can't be good or bad at.

Maybe we should focus on those subjects, right? I am somewhat, I have some inclinations in that direction.

But I don't feel like I have the expertise to make the claim about other fields.

But I do make it about philosophy that there isn't such a thing as being good or bad at it. And so if we were letting people in only for the purpose of doing philosophy, then I don't have an argument as to why it would be worse to have a random system, but I don't think it's wrong to have the system that we have.

You seem puzzled.

Do you want to ask a follow-up?

Audiance member #7: Well, I guess perfectly, I guess I just take a very different view about this sort of intrinsic versus extrinsic.

Like it seems to me that education is intrinsically very enjoyable and a wonderful experience, but that a university is premised upon the assumption that like the reason why we're letting certain people in is what they're going to now do with that education and how they're going to bring it into the world. And so I guess I'm struggling with like why we should adopt this idea that like I mean, it seems to me like we're not devaluing like how the idea of intellectual enjoyment by also saying that education has these important external or extrinsic benefits. And I'm wondering, I guess, why you're making that move?

Agnes: Good.

So first of all, I don't think it's for the sake of enjoyment.

That is, it may be enjoyable, but I think even if you didn't enjoy it, it would still be, learning would still be valuable, 'cause it's just valuable to learn.

So I think that if learning We're not, if people who had learned stuff were not valuable for society, we wouldn't have universities, right? So, the reason why our whole society supports universities is that this thing that we're doing has uses, right? But that doesn't mean that it's the place of the university to see itself as...

doing all of those things, right? It's almost like, it's like there's a market for the university in the society, right? And so the university pops up.

There's a market for the university to do what it's doing, namely learning, right? But I guess I think it's almost like one of these paradox, like the paradox of hedonism, where if you go for pleasure, you don't get pleasure.

It's like, the way you get those benefits is by treating learning as an end in itself. And so it's not that I think everyone ought to always treat learning as an end in itself.

One last question.

Agnes: Yes, go ahead.

Audiance member #8: So how possible is public philosophy? It seems like when you're writing your public philosophy pieces, you're trying to remove a lot of the philosophical content to be able to put it out there.

Or do you not see it that way?

Agnes: I don't quite see it that way.

I see it as like figuring out 'what is the one point I want to make here?' So it's really about simplification. And a lot of the bit that you don't see that I really enjoy and surprisingly have gotten out of it is the interactions with the editors of the magazine who give me comments, and they're like, I didn't get this, and I can go back and forth,

and it's really different from academic writing where that doesn't really have like you get comments.

You get counter-arguments and stuff.

But with academic writings, when you get referees objecting, what they're really doing is just asking you to put more and more epicycles into your paper.

But with the column, it's really like one of the conversations between you and the editor where they're trying to understand your point and telling you what is standing in the way of their understanding your point.

What I've really come to appreciate with this process is editors at these places like The Point, The New York Times, New Yorker, are people are like really good conversation partners. And so what I'm doing there is I'm trying to get down to the main point, the main question. And that means I have to set aside a lot of other kind of intricate, interesting points where if this were a philosophy article, the referees would be like, you need to answer these 17 questions. And so the editorial intervention goes in the opposite direction from the academic editorial intervention. And I do think that is philosophical, but I think it's a kind of It's a kind of pressure in a direction that philosophers usually don't get.

That's really the thing I value about it, is the pressure in the direction of simplicity.

Pretty much every other context I'm in, including this very conversation, the pressures in the direction of complexity, right? As I'm speaking to you and answering your questions, I'm complexifying the talk that I gave, and I'm adding up the cycles, and I'm making distinctions, and I'm, right, that's just the way it goes, and I think that's really good, and that's philosophy, right? But there's something really valuable about being pushed in the opposite direction, and there otherwise I've found very few that actually do that.

Okay, thank you guys very much.

The Ted K Archive

Agnes Callard
What Good Is Public Philosophy?
October 19, 2019

University of Chicago Division of the Arts & Humanities.
<www.youtube.com/watch?v=ckHNqRM2HOk>

www.thetedkarchive.com