Why Philosophers Shouldn't Sign Petitions

Our job is to persuade by argument, not by wielding influence.

Agnes Callard

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Recently I was asked to sign a petition opposing the deplatforming of philosophers on the basis of their views on sex and gender. Deplatforming is the academic branch of cancel culture — offense-based professional exclusion from forums like conferences, speaking engagements, journals and books. The petition argues that professional and social sanctions directed at the content of a philosopher's speech — even when the subject is sensitive enough that speech stands to cause harm — compromise core values of intellectual inquiry.

I refused to sign, because I believe that petitions, regardless of their content, compromise core values of intellectual inquiry. Here's why.

Whether you call it a "petition," an "open letter" or a "public statement," this type of document is distinguished by the fact that after stating and arguing for a position, it lists the names of people who endorse the position. The petition aims to effect persuasion with respect to what appears in the first part not only by way of any argument contained therein but also by way of the number and respectability of the people who figure in the second part. Such a document tries to persuade you to believe (that it is right to do) something because many people, some of whom are authorities, believe it (is the right thing to do). It is not always wrong to believe things because many people believe them, but it is always intellectually uninquisitive to do so.

The problem here is not that what many believe can be false, though that is a problem. The problem is that even if it's true, the fact that many believe it doesn't shed any light on it *why* it's true — and that is what the intellectually inquisitive person wants to know. Is this problem mitigated by the fact that the list is not about sheer numbers because authorities appear on it? I think intellectually inquisitive people do gravitate toward those with expertise, because they are in an especially good position to answer our questions. But this goes only for experts taken severally. One expert is a learning opportunity; being confronted with an arsenal of experts is about as conducive to conversation as a firing squad.

There is something aggressive about the way in which voices gain strength and volume by being joined together. Numbers generate a pressure to believe that isn't grounded in explanatory force, because having more and more adherents to a view doesn't give rise to better and better accounts of why the view is correct. Philosophers ought to be especially sensitive to introducing this element of belief imposition into our culture. As a philosopher, I want my influence to be philosophical, which is to say, I want to bring people to believe only what they, by their own lights, can see to be justified; I don't want them to believe something because (I am one of the) many people who think it.

The idea that "the many" cannot be philosophical goes back to Plato's dialogues: Socrates' interlocutors frequently resist his counterintuitive conclusions as violations of "common sense," and Socrates regularly replies, "why should we care so much for what the majority ("hoi polloi") think?" (Crito 44c.) Socrates wants to know *why* the view is true, not *who* or *how many* hold it.

I think there is a Socratic variant of the Hippocratic oath. Consider the fact that most of us tend to be ready with medical opinions in the context of casual conversation — we all think we know more than we actually do and overgeneralize from the one time our aunt had that problem. Doctors have to hold themselves to higher standards, lest they do real harm when people follow their recklessly given advice.

An expert understands where her expertise runs out; unlike the layman, the expert knows what she doesn't know. Much of the job of the philosophical expert consists of exposing the degree to which all of us — philosophers and laymen alike — are inclined to wrongly arrogate philosophical knowledge to ourselves, often under the heading of "common sense."

Just as doctors must commit to not doing any bodily harm, philosophers must commit to not doing a certain kind of epistemic harm. It is unacceptable for a doctor to use — or even advise someone to use — a medically unsound procedure. Persuasion by majority or authority is an unsound way to inquire; the employment of such a procedure constitutes a kind of philosophical malpractice.

Consider a counterargument: Doctors cause bodily harm all the time, for instance to themselves if they engage in risky sports activities. Or consider the doctor who punches someone in the face, breaking his nose, in a bar fight. Whatever he is guilty of, it won't be medical malpractice. Doctors are not always acting in their capacity as doctors; they needn't always be out to maximize health. Likewise for philosophers. So what if petitions don't employ philosophical methodology?

This is a reasonable point. Plausibly, the philosophers who write and sign petitions needn't conceive of that activity itself as a philosophical one — they wouldn't use petitions as teaching tools in their philosophy classes. I grant that philosophers should sometimes take off their philosophical hats. Nor is it plausible to insist that we employ the same methods inside and outside the classroom.

But ask yourself, in this case, why philosophers would be removing their hats. It's not a matter of the audience's being unwilling or unable to entertain a philosophical mode of argumentation — they are speaking to philosophers. Nor is it a matter of philosophers engaging in extraprofessional activity — on their off hours, on summer vacation, maybe philosophers don't feel like arguing; we are talking about an intramural, professional discussion of the ethics of the profession.

We'd never approach questions such as "Are possible worlds real?" or "Is knowledge justified true belief?" by petition, so why are we tempted to do so in the case of questions around sex, gender and hurtful speech? The answer is that the latter question involves *real* feelings and *real* people, and it is about something that is happening *now* — for all these reasons, it strikes us as being of grave importance. The petition writers are thinking to themselves, *this time it really matters.* I think it is a mistake for a philosopher to take the importance of a question as a reason to adopt an unphilosophical attitude toward it.

One thing that is distinctive about philosophy is that unlike other disciplines, it is philosophical all the way down. "What are mathematical objects?" and other such

foundational questions fall under the purview not of the discipline in question but of philosophy. Science doesn't ask, "What is science?"; philosophy asks this, as well as asking, "What is philosophy?"

I am not saying that philosophers should refrain from engaging in political activity; my target is instead the politicization of philosophy itself. I think that the conduct of the profession should be as bottomless as its subject matter: If we are going to have professional, intramural discussions about the ethics of the profession, we should do so philosophically and not by petitioning one another. We should allow ourselves the license to be philosophical all the way down.

"But I need to get people to see that excluding certain voices is not the way to create an inclusive intellectual environment." Then argue for it! If you strip the list of signatures off your petition, you'll find that you have an argument on your hands. The argument was there all along, but only when shorn of the appeal to authority does it invite counterargument — as opposed to counterpetitioning. Philosophers value having opponents worth listening to; we shouldn't be trying to sort people into teams of the like-minded.

Philosophical argument may not always bring about the largest number of mind-changes in your audience — the award on that front would go to mass propaganda of some kind — but it represents the kind of belief acquisition that we as philosophers are committed to: intellectually honest, conducive to knowledge, nonaggressive, inquisitive, respectful.

There is no greater threat to intellectual culture than the thought that when it really counts, when it actually matters to us, we philosophers give up on doing philosophy. If we don't believe in what we're doing, no one else will either.

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