ABSTRACT: In the sixteenth-century book *Utopia*, Thomas More argues that philosophers can play an effective role in the public sphere. This article builds from More’s argument to develop a theory of public philosophy centered on dialogue or rhetoric. It contrasts this public philosophy with the disciplinary form of philosophy that emerged in the twentieth century. The discipline constitutes philosophers as experts and limits them to a dialogue only with their peers. By contrast, public philosophers can be in dialogue with anyone involved in a public issue. The article discusses some key challenges to doing public philosophy. It then gives an account of the methods and central features of field philosophy, one kind of public philosophy.

KEYWORDS: applied philosophy, discipline, field philosophy, impact; public philosophy

I. Introduction

THE PHILOSOPHER HAS ALWAYS had a fraught relationship with the polis. Plato’s *Republic* opens with a discussion of the place of philosophy in public affairs, a drama about the dangers of questioning traditions and authorities. Socrates asks, “What is justice?” But the meta-question is whether this question can even be asked in a public way; for, to do so, begins down a path that can threaten the powers that be.

Hannah Arendt notes that in a polis, affairs are “decided through words and persuasion and not through force and violence” (Arendt 1958, 26). Speech (“words and persuasion”) is the stuff of philosophy, and only when matters are governed by the rule of law can philosophy have a chance to become active as a public, rather than a private or secretive, practice. In a Hobbesian state of nature, a reason-giving dialogue is just more fodder for the club or the ax.
So, only in a polis can philosophy potentially play a public role, but only in a certain kind of polis can this potential become actualized. In the opening pages of the *Republic*, Socrates confronts the personifications of dogma, brute force, and tradition—the perennial enemies of philosophy understood as open-minded dialogue about matters of importance. Words and persuasion easily dissolve into indoctrination, propaganda, and authoritarianism.

By Book VI of the *Republic*, Socrates has come around to fantasizing about philosopher kings piloting the ship of state with the one true understanding of the guiding stars (realizing full well that this is a fantasy if not an absurdity). Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) counsels a move in the opposite direction: a strategic withdrawal from the public realm, where the thoughtful turn inward to tend to small communities of virtue, wait for mass culture to burn itself out, and then re-emerge to try again at the (perhaps impossible) task of making a philosophical polis. Hegel pushes the point further with his remark that the Owl of Minerva flies only at dusk: philosophy can characterize the age that was but is impotent and unable to shape the current age or what is to come. In sum, each of these philosophers despairs at the prospect of philosophy playing a role in public life. Philosophers can either take complete control over public decisions or hide away.

But might there be a path for philosophy between totally dominating the public realm (philosopher king) and totally abandoning it? In this essay, I consult Thomas More’s *Utopia* to think through this question. First, I use *Utopia* to make a distinction between private and public forms of philosophy. Private philosophy is a kind of monologue where philosophers purport to have the answer and deliver it in a canned speech that is always the same regardless of the context. By contrast, public philosophy is a dialogue where philosophers must improvise in reaction to and in collaboration with their interlocutors. Next, I argue that disciplinary philosophy (the product of the nineteenth and twentieth-century drive toward specialization) is a kind of private philosophy, and, in turn, that contemporary and next generation forms of public philosophy must significantly depart from what I call ‘disciplinarity.’ I close with a discussion of field philosophy as one form of public philosophy.

II. Utopia: Private and Public Philosophy

Thomas More’s *Utopia* was first published in 1551. It begins with Raphael, a fictional character, having just returned to Europe from his travels to the island of Utopia. He regales More (a character in his own book) with tales of how much better life is in Utopia than in the kingdoms of Europe. More is impressed and tells Raphael that he must convince the rulers of Europe to change their policies. He says that a “true philosopher” is “public-spirited” and should direct his or her intelligence to public service. Raphael sees this as a fruitless task, because it would require persuading people to critically examine deeply held assumptions.
As he says, “Kings have no time for philosophy” (More 1999, 83). Like MacIntyre, Raphael counsels withdrawal from the public realm.

More’s reply provides the touchstone for my understanding of dialogue in philosophy, especially as it takes shape in “field philosophy” (see Briggle 2015; Brister and Frodeman, forthcoming). More thinks there is room for philosophy in the public realm and, to that end, makes a distinction between two kinds of philosophy. Raphael practices a speculative philosophy that “makes everything to be alike fitting at all times.” In other words, his speculative philosophy seeks standardized methods or universal theories that could be applied the same way to any problem, regardless of context. There is, however, “another philosophy . . . which recognizes the play that’s being staged, adapts itself to playing a part in it, revises what it has to say as the drama unfolds, and speaks appropriately for the time and place” (More 1999, 83).

Let’s call this other kind of philosophy public philosophy and reframe Raphael’s as private philosophy. Public philosophy features a kind of ‘dexterity’ or ‘accommodation’ (that is, of improvising or revising in order to speak appropriately in the context at hand). Following a metaphor developed by More, if a comedy is on stage, it will do no good for a philosopher to come out reciting a monologue from a tragedy, even if those lines are from a superior play. Doing so will “spoil and corrupt the play that is at hand.” So too in the polis; if the policies and opinions (the play) that rule are bad and you cannot root them all out: that doesn’t mean you should refuse to participate in government, any more than you should abandon a ship in a storm simply because you can’t control the winds. . . . Instead, you must attempt an indirect approach and must make every effort to handle matters tactfully. (More 1999, 84)

This is the key point: public philosophy begins with a kind of relinquishment. If you are to think together with others in the public realm, then your control over the circumstances is quite limited. You must begin from where your interlocutors are and see if you can follow the path toward wisdom together. Leo Strauss notes that to “speak with a view to the capacity of the vulgar necessarily means . . . to accommodate oneself to the particular prejudices of the particular vulgar group or individual whom one happens to address” (Strauss 1988, 178). This is the unspoken message of the Platonic dialogues. The genre, if you will, of the dialogue is about a give-and-take that cannot be scripted, because speech comes from the unpredictable uniqueness of different people. The play metaphor (as discussed above), then, is not quite accurate unless we think of it as an improv. Like jazz sax players, public philosophers go with the flow, seeking to influence the song on the public stage even if it hits lots of sour notes.

The other critical point about public philosophy is that judgments are made in the fray of the actual situation at hand. Public philosophy is done, for example, in city hall with decision makers and stakeholders. Private philosophy is often
done with fellow philosophers where there is no intent of influencing the public. Raphael says this private form is the only way to really do philosophy, because once philosophers are involved in actual public debates they will be ‘infected’ by society’s “wicked ways.” The language of ‘infection’ shows how private philosophy is meant to be pristine, to be kept pure by being isolated behind walls capable of holding out corrupting influences. This gets back to that curious phrase about “everything to be alike fitting at all times.” The pure philosophy of the private realm must be unchanging like Platonic Forms. To change is to be corrupted.

Raphael was certain that he had the right answers. This is similar to Socrates’s image of the philosopher king who knows the right direction to steer the ship of state. That means that for Raphael’s philosophy to ‘work’ publicly, it must serve like a blueprint for society. He is the expert with the answers and the public must conform accordingly. More thinks that this is too dogmatic or rigid. You must, he says, make “allowances for time or place.” The ‘perfect’ products of private philosophy will fall on deaf ears if they are just plunked down in the public sphere without any attunement to context. So, the art or ‘tact’ of public philosophy is about finding ways to make wisdom shine for a particular people in a certain situation facing a specific problem. From the point of view of private philosophy, this is about “dirty hands” sullying the pure essence of speculation. But More wants us to see it differently: the craft of dialoguing with anyone and everyone is the very stuff of philosophy.

More’s public philosopher is like a handmaid or helpmate, seeking to ameliorate problems in the polis. As I will suggest below, public philosophy is like field science and private philosophy is akin to laboratory science (see Frodeman 2003). That geology or ecology cannot attain the same precision (or perfection) as a controlled laboratory experiment is only a problem if we unthinkingly adopt the standards of the lab as the only standards of legitimacy. So too with public philosophy. If public philosophy cannot live up to the ideals of timeless, leisured speculation, perhaps there are other philosophical ideals worthy of our aspiration.

III. Dialogue, Disciplines, and Philosophy in the Twentieth Century

In this section, I bring the distinction between private and public philosophy into our contemporary society. I will argue that the twentieth century witnessed the rise of the discipline as the new orthodox or hegemonic form of philosophy. Disciplinary philosophy, I will suggest, is very much like Raphael’s private philosophy in its rhetoric. That is, it addresses a group of like-minded friends (disciplinary peers); it recites lines from the same play no matter what play is actually being performed on the public stage. This tone deafness is what so often makes disciplinary philosophy irrelevant to live public issues. Similarly, I will
suggest that More’s ideas can help us think about contemporary forms of public philosophy as alternatives to disciplinary practices.

Let’s start this modern chapter with another utopian story, one that helped us to get where we are today: Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis*, published in 1624. In More’s utopia, life is blissful because the people are virtuous. By contrast, in Bacon’s utopia, life is good because science and technology are highly advanced. People lead lives of comfort and ease that are made long and healthy by state-of-the-art medicines. The progressive engine of Bacon’s utopia is a quasi-private laboratory space of research and development. There, specialized scientists invent new cures and conveniences and release them to the public in a controlled manner designed to bring about beneficial impacts and prevent negative ones.

It is difficult to overstate the ramifications of this modern utopian vision. It slowly came to take hold in institutions like the Royal Society and the National Institutes of Health and more generally in industrialism and consumerism. As Arendt (1958) would note, the quest for convenience and control via science and technology has mostly displaced speech and action as the premier political activities. In their place, modernity has largely substituted two non-dialogical forms of activity: increasingly incomprehensible scientific discourses and the logic of the “invisible hand” or market. The ‘public,’ understood as the realm where commonly understood speech happens, has given way to impersonal social and economic transactions. In short, there are many challenges today to even conceiving of a ‘public’ let alone to actually practicing philosophical dialogue in the public.

Specialization plays a pivotal role in these challenges. Of course, by its nature, the polis relies on specialized roles for its citizens. But, at least in its ideal, it also hinges on universal participation: that everyone can understand and participate in the affairs of the commonwealth. This ideal of early modern democracy has always been at odds with its other ideal of the invisible hand. To momentarily create an artificial dichotomy, consider this clash first in terms of the *political economy* and then the *knowledge economy*.

First, relating to political economy, the division of labor and “invisible hand” of the capitalist market create a society where people become increasingly dependent on products and processes that no one can understand or speak intelligently about through words and persuasion. Consider, for example, grasping and articulating the complexities entailed in building the 5G network or developing fuel efficiency standards for the American automobile fleet. Managing the consequences of market processes (what Arendt called “the unnatural growth of the natural”) has become the purview of a bureaucratic administration or “the visible hand” (Chandler 1977). This is now taking shape as the rule of algorithms as humans exempt themselves from systems they cannot fathom.

Second, in terms of the knowledge economy, Bacon began a process of hypertrophic specialization for what was then simply known as philosophy or
natural philosophy. This process took its decisive institutional form with the advent of the research university in the late-nineteenth century. The university came to exercise a near monopoly on knowledge production and its certification (see Frodeman and Briggle 2016). The newly forming sciences came to define and carve this space along the fault lines of disciplinary identities such as physics, biology, sociology, etc. Let’s call this ‘disciplinarity,’ as the discipline became the political unit for the flow of resources, the policing of legitimate knowledge, and the (re)production of new generations of knowledge workers.

Bringing these threads together, the terms “knowledge production” and “knowledge worker” are meant to signify the ways in which the knowledge economy interacts with the political economy. The logic of this interaction, foreshadowed by Bacon, was given more explicit formulation by Vannevar Bush in his 1945 blueprint for the National Science Foundation, *Science—The Endless Frontier*. Scientists conduct ‘basic’ research by following their curiosity without any thought of application to social needs. They deposit the knowledge they discover into a peer-reviewed reservoir. Society can then find ways to apply that knowledge to serve the ends of health, wealth, employment, security, and happiness. The scientists’ dialogue, in other words, is delimited to the realm of fellow experts via the mechanism of peer-review. Their responsibility is correspondingly limited to the act of producing certified knowledge.

Across the twentieth century, philosophy came to understand and organize itself along this same model of specialization (Frodeman and Briggle 2016). It became one region or territory set alongside other specializations. Philosophers became experts, or what we might call sophists, in the sense of those proffering answers. And they too followed their curiosity, similarly assuming that somehow later on that would prove to be socially beneficial. As a result, their understanding of dialogue was similarly constrained to fellow experts. Rudolph Carnap put this in the same terms as Bush: “philosophy leads to an improvement in scientific ways of thinking and thereby to a better understanding of all that is going on in the world, both in nature and society; this understanding, in turn, serves to improve human life” (Carnap 1963, 23–24). Philosophy would not just model itself on basic science but put itself at the very base of basic science. Needless to say, it would be far removed from any contemporary public concern.

Disciplinarity is an institutionalized form of ‘private’ thinking among like-minded friends espoused, as discussed above, by Raphael. It is a kind of strategic withdrawal from public life. Raphael simply gave up on the prospect of helping society—his path was one of permanent hermitage or total disconnect from public life. Disciplinarity, by contrast, is premised on a strategy and serendipitous logic of the invisible hand—that somehow later on all the work done by scholars will emerge into the public sphere and do some good. It is better, Carnap said, for the scientist to retire to the lab and invent a cure than to hold the hand of the
sick. Philosophers adopted the same logic—better to retire to the discipline and perfect our speculations than to minister in real time to the public.

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, applied philosophy emerged as a supposed alternative to this model. The results have been mixed. Whether it represents an actual alternative hinges on the question of dialogue or rhetoric. One way to do applied philosophy keeps the same dialogical form of disciplinarity. It will talk about a contemporary issue (e.g., a proposed wind farm or euthanasia) but it will continue talking with fellow philosophers in the pages of peer-reviewed journals and in specialized jargons. In this way, it makes “everything to be alike fitting at all times.” That is, disciplinarity, including this kind of applied philosophy, may appear to contain a great deal of diversity (Kant scholars, analytic philosophers, political philosophers, etc.) but as a matter of dialogue and rhetoric it is largely the same. It is generally addressed to fellow academics in the key of expert-sanctioned discourse, which is often incomprehensible to the public. Often, the public issue is treated like unrefined ore, to be processed and transformed by scrubbing away all the ‘non-philosophical’ tailings (economics, science, etc.) to get to the real, pure philosophy.

Daniel Callahan (1973) called this “disciplinary reductionism,” or the practice of distilling the “philosophical essence” out of a complex real-world issue, which is then treated with the familiar concepts and tools of the disciplinary expert. The purity and control won by this distillation come at the cost of relevance and engagement with the stakeholders actually wrestling with the problem in its un-distilled form. For example, I once wrote an applied philosophy paper about a proposed Nantucket Sound wind farm at a time when the project was hotly contested—some loved the idea of an off-shore wind farm and others hated it (Briggle 2005). My paper focused on the aesthetics of the wind farm and even featured recommendations to improve the policy process. However, I suspect that no one (or very few, if any) actually involved in the debate ever heard of my paper or the peer-reviewed journal in which it was published. My commentary on this public issue was, rather, confined to the realm of disciplinary experts.

My failure to contribute to this debate set me on a path toward public philosophy. Rather than treating the wind farm simply (or exclusively) as the raw material to be mined and then refined as an object of analysis in a peer-reviewed philosophy journal, the public philosopher treats the wind farm as the actual site of philosophical activity. The public philosopher will find ways to listen to those involved in the debate. Beginning from those perspectives and working with those people, the public philosopher will aid in the task of seeking wisdom in this particular context. This will involve many things such as: making hidden value claims visible and helping people think about them, questioning expertise, revealing false dichotomies, building and analysing arguments, calling attention to power dynamics, and revealing the ways in which issues are framed.
As this suggests, philosophers will cede a great deal of authority as they begin from the contested understandings of actual stakeholders. Their role, in the first instance, will be as both listener and questioner. Their skill, in part, will be used to inflect the issue at hand with artful dialogical turns. This is why Paul Thompson at Michigan State University calls his own practice “occasional philosophy.” Thompson works with diverse stakeholders in the agricultural community to think through the ethics and values dimensions of their practices around food production and distribution. He looks for those occasions that pop up where he can call attention to hidden values, problematize false clarities, make or deconstruct arguments, open or close controversies about expertise and knowledge, relinquish space for marginalized voices, or otherwise help people follow a path toward wisdom (see Thompson 2019).3

Most public philosophers find themselves in a “supply side” situation where they seek to engage with publics wrestling with an issue that is not already being framed as philosophical in nature. The wind farm example is, again, a good illustration. Very few if any public stakeholders will think of this as an issue that features significant philosophical dimensions. They will speak in terms of science, engineering, economics, and politics. Of course, justice, epistemic uncertainty, beauty, and other philosophical issues are in fact vitally at stake and woven throughout all those other domains involved in the issue. People will, then, already be doing philosophy as they inevitably talk and make decisions about such ethics and values dimensions. But they won’t see how this is philosophical and how philosophers might help.

Raphael already diagnosed this problem with his quip that kings have no time for philosophy. His general point is that people (the public, whether kings or not) always act on the basis of assumptions. Philosophy requires calling assumptions into question and people will find that irrelevant or distasteful and so will dismiss philosophers as fools. One meaning of ‘utopia’ is “no place,” as in there can be no actual place for the philosopher’s speculations about how things might be better. But I think contemporary public philosophers are proving Raphael wrong. They have been innovating and thinking in relation to the actual shape of the issues unfolding in public life. I turn now to field philosophy as one kind of contemporary public philosophy.

IV. Taking Philosophy into the Field

To recap briefly, I have used Utopia to draw a distinction between private and public philosophy. I then argued that disciplinarity is a modern version of Raphael’s private philosophy and that contemporary forms of public philosophy must break with the disciplinary model of knowledge production. The private/public distinction is best understood in terms of dialogue and rhetoric. Private or disciplinary philosophy is a dialogue among the like-minded. Even if disciplinary scholars vehemently disagree about, say, Aristotle’s metaphysics, they are
generally like-minded in accepting the conventions and form of the discipline and in speaking with its jargon. They agree on the rules of the game where units of knowledge are produced by experts and for experts and then deposited in peer-reviewed publications. By contrast, public philosophy is another kind of dialogue with and for non-experts. What does this look like?

Elsewhere, I have discussed in detail my own case studies in public philosophy (Briggle 2015; forthcoming a). So, rather than go to the ground level here, I will drop from higher level theory to a meso-level and discuss field philosophy as one model of public philosophy. On this score, I am a pluralist and see vital roles for disciplinary philosophers as well as the full gamut of public philosophers (see Briggle, forthcoming b, for my taxonomy of types of public philosophy). Disciplinary philosophy and its constrained version of dialogue-as-peer-review are not in themselves problematic. The problem is its orthodox position and its hegemonic definition of what counts as ‘real’ philosophy.

These are hopeful times for public philosophy. In my own experience, I increasingly see younger scholars practicing engaged forms of philosophy and entire philosophical organizations are now devoted to advancing public philosophy. For example, the Philosophy Learning and Teaching Organization (PLATO) has worked since 2010 to advocate for public philosophy within the American Philosophical Association (APA) and beyond, primarily in the form of philosophy in schools. In addition, organizations like the Society of Philosophers in America (SOPHIA) and the Public Philosophy Network have grown in stature and are helping to create and legitimate various forms of public philosophy. Departments are beginning to seriously consider revising promotion and tenure standards to account for non-disciplinary forms of scholarship, impact, and the dialogical practices entailed therein (see Meyers 2014).

One of the things largely missing from this renaissance of public philosophy, though, is reflection on what might crudely be called questions of methodology. Just what is public philosophy and what are smart practices for its conduct and its evaluation? Here, too, though, more work has recently emerged, including the special issue of *Essays in Philosophy* devoted to public philosophy and edited by Jack Russell Weinstein (2014). I intend these remarks on field philosophy—a term coined by my colleague Robert Frodeman (2010)—in a spirit of advancing our understanding of just what it is we are doing when we do public philosophy. Again, not all public philosophers are field philosophers, but hopefully delineating our practice helps to clarify similarities and differences.

Field philosophy identifies projects where philosophy is put into practice. On the model of fieldwork in the sciences, field philosophy is practical research that takes place in the wider world rather than being done from the proverbial armchair. As noted above, disciplinarity largely assumes a model of societal impact via indirect serendipity: philosophers produce peer-reviewed articles that might someday and somehow trickle down into social changes. By contrast,
field philosophy seeks more direct and intentional pathways to impact. Questions about the relevant audience and how to effectively communicate with them are thematized up front and revisited throughout the research project. In other words, field philosophy treats dialogue as *first philosophy*. The primary questions are about who we want to engage and how we can do so in productive ways. By contrast, with disciplinarity, these questions are answered with the default assumptions of a private dialogue among expert peers.

To summarize, field philosophy is distinguished from the disciplinary model in five ways:

1. It involves collaborative case-based research at the project level. It aims to influence a practice or product, such as scientific data collection methods, a museum exhibit, or a policy—as opposed to being completed through a publication for philosophical audiences.

2. It begins with the interests and framing of a non-philosophic audience rather than with the categories and interests of philosophers.

3. The knowledge it produces is done in the context of its use by non-philosophers. Indeed, “knowledge production” is not the best metaphor. The idea is to ‘co-produce’ knowledge through dialogue, helpful insights, and questions. In other words, the intellectual work is done *in media res* and in real time rather than in isolation in advance of later applications. Field philosophers are not applying pre-baked concepts or theories; they are *doing philosophy with* their partners in dialogue.

4. Its notion of philosophic rigor is contextual, sensitive to the demands of time, interest, and money. Callahan (1973) is right that truly public philosophy needs accounts of “a different kind of hard.” Doing thoughtful dialogue is rigorous work; it just doesn’t fit the dominant axiology where rigor is understood as the labors of a monkish mind engaged in an internal dialogue with itself. We should think here of Socrates’s contributions to philosophy, which come in the form of give-and-take and never as a single-authored book or article.

5. It prioritizes audience-based standards for evaluating success. As one example, my own field work put me in dialogue with the city council for Denton, TX. So, one of my external letter writers for my tenure case was the Mayor of Denton. His standards were vital for evaluating my work.

Field philosophy complements other forms of practical philosophical inquiry. To reiterate, applied philosophers generally write about real-world issues for other professional philosophers and often publish in disciplinary journals. Field philosophers work on real-world projects—for and with the people engaging those issues. Further, field philosophy does not apply a theory developed from the armchair, but rather works through the philosophical issues in a particular
situation in a context-sensitive and bottom-up way. Thus, some—but not all—applied philosophers deploy a fieldwork approach some of the time. One simple way to push things a bit further than disciplinary, applied philosophy is to mail a peer-reviewed manuscript to a policymaker who might find it useful (in hindsight, I should have done this with my wind farm paper). The next step would be to set up a meeting with that person. Fieldwork, at that point, has begun, which is to say that now the dialogue has become public rather than private in the ways I have been using those terms here. This is only one path to a very minimalist sort of field philosophy, but it would be a start.

Although philosophy is often treated as distanced from real-world problems, many philosophical schools, including Aristotelian practical wisdom, American pragmatism, and Marxism provide conceptual foundations for the engaged methods of field philosophy. However, when these methods are examined within disciplinary venues, they are not themselves fieldwork. Field philosophers can engage with such historical and theoretical texts in a ‘reciprocal’ way by consulting them to improve their field work and by using their field work to improve their theoretical accounts of philosophy.

Some interdisciplinary collaborations are examples of field philosophy. An academic collaboration most resembles field philosophy when it addresses a problem that is framed by non-philosophers, is developed to meet the constraints of a particular context, and is published or performed in the context of use rather than in disciplinary philosophy journals. Field work can happen in prisons, at city hall, at the European Commission, and many other places. Indeed, the possibilities are vast. They may not, however, be unlimited. In particular, I work in collaboration with several Chinese philosophers who often face political constraints on their abilities to freely voice criticisms. The ability to speak truth to power seems like a precondition for field philosophy. The absence of this condition is, of course, not limited to Chinese contexts and it is probably best thought of as matters of degree. In my own case working on the politics of oil and gas development in Texas, I have encountered questions about the limits of a field philosopher’s freedom of speech.

V. Conclusion

Bruno Latour (1993) argued that modernity simultaneously purifies things and hybridizes them. As the sciences have carved out purified domains of knowledge, they have created a proliferation of hybrids where ethics and values issues get tangled with politics, economics, and more. These ‘mangled’ and rhizomatic spaces are the native habitat of public philosophers who must find ways to play a role within those less-than-pure places. In its own quest for purity, disciplinary philosophy became ill-suited to operate in those tangled knots. That, in a nutshell, is why the discipline is not sufficient as the only institutional expression of philosophy or its only mode of practice. As society increasingly asks philosophers to
give an account of their impact, the time is ripe for not only engaging in public-facing practices but also theorizing, institutionalizing, and legitimating this work.

This all hinges on dialogue. Public philosophy differs from disciplinary philosophy in terms of its audience: or, with whom are you speaking? Disciplinary philosophers largely speak with one another as they create philosophical knowledge by extending their expertise, and they are judged by the standards of their peers. Philosophical knowledge is produced and collected in a manner that is largely isolated from non-academic use. By contrast, public philosophers engage people outside of academia, and field philosophers engage audiences in practical pursuits outside of philosophy. Thus, the relevant audience for public philosophers is typically taken to be non-academics. While field philosophers usually work outside academia, they may work with other academics on practical projects. They are interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, or simply non-disciplinary.

Field philosophy, and public philosophy, more generally, poses several meta-philosophical questions. How shall we define the standards of ‘rigorous’ non-disciplinary research? How shall it be evaluated? How do we best teach next-generation scholars to do it? And how can we institutionalize support for it? These questions should constitute the theoretical agenda for a twenty-first-century philosophy.

Notes

1. ‘Vulgar’ has a derogatory connotation (which Strauss probably intended), but we can take it to mean something more neutral like the public, common people, or non-experts. The point that interests me here is that speaking with non-philosophers necessarily entails adjustments so that one can be understood.

2. Of course, this improvisation also entails judgments about when to not accommodate to the situation at hand. If, for example, the public philosopher is working in situations marked by systemic racism, the right kind of activities may well be marked by significant forms of resistance. So “going with the flow” should be understood as making context-sensitive judgments and not simply riding along the currents of existing power dynamics.

3. To consider another example, bioethicists have put into practice dialogical practices along the model of public philosophy. They are engaged with a variety of stakeholders and embedded in different institutions. They have developed different concepts and languages in attempts to mirror, magnify, and communicate with a manifold of stakeholders. But bioethics has a curious historical and political origin, which calls into question the universal applicability of it as a model for public philosophy. In short, bioethics, especially the predominant tradition of principlism that formed early in that field’s history, is an example of “demand side” philosophy. That is to say that the US government explicitly problematized a set of issues as ethical in nature, especially in the wake of the Tuskegee syphilis study that came to light in the
early 1970s. In this rare case, then, a public space was opened and labelled as philosophy, which instantly gave bioethicists a measure of authority on the issues then being defined as part of their turf.

4. This summary of field philosophy is adapted from text on our research website https://philosophyimpact.org/. Philosophy Impact is the only research group on the impact of philosophy and the philosophy of impact.

References


