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How to Be a (Good) Philosopher-Activist

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Abstract

Can philosophers be good activists? This essay defines activism for the philosopher and then provides a normative conception of a good philosopher-activist that is grounded in rational integrity and sound rational deliberation. I argue that because philosophers have been trained in reasoning and argumentation, they can contribute these skills to an activist movement. An activist with rational integrity exhibits five skills or virtues: they are honest, rational, logical, deliberative, and respectful. Conversely, bad philosopher-activists display five vices: they are dishonest, manipulative, obfuscating, thoughtless, and insulting. Next, I argue that rhetorical and reasoning skills are only part of what define good activism, and describe the soft skills needed for effective activism. Philosophical training sometimes works against the development of these soft skills, but they are critical to the success of the philosopher-activist. I conclude by describing activism within the context of academic life and argue that philosophers who engage in activism can do so in an intellectually responsible way.

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Three years ago, I got fired up about politics. I mean, *really* fired up about politics. At that point in my career, I was tenured. I had directed my university's Women's and Gender Studies Program for six years, and had served as interim department chair for one year. As an administrator, I had developed skills in public relations, networking, and organizing. In my upper division courses, I had led students in their own semester-long activism projects. I had written about a wide range of issues in applied ethics. Without a time-consuming administrative appointment, I started networking with everyone I knew inside and outside my university to form a local community activism group. Within 48 hours, someone I contacted said there was another woman in my geographic region doing precisely what I was. I contacted this person and asked if she would like to work together. She did. Fast forward to three years later, and she and I are the co-founders of a nonprofit organization with over 1000 members, devoted to protecting and defending democracy and human rights in what is considered to be one of the least progressive areas of the United States.¹ We know and are on good terms with all the local media outlets and politicians. Most everyone involved in local politics knows who we are and what our organization is about.

This is not an outcome or trajectory that I could have predicted at the outset of my career, or even when I sent those first messages. And yet, it is possible, and as I will argue in this essay, *desirable* for more philosophers to get involved in activist movements in this way. While some have argued that philosophers should not sully their theoretical reflections by engaging in activist pursuits like political engagement,² as anyone familiar with the history of philosophy knows, philosophers have rarely kept out of politics and have been frequent contributors to shaping the course of history, institutions, and social and political movements.³ In this essay, I argue that this trend should continue, lest philosophers

¹ My co-founder and now dear friend is Ashlyn Hunt; our efforts led to what is now [Grand Strand Action Together](#). I am grateful to two anonymous reviewers for encouraging me to integrate my personal experiences with activism into this essay; it is a far better paper for their suggestions, and I am grateful for their detailed feedback.

² Bas van der Vossen, "In defense of the ivory tower: Why philosophers should stay out of politics," *Philosophical Psychology* (2015), Vol. 28, No. 7, 1045–1063.

³ John Locke is undoubtedly the most important philosophical influence on American politics, as he is directly responsible for Thomas Jefferson's rhetoric in the Declaration of Independence. He penned the phrase "government with the consent of the governed" and the idea of equal rights under the law; Karl Marx's influence on social democracy, communism and his participation in revolutionary social movements were central to labor movements in the 1800's and are the guiding force behind today's worker's unions; Plato's defense of a government by benevolent aristocrats (and against democracy proper) helped to prop up rule by kings and queens across Europe for centuries.

get left behind in society.⁴ I will provide a model of how philosophers can effectively get beyond the ivory tower, and explain how activism fits within the context of the contemporary academic job description that includes teaching, research, and service. Because my audience in this particular venue is academic philosophers, my goal here will be to provide a normative conception of a *good philosopher-activist*.

The essay will proceed as follows. I begin by defining activism broadly, and then I articulate how philosophers can become involved in activist movements *qua philosophers*. I argue that because philosophers have been trained in reasoning and argumentation, what they can specifically bring to an activist movement is rational integrity and sound rational deliberation. This is not to say that most activists do not have rational integrity; rather, because being an activist involves working within a movement with other people, philosophers can make a unique contribution. An activist with rational integrity exhibits five skills or virtues: they are honest, rational, logical, deliberative, and respectful. Conversely, bad philosopher-activists display five vices: they are dishonest, manipulative, obfuscating, thoughtless, and insulting. Next, I argue that rhetorical and reasoning skills are only *part* of what define good activism, and describe the soft skills needed for *effective* activism. Philosophical training sometimes works against the development of these soft skills, but they are critical to the success of the philosopher-activist. I conclude by describing activism within the context of academic life and argue that philosophers who engage in activism can do so in an intellectually responsible way.

What is Activism? Activist Methods and Goals

Let's begin by defining activism generally, and then narrow the discussion to the unique role that philosophers can play as activists.

Efforts that attempt to sway public opinion, such as marches and demonstrations, have been in existence for a very long time; today the word "activism" is used to describe this direct action for the sake of public persuasion and social/political ends. Activism involves engaging in particular activities and using specific methods (such as advocacy or public demonstrations) for the purposes of *persuasion*, or getting people to believe a

⁴ The view that philosophers are a joke and have nothing important to contribute to society is prevalent in anti-intellectual climates such as that which dominates the United States today. Marco Rubio's joke about philosophers being unemployable revealed a lot about the contemporary public perception of philosophers. <https://www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2015/11/11/philosophers-and-welders-react-to-marco-rubios-debate-comments/>

certain point of view or proposition, which will result in changed behavior.⁵ People are generally activists about: (a) political and legal issues, (b) social, cultural, or religious issues broadly speaking, (c) environmental issues (including animals), and (d) economic or workplace issues. Political issues include local, state, or national politics – helmet laws, emissions regulations, abortion laws, gun safety laws, health care laws, civil rights laws, public expenditures on roadways, canals, and other physical infrastructure, noise ordinances, marriage rights, immigration laws, etc. Social and cultural issues such as racism, sexism, white supremacy, and other types of issues are often addressed by activists: the #MeToo movement, Black Lives Matter movement, Colin Kaepernick’s kneeling during the national anthem, and prison strikes address the prevalence of cultural practices that activists view as needing change. Economic issues such as worker pay are addressed by activists – teacher strikes, the Occupy Wall Street movement, even the Boston Tea Party and Gandhi’s salt march in India, are examples of economic or workplace activism. Matters relating to one’s profession or culture, such as protesting a graduation speaker, petitioning an administration for greater diversity resources, or lobbying for better working conditions, are also the topics of activists. Finally, environmental concerns are often addressed to large corporations: new fracking sites or oil pipeline projects (such as the Dakota Access pipeline), deforestation, animal cruelty in factory farms, and other issues affecting the environment are topics that citizens address using activism. While one might be an activist about one narrow topic, such as fracking,⁶ many of these topics overlap with one another, and sometimes people lobby for multiple related issues, such as the global climate strikes in September 2019, where millions of people demonstrated on a wide range of issues related to climate change.

Although many people have opinions on political and social topics, not everyone takes action to convince others to hold a particular point of view. Some might talk to their family members, neighbors, or co-workers about these topics, but that is not necessarily activism. Activism is a type of engagement that attempts specifically and efficaciously to bring about the desired goal of public persuasion, which is generally for the ultimate

⁵ An anonymous reviewer pointed out that there are other goals of activism, such as *coercion* to change behavior. They note that actions such as boycotts are meant to coerce people into acting in particular ways, and that this goal does not involve persuasion. Though I do not have space to address this issue in detail here, I acknowledge that some forms of activism such as boycotts are inherently more coercive than others, but that the goal of persuasion is embedded in such actions, even if coercion, rather than persuasion, is the primary goal of a particular activist action such as a boycott.

⁶ Philosopher Adam Briggles has done an excellent job articulating the problems with fracking and led the activist effort to stop it in Denton, TX. See his *A Field Philosopher’s Guide to Fracking: How One Texas Town Stood Up to Big Oil and Gas* (Liveright, 2015)

purpose of social and political change. The methods of activism are multitudinous and limited only by the imagination.⁷

The historic and paradigmatic types of activism include attending rallies, marches, sit-ins, or organizational meetings; engaging in acts of civil disobedience such as dumping out tea, sitting at lunch counters from which one is prohibited from eating, tying oneself to a tree in a forest, or climbing a flagpole and removing a flag; participating in boycotts; distributing pamphlets or brochures on a topic; creating art that makes one's point; sending letters to political representatives, joining, volunteering for, or donating to groups that advocate for particular political outcomes or social agendas; and more recently, posting articles, images, or memes on social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) as a way of attempting to influence others' opinions. These are examples of public actions that many people have taken in order to try to convince others of their views, and to fight back against what they see as unjust rules or laws, unfair economic activities, and discriminatory social practices.

A central goal of activism is persuasion that will result in social change. This is why there are often activists on both sides of a debate – one group wants to persuade a group of a particular proposition (such as “Abortion is wrong,” or “Fetuses are persons with full moral worth,”) and those on the other side want to persuade people of a different view (“Abortion is not the killing of a person,” “People do not have full moral rights until they are born; fetuses are not persons with moral rights”). From an activist perspective, if people believe one of these propositions, they will support laws and practices that converge with this opinion. Even if the targets of the activism do not change their *minds*, activists hope that their actions will result in changed *behavior*.⁸

Of course, not all activism is public. For many, participating in public activism is dangerous, and can get them killed, fired, or otherwise harmed. This is why many people have participated in activism anonymously, covertly, or by performing behind-the-scenes work. Fear of reprisal from spouses, employers, or one's social group, often influences which activities people choose to engage in; some may avoid public marches for fear

⁷ Even Emma Sulkowicz's carrying a mattress on her back around Columbia University campus as a part of her senior art project can be considered a form of activism.

⁸ For example, Chick-Fil-A has received public criticism for its support of anti-LGBTQ organizations, including protests at the company's first store outside the United States, which led to the company's announcing the closure of this store a few days after opening. Recently, Chick-Fil-A announced that it will no longer donate to anti-LGBTQ organizations. <https://www.cnn.com/2019/11/18/business/chick-fil-a-lgbtq-donations/index.html>. While the company's owners views have likely not changed, their corporate practices have changed as a result of the protests.

of violence, but may instead help to advertise a march or work out logistical issues.⁹ In my own non-profit organization, several volunteers perform behind-the-scenes tasks that are crucial to our mission (building websites, making placards or postcards, planning events) but because of their precarious social role with respect to an employer or a spouse, are unable to publicize their activity. Others may participate in activism by doing behind-the-scenes activity that is critical to the mission, as the mission is significant. We are now learning about civil rights activists such as Georgia Gilmore, who fed and funded the Montgomery bus boycott.¹⁰ Indeed, these actions count as activism because people are doing things that are critical to a specific mission and agenda. Importantly, activism is not about whether you are the face of a movement, behind the scenes, or even if you *identify* as an activist.¹¹ Activism is not about having a belief about yourself and what you're doing; rather, it is about *efficacy* and doing the work of getting involved, being part of a group, and doing your part to move the group's agenda forward.

In an ideal world, people would be able to participate in activist movements based on their motivation, their time, money, social capital and resources, their comfort level, and their creativity. But alas, the world works against this. In many cases, people (especially women) have not been able to participate as much as they would like because of a movement's or organization's social hierarchies. For example, women in many Black Panther chapters across the US did not rise to leadership roles and have the power that the men in the organization did.¹² Elaine Brown, the one woman who did rise to power and served as president of the Black Panthers, writes extensively about the sexism and chauvinism of the organization in her memoir, *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story*.¹³ Noting these

⁹ Serene Khader explains how white feminists are too quick to judge oppressed women of color in other countries for not resisting their own oppression, because they do not fully appreciate the consequences of doing so. See her essay "Transnational Feminisms, Nonideal Theory, and "Other" Women's Power." *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 3, (1) 2017. Article 1. doi:10.5206/fpq/2016.3.1. Activists also should not judge others for a perceived lack of participation.

¹⁰ Gilmore started the Club From Nowhere, a clandestine group that prepared and sold meals to raise money for the 381-day resistance action. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/31/obituaries/georgia-gilmore-overlooked.html?fbclid=IwAR19Qs7eLkuH5n_GF5rEos57dzs0xSpFZhv2mFISeoGRzFNZMqNN1LRJ2w

¹¹ Some people may identify as activists, others as community organizers, and still others will just say they act in their role as citizens.

¹² Jakobi Williams "'Don't no woman have to do nothing she don't want to do": Gender, Activism, and the Illinois Black Panther Party," *Black Women, Gender + Families*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Fall 2012), pp. 29-54.

¹³ Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story*, Pantheon Books, 1992.

unfortunate social dynamics at work in one of the world's best-known activist organizations is not meant to downplay its accomplishments; rather, it is to illustrate how activist organizations are complex, and must stay cognizant of inequities, discrimination, and infighting so as not to detract from the effectiveness of the organization's overall mission and goals.

Thus far, I have implied that activists work collectively and collaboratively. In general, activists do not work on their own, simply because they cannot accomplish their goals alone. But just as organizational dynamics in activist organizations are complex, so are the boundaries between the personal and the organizational when it comes to activism. Consider Rosa Parks. We all know that she was arrested when she refused to get up from the white section of the bus. As children are told the story, Parks just decided one day that she was tired from working, tired of segregation, and just refused to get up. But the situation is more complicated than this.¹⁴ Parks had been involved with the Montgomery NAACP for ten years, where she served as secretary and wrote down the stories of people suffering immense brutality under Jim Crow laws. She was well-connected and respected among other activists. In earlier years, several other African-American women in Montgomery had been arrested and even beaten for sitting in the white section of the bus as Parks did, but those arrests did not motivate any larger action. But Rosa's arrest was different. Having been involved in the NAACP, and knowing that the ultimate goal was to overturn the unjust segregation laws, Parks was prepared to disobey the law and see what happened. Though she acted alone in her refusal to not sit in the white section, Parks acted as an activist long affiliated with the NAACP, with a good political understanding of the ramifications of her actions. Because of her unique local stature, Montgomery's black leadership launched a mass protest that turned into the 13-month long Montgomery bus boycotts. Being a well-connected activist makes a difference, and this is how Rosa Parks became the face of the civil rights movement in Montgomery.

The Philosopher as Activist

In the same way that Parks' actions can be understood on the level of an individual and as a member of the NAACP, the actions of philosopher-activists can be understood in the context of their role as a philosopher *and* as an activist. In other words, a philosopher's activism should be influenced by one's philosophical methods and training; while philosophers have a range of distinctive skills, their argumentation skills broadly construed (including rational evaluation) are particularly valuable and can be used to contribute to activist movements. Since activism involves (among other things) *convincing others*, and

¹⁴ See Jeanne Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*, Beacon Press, 2015.

getting others to change their minds, the skills of philosophers are extremely valuable in this domain. That is, philosophers have reasoning skills they can contribute to the world beyond the ivory tower. Philosophers have been taught how to make fallacy-free arguments and how to subject claims to rational scrutiny through critical thinking; they can take many data points and variables into account when they deliberate about complex issues; they think ‘outside the box’ in questioning assumptions and imagining alternate possibilities. They know how to articulate a wide range of arguments on a particular topic, and can articulate objections to an argument, even if they agree with it

Although there may be some careers that do not fit well with activism (judges, for example, because their political views cannot be made public), the career of philosopher does not prohibit involvement with external organizations. So how should they participate? As philosophers or as concerned citizens? While both are admirable, and there may not be much difference in terms of logistics, contributing philosophical reflection, writing skills or oral argumentation can be useful. This is not to say that philosophers must *always* engage as philosophers, and not merely concerned citizens. But every social movement needs a wide range of actions to be performed – from website building, to fundraising, to event organizing, etc. – and philosophers have developed argumentative skills and can use this skill set to perform certain kinds of services. This is the advantage of working together: each person can do what he or she is good at. For example, in my activist work in Grand Strand Action Together, my co-founder and I play different roles. When an elected official needs to be called out, my co-founder does it. When an issue needs to be explained and evaluated, I do it. When a social media campaign is needed, she does it. If the media needs an interview on an issue, I do it. This is not to say that I don’t get to yell into a megaphone – I do. But when I do, I don’t do a lot of the name-calling that gets a crowd riled up. I engage in argument and explain why I think a particular policy is bad or problematic. This enables me to play a specific role, the role of the philosopher-activist; other people play their roles in line with their skill sets. It does, after all, take a village. As I stated earlier, people in different social positions have unique opportunities available to them, depending on the issue and the circumstances, and this is true for philosophers as well.

Now that we have a general idea of what philosophers can contribute to activist movements, it is important to ask: which activist movements? Are there some activist movements that are inherently bad and that philosophers ought not participate in? There are indeed activist movements that I take to be morally wrong, such as white supremacist activism, and activism that seeks to disenfranchise a particular group (such as women, minorities, or noncitizens in a particular area). But this activism is problematic for *moral* reasons, namely, they fail to meet the minimum requirements of human rational equality that is largely agreed upon in the 20th century.

Since I am interested in examining activism *qua activism*, my goal here is to focus primarily on activist methodology rather than content. Thus I will not critique or endorse activist agendas that are controversial among philosophers and the general electorate – such as abortion activism – other than to say that activism done on behalf of these issues should follow the virtues and values I set out in the following section. Again, my goal here is to provide a model of good activism *qua activist and qua philosopher*, independent of an activist's goals.¹⁵

What Makes a Good Philosopher-Activist? The Ideal of Rational Integrity

Cornel West. Noam Chomsky. Martha Nussbaum. Martin Luther King, Jr. Angela Davis. Leon Kass. Mary Wollstonecraft. Robert P. George. Peter Singer. Catharine MacKinnon. Are these philosophers good activists or bad activists? What criteria should be used to decide? One might argue that someone is a good activist if they agree with that person's positions and what they advocate for. But whether we agree with someone's philosophical views is somewhat irrelevant to whether she is a good *activist qua activist*. Activists such as Richard Spencer or David Duke advance views that many find abhorrent, but that is because most of us disagree with the *moral basis* of their views. But objecting to people's activism on a moral basis is distinct from evaluating their work as an activist *qua activist*.¹⁶ My goal in this section is to outline the qualities and standards that make for a good philosopher-activist, understood as someone who engages as a philosopher in the forms of activism described in the previous section. Again, an evaluation of the *content* of their activism should be done using moral principles and concepts.

Because activism primarily involves being outspoken on controversial issues and convincing others to hold a particular view, I argue here that the normative ideal of the philosopher-activist should be centered on the activity of convincing others, motivating them, and persuading them. Philosophers have unique skill sets, and thus, we are well suited to play a unique role in activist movements. Thus, philosophers should get involved in activist movements, and they should bring their argumentative skills with them. Not all activism is good activism, and not all argument is good argument: shout-

¹⁵ I recognize that remaining neutral about the content of activism can be interpreted as sidestepping the whole issue of whether certain activists movements are good or bad. While I do have views about which activists movements are good or bad, my goal here was to focus on activist methods rather than content, so I have narrowed my discussion of activism for this purpose.

¹⁶ Moral reasons for objecting to certain activist positions are of course important and relevant considerations to making a global judgment on whether someone is a good activist, but my goal here is to focus merely on the features of *activists qua activists*.

ing people down, harassing people, and distributing false information are bad methods for any activist organization.¹⁷ They are particularly bad for a philosopher-activist. Whether a particular act of activism is done *well* depends on how it is carried out, and in this paper, I explain the methods and skills needed to be a good philosopher-activists. The normative ideal of the philosopher-activist should be grounded in *the activity of reasoning*. Specifically, the normative ideal of the philosopher-activist should be grounded in *rational integrity*. The central idea is that the method of argumentation one uses to persuade others, or the manner that one uses to advocate for one's views, is rationally evaluable, and is the appropriate grounds for determining if one is a good activist. All philosopher-activists should follow these principles, no matter their agenda. In this section, I will elaborate on the ideal of rational integrity, and then in the following section, I will identify the skills needed for *effective* activism.

The characteristics central to rational integrity, that philosopher-activists should use, are the following:

1. *Honest* – (a) use true, reliable, and trustworthy information and sources, (b) know the relevant and important social or historical facts surrounding their views.
2. *Rational*– use reason to communicate and to facilitate communication; are careful, calm, insightful, and composed; don't base arguments primarily on emotional appeals.
3. *Logical* –use logically sound arguments, do not make blatant or obvious logical fallacies, especially informal fallacies such as circular argument, slippery slope, red herring, straw man, etc.¹⁸
4. *Deliberative*—know the weaknesses in their arguments; know the opposing arguments and are able to explain rationally why they disagree; understand the social and political implications of their views.¹⁹

¹⁷ Destroying others' property and harming others are bad activist methods, and in general activist methods that include violence are not recommended. For a thorough treatment of this topic, see Todd May, *Nonviolent Resistance: A Philosophical Introduction*, Polity Press, 2015.

¹⁸ In this sense, reasoning is "good reasoning" in the sense that it the premises and conclusions flow within the points that it starts with. I adopt a functional account of reasoning, such as the one developed by Conor McHugh and Jonathan Way. See their "What is Reasoning?" in *Mind: A Quarterly Review of Philosophy*, 127(505), 167-196. 30 p. Jan 2018; see also their "What is Good Reasoning?" in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 96(1), 153-174, 22 p. Jan 2018.

¹⁹ I follow Julia Annas's skill-based model of virtuous agency, in outlining the qualities I describe here. See her *Intelligent Virtue*, Oxford University Press, 2011. The importance of deliberation to virtuous agency is widely endorsed by philosophers. See, for example, Christine Korsgaard's endorsement in

5. *Respectful* – not annoying, misleading, dramatic or egotistical; can speak civilly with opponents and do not insult or attack them as persons.²⁰

It is important to note that, again, these are traits of good philosopher-activists, and not just activists generally. Most activist movements include dramatic emotional appeals or emotionally powerful gestures in order to effectively make a point. But they also need rational persuasion, community education, scientific research, public engagement, and a positive public image. Philosophers are uniquely suited to do the rational persuasion dimension of activist movements, because philosophers are trained to offer some modicum of reason and rationality to a situation. They aren't usually the ones name calling the opposition, and such actions generally don't fit with philosophers' public personae. Let someone else perform a dramatic gesture when the time is right.

The characteristics listed above can also be understood as traits of character one might seek to develop as an activist. By emphasizing rational integrity and the importance of rational arguments, we acknowledge the importance of good reasoning, not just for its own sake, but for its dire importance to human flourishing. The philosopher-activist should seek to remind the world that rational communication and discussion is possible. In order to better understand the ideal of rational integrity, it is useful to identify the opposite tendencies, which are qualities that do not engage or promote good reasoning. These are properly described as vices and are antithetical to being a good philosopher-activist.

1. *Dishonest*: (a) claims are grounded in false statements or untruths; do not clarify or contextualize a claim using historical facts and social or political history as a guide.
2. *Manipulative* – make overly emotional appeals that aim to induce fear and anxiety,

Self-Constitution, Oxford University Press, 2009 and Susan Wolf, *Freedom Within Reason*, Oxford University Press, 1990.

²⁰This is not to say that activists must always be *civil*. For more on the difference between being respectful, being righteous and being rude, see Amy Olberding's essay 'Righteous Incivility' *Aeon*, September 5, 2019, where she writes: "I believe that righteous incivility is sometimes better than civility and that it can indicate a pattern of reasoning we morally need.... If I in fact refuse to shake your hand, I won't just be rude: I will take myself to be *righteously* rude. I disrupt the usual civil patterns because I morally judge they *need* disrupting, whether because integrity demands it or because some greater social good is won by it, or both. This pattern of reasoning is one we certainly need, lest we become unthinking conformists to superficial forms of niceness that would sacrifice higher values." See also her book *The Wrong of Rudeness: Learning Modern Civility from Ancient Chinese Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, 2019.

especially of things that do not truly pose a threat; use rhetoric to fan emotional flames rather than prompt deliberation; predatory on emotions without an argument.

3. *Obfuscating* – make arguments with logical fallacies that the audience does not recognize; make misleading and confusing arguments, such as saying X but doing Y, or saying they will do X and then doing Y, or saying they did X but they did not, or saying they did not do X when they actually did.
4. *Thoughtless* - give arguments using (bad) rhetoric, make rational discussion harder, focus only on the minutiae of an argument rather than on the big picture; focus on the trees, not the forest, or focus on a tangent, rather than the main topic.
5. *Insulting* – do not show respect towards opponents; makes *ad hominem* attacks; insult instead of engaging in rational conversation.

The qualities I have described here are in many ways epistemic habits of mind, but they are also character traits that activists should avoid (or in the virtue case, strive toward) when they engage with others. Speaking from experience, avoiding these practices is difficult. It is easy to use zingers to insult the opposition; it is easy to become impatient with questions we take to be stupid; it is easy to want to cut corners and be intellectually lazy when defending our views. While there may be a time and a place to do this, they ought not be the norm for good philosopher-activists. We should engage in activism for the purposes of improving the human condition, human reasoning, and our future; thus, we cannot routinely give in to our basest instincts to control and herd other people. This doesn't mean that a philosopher's activism and arguments should be limited to ones we actually accept – the activist might avail herself of an argument that she herself is not persuaded by, if she recognizes that others take the premises to be true, and if the argument leads to the conclusions that she endorses. There is room in the ideal of rational integrity for strategizing and connecting with different constituencies on terms that those people believe in and endorse; this is strategy, not deception.

A major objection to my view is that it is unduly optimistic about the potential for the public to be persuaded by reason.²¹ According to this objection, many people are persuaded by bad arguments, rhetoric, and emotional appeal, and that is the basis on which they make the majority of their decisions. We are imperfectly rational, strongly emotional creatures who are persuaded to hold views for random and often ridiculous reasons.

²¹ See Jonathan Haidt, "The Emotional Dog and its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment," *Psychological Review* 108, 814-834, 2001.

Thus, shouldn't activists use any means necessary to reach their goals? Shouldn't they use every tool at their disposal to persuade people of their position, including rhetoric, emotional appeals, personal connections, promises, guilt trips, negative consequences, and dubious information? Even some forms of activism are founded on this – boycotts aim to bring about negative consequences (such as lost revenue or public shaming) for the entity being boycotted. People use these tactics all the time—and not just activists, everyone.

My response to this objection is that although people do make decisions based on emotional appeal, in the end, we are also rational beings, and people need to be able to rationally justify their views to themselves and others. It is not merely that people *can* be persuaded by reason, but that they need reason and arguments for them to sustain their beliefs in a meaningful way. Although some activists are perceived as being willing to go to any means necessary to convince their audiences of certain views, this is not a good long-term strategy for the philosopher-activist. The philosopher-activist can help persuade one to hold a certain view, but this often takes time; philosopher-activists should continue to use good reasons and think about long-term beliefs and strategies for achieving stable epistemic states.

Another objection to my argument is that the characteristics I articulate better describe a public intellectual rather than a philosopher-activist. To some degree, this is correct: the skills required to be a good public intellectual are similar to those required for good philosophy-activism. Both should maintain rational integrity when they discuss the issues they are engaged in. The primary difference is that the philosopher-activist acts in concert with others, and in very public ways, to accomplish her ends. Public intellectuals may be interviewed for the purposes of their sharing knowledge on particular issues. But philosopher-activists will also work publicly on specific social or political campaigns, forge connections with nonprofit organizations, church groups, politicians, and other groups devoted to changing public opinion, to accomplish their work.

Consider, for example, Peter Singer, who counts as a paradigmatic philosopher-activist on my view. Although he has made a career out of writing academic philosophy, he is very much in the public eye and works actively to persuade the public in favor of his views. Singer devotes much of his time and effort (and a considerable portion of his income) to social and political causes, most notably animal rights but also famine and poverty relief, environmentalism, and reproductive rights. He co-founded the Australian Federation of Animal Societies, now [Animals Australia](#), the country's largest and most effective animal organization. He ran, unsuccessfully, for public office. He has written a number of books for the general public, appeared on the comedy show *The Colbert Report* advocating for

animal rights and welfare, and started the nonprofit organization *The Life You Can Save*, which is devoted to the elimination of global poverty. He uses rational argumentation in each public talk and interview, but without using jargon or lofty language. It takes special skill to speak with general audiences with no background in philosophy; it requires the ability to make your arguments as trenchant as possible in a brief sound bite. He does this very well. And while Peter Singer may talk about “animal rights” even though he does not endorse this theoretical approach in his own work, Singer is not being duplicitous. He is using arguments that are rationally plausible to other people.²²

Before closing this section, let me note that while I have illustrated the idea of the philosopher-activist using a philosopher who engages in activism in the area in which he is an expert, it is important to note that one’s activism must not be strictly within one’s area of expertise. Those with specializations in feminism can become engaged in environmental ethics movements; those with specializations in animal ethics could become engaged in business ethics activism. There are many ways this can happen and many different approaches to take: one might extend the same philosophical approach or methodology to a new area, or one might extend her pre-existing concerns to a new area, for personal or political reasons that arise over the course of life. People become motivated to participate in an activist movement for a wide range of reasons, some of which are personal and which may come up suddenly and are not a part of someone’s prior research agenda. It is perfectly fine for people to become politically engaged in areas that are outside their field of academic specialization. Perhaps the best example of this is Noam Chomsky, who is widely known among philosophers for his revolutionary work in linguistics, whereas the general population is familiar with his political advocacy, about which he has not published in professional philosophy journals. This is not to say that Chomsky isn’t serious about his work in politics, or that he lacks expertise in foreign affairs. Using the criteria I have laid out here, Chomsky qualifies as a philosopher-activist, since he brings his philosophical methods, skills, and deliberative practices to the issues he takes up in for-

²² I hesitate to point out examples of less good activism, but it is instructive to compare cases. Consider Kathleen Stock, who has been working on transgender issues as they affect women in Britain. She has been very public in her arguments, and has worked with non-academic advocacy groups, so she is doing activist work as I have defined it here. One concern with her advocacy is that she tends to commit vice 3 mentioned above, obfuscation, and sends mixed messages regarding her arguments. To use one example, while she claims that she “would never say that all or most trans women are violent,” she writes that “we have no evidence that self-declared trans women deviate from male statistical norms in relevant ways.” (Twitter, July 30, 2019, 12:25pm) Thus she implies that (a) trans women are males, and (b) trans women reflect the same statistics for male violence that men do, even as she says at the same time that she would “never say that most trans women are violent.” I do not want to debate the content of her view here; rather, my point rather is that this argument is obfuscating because although she explicitly denies the implications of her view, those conclusions do in fact follow from her arguments.

eign policy. Moreover, he has likely been more influential in this arena than most foreign affairs scholars, and is better known for this work (as well as his work critiquing capitalism) among the general public than for his work in linguistics. This is not bad—in fact, it reinforces my point that there are many ways to be a philosopher-activist and there is no one model we should all follow. I encourage philosophers to become activists in the areas they care about, by following the virtues and practices I have laid out.²³

What Makes a Good Philosopher-Activist, Part II? Additional Skills for Effective Activism

In the previous section, I outlined how to be a good philosopher-activist. The traits I identified are the baseline criteria of how to do good (as opposed to bad) philosophy activism. But if one wants to do philosophy-activism *effectively*, there are additional skills and virtues that are important to acquire. Because advocacy involves not just convincing others to hold a view, but doing so effectively and efficiently, the skills of the good philosopher-activist expand beyond the reasoning and persuasion virtues described above. Engaging in activism is time-consuming and can be draining, especially for those burdened by the oppressive situations that they are actively working against. In order to not waste valuable time, energy, social capital, and goodwill, philosopher-activists should develop the following interpersonal and strategy skills that improve one's efforts to succeed in activism.

Many experienced activists have written entire books on how to be an effective activist, so my goal here is not to reiterate or summarize this advice.²⁴ While those who are serious about activism would benefit from reading such books, my goal here is to highlight four traits that philosophers should attempt to develop, because our training diminishes the possibility of developing these skills. These skills are: being (a) tactful, (b) personal, (c) collaborative, and (d) fun.

²³ Cornel West is another important philosopher who is doing activist work. And while he uses hyperbole and appeals to emotion more than I would recommend, he is very successful in his work. He is a regular guest on the Bill Maher Show, CNN, C-Span and Democracy Now. He has done national tours with Tavis Smiley for NPR. He made his film debut in the film *The Matrix Reloaded* and was the commentator (with Ken Wilbur) on the official trilogy released in 2004. He has appeared in over 25 documentaries and films, and is one of the most well-known living philosophers at this time.

²⁴ See for example Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, *Grassroots: A Field Guide for Feminist Activism*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux; First edition, 2005; Grace Lee Boggs, *The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century*, University of California Press, 2012; T. V. Reed, *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Present*, 2nd Edition, University of Minnesota Press, 2019.

If there is one quality that a philosopher-activist should develop, it is *tact*. By this I mean the ability to listen to another person and respond to them without over-reacting, being defensive, belittling them, or losing one's cool. I learned this very early on in my career. While I was at a social function/fundraising event, I saw a feminist leader at my university talking to an interlocutor who had stated (to her face) that he believed the world's problems were related to women working outside the home; if they would just go back home and take care of their kids, that would solve a lot of problems. I was dumbfounded when I heard this person (a university donor) say these things, and had no idea how she would respond. Amazingly, with a smile, she said, "I respectfully disagree," and explained why women working outside the home was a good thing, and why another parent such as a father spending time with their kids at home was also valuable. I was impressed, and realized I had a lot to learn. These kinds of situations regularly arise and while they may seem surprising to academics, responding respectfully and tactfully to such a view is critical, not only if you hope to change someone's mind, but also for maintaining credibility. Taking personal offense to the man's claim would have been justified, but it would not have been effective; being able to explain to someone why one disagrees with another person *rationally* and *in a face-to-face* conversation, is a far better strategy.

A second dimension to being tactful is knowing when to make an objection and knowing when to let something go. Philosophers are taught to make objections to any and every view, their own views, and views they endorse or agree with. We are taught that we must win an argument. While this is very useful for critical thinking, in the wrong context, criticizing someone's proposal in an abrasive way – without constructive criticism – is bad because it turns people off. Many people outside of philosophy think philosophers are jerks because their bluntness leads to unnecessary divisiveness and chasing tangents that don't ultimately matter to the substance of the argument. This may be the result of not being very self-aware, or aware of the consequences of our words, or aware of our communication style. Sometimes it is not until we are a good five years into our careers that we learn how to communicate effectively with our colleagues and other professionals. In addition to being able to make convincing arguments, it helps to be seen as a thoughtful and constructive colleague, in order to be well-positioned to be successful in persuasion. The most effective activists are tactful, rational, and clear. The philosopher-activist should choose their words carefully, especially when going on record with the media, for these recordings remain for perpetuity.

The second skill that philosophers should develop is being more personal and making personal connections with people. Because philosophers are focused on rational arguments, we are often very abstract. We don't talk about our lives, people we know, or

situations related to the issue at hand. We use examples that are too fanciful (runaway trolleys, evil demons, Chinese Rooms), instead of connecting with the lived reality of our listeners who face serious life problems. We often use works of highbrow literature to illustrate our points in order to impress the other Ph.D.-holders in the room. But we must recognize when it is appropriate in a conversation to take off the philosopher hat and just be a person and develop the ability to connect with a wide range of people. Another part of this is knowing when to halt the philosophical line of thought. Because philosophers are willing to entertain any question (“What’s wrong with incest?” for example), we are considered uncouth and abrasive. Asking “any question” is normal for philosophers. But in the wrong context, we lose listeners and potential allies by using outrageous or offensive examples. Training in the discipline of philosophy means that we get used to asking all the questions and using wild examples, but this is not a good general strategy outside of the discipline of philosophy.

Third, philosophers should seek to be collaborative as activists. This is, in fact, the heart of activism: connecting with others, creating new networks, building coalitions, recruiting new members, strategizing with others about how to accomplish shared goals and thinking creatively about how to address power structures. All of these things are critical to effective activism. Seeking out opportunities to meet new people, collaborating with others to put on an event, and working with people to reach a mutually desirable goal is very gratifying work for the philosopher-activist. And even though we develop and publish our ideas in isolation, we should not proceed alone in our attempts to change the world. Alas, this will not work.

Last but not least, philosopher-activists should at least try to have a sense of humor and make their activist work fun and engaging for others. This may seem to be a banal point, but it bears repeating. If it is not fun, it will feel like work – which it is. But nobody wants to volunteer to do work they don’t get paid to do, especially if they don’t enjoy doing it. By using humor to defuse stressful situations, hosting dance party fundraisers, making funny signs together, or doing whatever people in a group perceive to be “fun,” one’s audience and members will remain engaged. Activist work is notoriously depressing and has a high rate of burnout. Activists routinely talk about the importance of self-care as a way to avoid this.²⁵ I have found that maintaining a sense of humor while railing at the world’s injustices is one of the best ways to avoid burnout and to remain engaged.

²⁵ One interesting book is James O’Dea’s *The Conscious Activist: Where Activism Meets Mysticism*, Watkins Publishing, 2014. See also Hillary Rettig’s *The Lifelong Activist*, 2006, which emphasizes the importance of self-care, and is available here: <https://lifelongactivist.com/>

Although there are many philosopher-activists who have the traits I have described above, Sally Haslanger is a philosopher who has these additional skills of effective activism, and who is an excellent model of a philosopher-activist. In her writings, talks, lectures, panel discussions, and her leadership work, she exhibits the rational integrity described in the previous section. She does not get offended easily and she responds to objections to her work with grace. She is highly personal in her work, and openly discusses personal trials and challenges, as a parent, a spouse, and a person in general. Haslanger especially exhibits the characteristics of effective activism as well. She tirelessly works behind the scenes to collaborate with others and develop their ideas, events, book projects, and strategies for specific causes. Moreover, she has done so for decades. She mentors and advises people, even those she doesn't know, and works tirelessly to advance the cause of feminism, especially within philosophy. To top it off, she has a positive attitude and knows how to make activism fun.²⁶

Although people often say that these skills are hard to develop and cannot be taught, I disagree. One of the advantages of having a career as an academic philosopher is that we have ample time to develop these skills, and have many role models (both positive and negative) to learn from. Opportunities to develop these skills—working with others, providing constructive feedback, or making objections in a respectful way—arise every day. If one has the motivation and incentive to learn these skills, one can do so by taking note of their interactions with others and trying (and failing) to improve each day. I recently had a former employee (and mentee) tell me how much that they evolved and matured as an activist, and had finally understood and internalized the advice I had given regarding how to respond to opponents of their feminist work, especially the ability to respond to the opposition with tact.

The Philosopher-Activism in Context: Teaching, Research, and Activism

Now that we have a working model of a good philosopher-activist, how does being a philosopher-activist fit within the standard tasks of twentieth-century academics: research, teaching, and service? In other words, how does being a good philosopher-activist fit in with one's job?

The activity that philosophers engage in and which seems to overlap most with activism is *writing*. To recall, I defined activism as *engaging in advocacy or public campaigning for*

²⁶ My interaction with Professor Haslanger is primarily through email and at conferences. I am by no means one of her closest mentees, but I have interacted with her enough, and have heard enough about her activism to know that she stands out as an extraordinary philosopher-activist.

the purposes of public persuasion and bringing about social or political change. So is writing academic philosophy papers on stem cell research, abortion, immigration, marriage, or LGBTQ topics a form of activism? Well, it can be. But just because a philosopher argues for a particular view on social, moral, or political issues (especially those who do political theory, applied ethics, or feminist philosophy), does not mean that one is engaged in activism.

First, philosophical writing does not fit the standard description of activist writing. The style of writing for professional philosophers is fairly abstract and only easily readable for those in the field or students who are under the tutelage of philosophers. We use philosophical vocabulary that is not in common parlance and jargon that college students must be taught to understand.

Second, most philosophical research is *practically* inaccessible in the sense that it is read only because libraries have subscriptions to the journals in which the ideas are published. Because most academic articles are accessed through journal subscriptions, academic work is effectively behind a very expensive paywall. While not *all* philosophical writing fits this description – there are open access journals such as this one, which deviate from the norm – much of it does. While some philosophers write ‘public philosophy’ versions of their essays, in, say, the *New York Times*, most don’t. Of course, if one does, this is one excellent way to be a good philosopher-activist.

Third, philosophers are unlikely to talk about their ideas in social networks outside of the academy, unless they make a concerted effort to do so. Academics are far less likely to engage with non-academics, and to befriend non-academics, than they used to be. The way people socialized in the 20th century has changed, and this leads to dwindling diverse social networks. This means that fewer academic ideas make it outside of the academy via personal connections. Again, if one wants to be a good philosopher-activist, one could present one’s views in a public setting, with non-philosophy colleagues, on social media, television, in popular venues, in books written for popular audiences, etc. Alternatively, and perhaps more effectively, one might present her ideas to audiences that include public administrators, politicians, judges, etc. so that the ideas are directly disseminated to people that have the power to implement them.²⁷ Either way, philosophers should make an effort to put their ideas into mainstream publications, venues, and places, outside of academic journal publication, and into the hands of decision-makers and powerful people, for their ideas to have more impact.

²⁷ Jeremy Bentham and J.S. Mill both did this, as they were both well-connected to politicians, statesmen, and intellectuals.

What about service? Much of the service work that philosophers do in the university can be considered a form of activism. In committee work, for example, there are many opportunities to address wage, gender, and racial gap issues that arise in admissions, hiring, and tenure processes. There are economic issues that arise regarding adjunct professors and graduate student pay, unionization matters, and issues regarding outsourcing services like sanitation or staffing athletic events. In my role as director of Women's and Gender Studies, I served on a committee that revamped the university's sexual harassment training policy, instituted a new reporting process for Title IX violations, and purchased a new consent training module for incoming freshman. Currently, I serve on my University's Buildings and Grounds committee – which I initially thought was unimportant, until I got on the committee and learned what it did, and realized the potential for addressing issues of accessibility and environmental concerns. After becoming chair of this committee, I led a movement to rewrite its charge – which was unanimously agreed upon by the committee and the larger Faculty Senate. By bringing my philosopher-activist skills to an area I was previously unacquainted with, I was able to find ways in which the committee could improve in fulfilling its mission. And though I will not argue for it here, it would be extremely good if universities recognized and acknowledged community volunteer work that is directly related to one's work as a philosopher-activist.

One of the most important aspects of being an academic philosopher, at least in many universities, is teaching. So how do philosopher-activists conduct themselves as teachers? Since activism involves persuading others, we might think that its goal conflicts with the aims of teaching. But since one of the primary goals of philosophy teachers is to teach students critical thinking and reasoning, philosopher-activists can use these skills to help students learn how to reason well, how to detect faulty arguments, how to develop their ideas, etc. Perhaps one of the most important things philosopher-activists can do is to teach their students how to be activists about issues they care about, which I (and others) have done in upper-division courses.²⁸ The project Engaged Philosophy showcases student activist projects and interviews philosophers who work with their students in these kinds of assignments.²⁹

This is not to say that philosopher-activists should attempt to indoctrinate students in the classroom. They should not. But it is perfectly reasonable for philosopher-activists to teach the material about which they are activists to their students. They can assign

²⁸ While philosophers might attempt to convince their students that philosophy matters, or that activism is important, or that they should be informed about the world around them, this is not the same as being an activist with your students as your target audience on a particular issue.

²⁹ For more information, see <https://www.engagedphilosophy.com/>.

readings (their own and others) and encourage discussion of the ideas. Though one's readings and assignments reflect conscious choices to encourage students to think about particular issues, this kind of choice is not indoctrinating or coercive. It is an attempt to educate. The philosopher-activist must not, of course, treat students who do not agree with her unfairly by giving poor grades to students whose theses one disagrees with. And she ought not offer incentives for attending her own activist events unrelated to the university and classroom.

Some might object that teaching students the facts associated with, for example, climate change, or the environmental hazards of factory farming, is problematic activism that goes beyond the bounds of propriety for teachers. But is it? Is assigning readings that endorse the view that human activity is at least somewhat responsible for climate change, a form of activism? I would argue that it is not – it is education. The professor is not requiring that the students believe the conclusions of the argument. They are merely required to read, think about, and respond to these readings. What about assigning readings about other controversial issues—evolution and religious belief, or gun rights and gun control, for example—is this activism? This is somewhat tricky, but I would argue that provided that one teaches at least two different views on a particular topic in applied ethics and does so in a fair and charitable manner, then this is acceptable; that way, students are exposed to more than one way of thinking about an issue. And of course, individual teaching methodologies, assignments, and lectures matter here as well, and should be taken into consideration when teaching controversial issues.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued that philosophers have valuable critical thinking skills that they can (and should) implement, by bringing their skills and abilities to activist movements that are important and worthwhile. In the highly polarized society that characterizes the United States today, philosophers can help elevate conversations for citizens by modeling the use of rational standards of debate and discussion. Of course, faculty must navigate the hurdles of tenure and promotion carefully, and so waiting until one is tenured to become publicly involved in activist movements may be wise. Individuals should exercise discretion and seek to understand their own university or employment context. That being said, many graduate students engage in activism in thoughtful and meaningful ways that enhance their careers, and do not detract from them.

We can also learn from cases where a professor's "activism" goes wrong. In the case of Professor Steven Salaita, who lost his academic appointment for making incendiary tweets regarding the Israel-Palestine conflict, I would argue that it's not clear that his tweets

count as “activism” as I have defined it here, since he was not publicly working with a specific activist organization in concert with other people. They were primarily expressions of opinion, though many attempted to educate the general public.³⁰ In addition, Professor Salaita did not adhere to the fifth aspect of rational integrity I articulated in Section II, about not making personal attacks on the opposition. He made many, such as that people who supported Israel were “awful human beings.”³¹ I’m not arguing that he should be fired for these tweets, but I am noting that publicly insulting the opposition via personal attacks has numerous deleterious effects: it will *never* bring these people around to your view, it only serves to detract attention away from the issue at hand, and expresses a disdain for the opposition rather than a hopefulness that they can be persuaded.

Perhaps the most important objection to my view here is that engaging in political activism significantly raises the risk of developing biased attitudes and thus makes it extremely difficult to do ‘objective’ research.³² Psychological research shows that strong political partisans exhibit more biased judgments and motivated political reasoning, than ambivalent partisans or independents. But as philosopher Ben Jones notes in his response to this objection, political partisanship is *not* the same thing as political activism, and so it would be a mistake to draw this conclusion of political activists.³³ Jones offers a strong response to the overall worry that political activism will lead to research bias, by arguing that if scholars can be aware of the potential that political activism has in increasing bias, they can take steps to reduce any biasing effects; doing this makes far more sense than to avoid political engagement altogether. As I have argued, activism is not antithetical to the philosophical search for truth. Rather, it makes searching for truth more meaningful because it has the potential for keeping philosophers’ theories grounded in everyday lived experience. Those who engage in activism express both intellectual and social responsibility for the world they live in, and this helps to keep them intellectually honest. To conclude, I have argued that philosophers should make an effort to wed philosophical reflection with activism. This requires work; it would be easier to just do philosophy and

³⁰ For more details on his tweets, see <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/13/world/middleeast/professors-angry-tweets-on-gaza-cost-him-a-job.html>.

³¹ He wrote: “If you’re defending #Israel right now you’re an awful human being.” In other tweets, he describes defenders of Israel as “hopelessly brainwashed” and makes use of the idea of sociopathy when discussing characterizations of anti-Semitism. These inflammatory tweets do not work for professors acting in the public realm.

³² Bas Van der Vossen, “In defense of the ivory tower: Why philosophers should stay out of politics,” *Philosophical Psychology*, Vol. 28, Iss. 7 (2015), 1045-1063.

³³ Ben Jones, “Political Activism and Research Ethics,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 2019, p. 4. <https://doi.org/10.1111/japp.12366>.

act on one's social, moral, and political commitments in separate domains. It takes work to bring one's philosophical and evaluative skills to bear in one's teaching, research, and service work. It takes work to be an activist and to motivate student activism. But there is much potential for having an impact in one's community, state, or nation, by doing so. My (now former) dean recently shared with me that it was my invitation for him to speak in my upper division class on Race, Gender, and Justice on what the university was doing to address race and diversity matters (an activism project the class had chosen), that impacted his thinking about these topics. Confronted with the hard questions asked by the students, he decided after that visit to actively create conditions that foster diversity by generating new opportunities and to work with faculty to do something transformative. This led to the establishment of an Institute for [Gullah and African Diaspora Studies](#), the first of its kind in in the American South.³⁴

We should never underestimate our potential for effecting how people think. Philosophers have an important role to play in bridging theoretical reflection with everyday life, and this is why activism is important. By engaging in philosophical reflection in an activist context, we plant the seeds of reflection in another person's mind. It is my hope that more philosophers will recognize the potential for philosophical thinking to make an even bigger impact in the world today.

³⁴ Personal correspondence with Dan Ennis. Ennis notes that the establishment of the Institute was a true collaboration between many hard-working faculty who also deserve credit for its creation – but the visit to my class was the trigger that made him decide to actively create conditions that foster diversity.