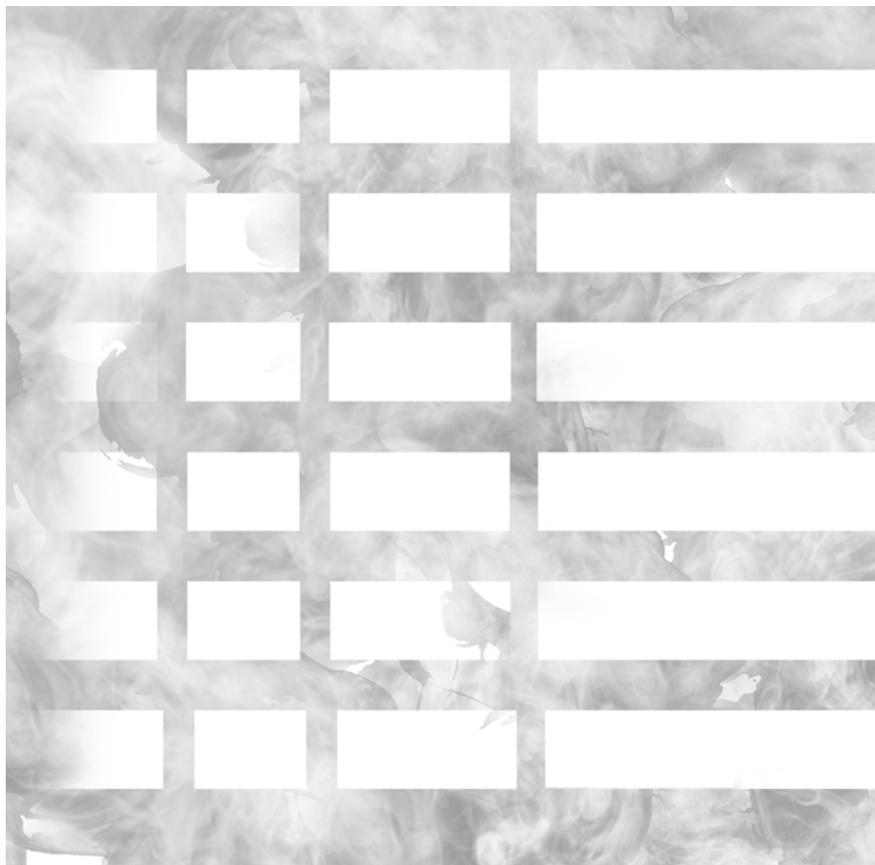




Check for updates

# PHILOSOPHY AS A HELPING PROFESSION:

AN INTERVIEW WITH  
GINA SCHOUTEN, PhD





## ABOUT GINA SCHOUTEN:

Dr. Schouten is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Harvard University. Before coming to Harvard, she was Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Illinois State University (2013–2016). Before that, she was a grad student at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, where she received her PhD in philosophy in 2013. Schouten received her BA in 2006 from Ball State University, majoring in philosophy and Spanish where she also started *Stance*.

Dr. Schouten's research interests are in the areas of social and political philosophy and ethics. Her most sustained research projects concern political liberalism and political legitimacy, educational justice, and the gendered division of labor. Her book, *Liberalism, Neutrality, and the Gendered Division of Labor*, just came out with Oxford University Press. She has also written on diversity problems within the discipline of philosophy, on the ethics and politics of abortion, on the use of social policy to curtail animal consumption and experimentation, on the practice of non-ideal theory in political philosophy, and on other issues in feminist philosophy.

---



STANCE: To begin, we wanted to ask you, how did you end up as a philosophy major at Ball State?

SCHOUTEN: I came to Ball State a little up in the air but with the intention of studying Spanish and social work. So, I was a social work major at first, and Spanish all along. In high school, what little career advising I got, the message that was conveyed to me was, “You seem like a people person; you should work with people; and you should do teaching, or you should do counseling or something like that.” I think that advising was a little bit gendered, but I did like to think of myself as a nice person. I had done some work in high school, assisting a family of recent immigrants from Guatemala. The daughter didn’t speak any English and was a student at an elementary school where my high school Spanish program had us go and work with students who were English language learners. That was the first academic thing that I remember really, really loving. It felt so gratifying to me to do that work, and I really grew to love this little girl in particular and got to know her family and visited them. So insofar as I had any plan at all, I thought I would learn how to be a social worker and just develop skills to make myself of use to people like this family. So, I would learn Spanish and social work to help ease that transition to a foreign country. That’s what I came here to do.

I FOUND MYSELF  
WANTING TO ASK  
MORE STRUCTURAL  
QUESTIONS ABOUT  
THE KINDS OF  
SOCIAL PROBLEMS I  
WAS BEING TRAINED  
IN SOCIAL WORK  
TO HELP EASE OR  
MITIGATE.

Early on, I guess I also wanted to try on being a little edgy, so I took a philosophy class just for the hell of it. I was finding my social work classes a little bit unfulfilling. I think that’s incredibly important work, and I’m sure the classes were really wonderful, but I found myself wanting to ask more structural questions about the kinds of social problems I was being trained in social work to help ease or mitigate. I wanted to think more about big-picture, ethical questions. Meanwhile, I was taking this philosophy class that wasn’t in political philosophy, but there was this clear sense that I was being trained to think in a certain way. And I thought, I want to keep thinking about this stuff from social work, but I want to think about it in this philosophical way. I like this, and I want to get good at this. So, I stayed the course and kept taking philosophy classes. And I’m not sure when this happened, but there was a point at which I felt, I can’t really kid myself anymore, I want to do philosophy.

So I dropped the social work. And that has always felt a bit like a self-indulgent choice, not because I think academics generally are self-indulgent, but because I'd had an idea of myself as someone heading for a helping profession. I've long felt conflicted about that choice, but have tried to think of *this* work in *that* helping-profession spirit. The deal I struck with myself was, you can take a go at being a philosophy major, but remember that you went to college to get into a helping profession. So, see if you can do philosophical work in that spirit. I don't claim to have succeeded in doing that, but it is an important detail about the way I try to think of my professional aspirations now.

**STANCE:** Do you think that being a Spanish major has influenced the way you think about philosophy? Has that been at all helpful to you in your studies in philosophy?

I DON'T THINK OF  
PHILOSOPHY AS  
SITTING ALONE IN  
YOUR ROOM AND  
THINKING DEEP  
THOUGHTS AND  
THEN WRITING  
THEM DOWN ON  
PAPER ONCE YOU  
THINK THEM UP TO  
PERFECTION. I LOOK  
FOR PROJECTS IN  
PHILOSOPHY THAT  
ARE PRACTICALLY  
ENGAGED.

S: I'm not sure. Honestly, I think knowing Spanish hasn't been that helpful. I should do more to study texts outside of the English-speaking cannon, but I haven't been on the forefront of doing that kind of work. I *have* tried to remember why I was a Spanish major and why I loved Spanish when I first started learning it in high school. It was this idea that there are really vulnerable people in our community who need help and we ought to do what we can to provide help, to make ourselves useful. So, I don't think of philosophy as sitting alone in your room and thinking deep thoughts and then writing them down on paper once you think them up to perfection. I look for projects in philosophy that are practically engaged. And there are great role-models of this all around; this isn't something I'm claiming to have cooked up myself. But the aspiration is to use the habits of thinking that we learn and practice in philosophy to answer questions that matter to people or matter to our society, and then to try to figure out how to communicate those answers (and this is the part that's still very hard for me!) in a way that actually can help, or that can provide a clarity, or can elucidate some problem that people actually face. I think that's the sense in which Spanish stays with me.



**STANCE:** Considering that you were once one of us, an undergraduate philosophy major at Ball State and you started *Stance*, can you kind of tell us a little bit about *Stance's* origin story?

**S:** I can! I started *Stance* when I was a junior because I was involved in Phi Sigma Tau. Part of the mission of Phi Sigma Tau is to encourage undergraduate research. I asked my advisor, Dave Concepción, if we could make a journal. The first issue is kind of taped together. It's not very nice. But, it's a journal. Then the second year, I did it as part of an Honors College senior thesis. Then, not very many years later, someone who took it over began the transition of making it into what it is now. It's a laughably unearned privilege that I get to continue to be called the founder of *Stance* because it is such a different thing now. It is such a professional and inclusive and impressive thing. It's something that I feel very proud of when I get my issue every year, but I feel, how funny that I get to still say that I'm the founder of this thing that's totally different than what I started.

**STANCE:** In what ways has *Stance* gone beyond what you expected? What about it is different than how you thought it would be?

**S:** The thing that strikes me first is that it's just so slick. The graphics are beautiful. The website is beautiful. You have done the work of drawing people in from across the campus to contribute their talents, energies, and enthusiasms to make it something really beautiful. The cover art is gorgeous. I think, not only could I not have done those things, but I didn't have the vision to tap into all of the different skill sets across this campus and bring them into philosophy. This exposes other students to the kinds of things we do. Maybe they will have a slightly less caricatured version of what philosophy is. Meanwhile, while they're over here, they pitch in to make something really, really impressive. I think the other piece is that the reach is so broad. You've really turned it into a proper journal. You go to the APAs. You have an international standard serial number. You get submissions from across the globe. It's a thing that I hope you're all very proud of.

Part of my senior thesis was to take notes about what we were doing so that it could live on after the cohort of people who were doing it with me. There must have been a ritual burning of those notes when you were like, "This is a joke, we don't need this help anymore! We've moved so far past this." And you have! It just makes me so proud to see it every year.

**STANCE:** Moving into your work, which we really enjoyed reading. A number of your articles focus around education. We're curious, what made you focus on education? What led you to that line of questioning?

**S:** I think I was primed for it because I have been recovering for a long time from giving up this idea of myself as a social worker. I got to graduate school, and it just happened that one of the people who reached out to me and supported me and mentored me at Wisconsin was someone who was working on philosophy of education. He hired me to do some work for him one summer. It involved reading some books on justice in higher education, taking some notes, and writing up some commentaries. He liked something that I had written and asked if I would co-author a paper with him. Well, that's how he would tell it, but really, I think he was intentionally mentoring me in a way that was very much me-regarding. But he said, "Oh I just really want this passage that you wrote to be in the paper." It took off from there. So, I sort of fell into it; I got lucky. Somebody who I wanted to work with was working on that and I had opportunities to write.

I ALWAYS  
COME BACK TO  
EDUCATION. IT'S A  
CRUCIAL PART OF  
THE ANSWER TO  
HOW WE CAN HAVE  
A SOCIETY WHEREIN  
PEOPLE ARE MAKING  
THE CHOICES THAT  
THEY WANT TO  
MAKE.

The reason that I never stopped thinking of philosophy of education as being part of what I do is that everything else that I think about—all the abstract, straight political philosophy stuff, and stuff about gender norms and how social injustice can arise out of the totally mundane choices that people make which turn out to be really harmful, and my questioning about how the state can intervene into that nexus of social forces—through all that, I always come back to education. It's a crucial part of the answer to how we can have a society wherein people are making the choices that they want to make and have sort of broad freedom to live according to their own conception of value and yet the aggregation of the choices that they make doesn't lead to a deeply unjust society. Education seems so important as a mechanism for realizing social justice in society. It's a tool we can use to equip people with the skills they need to be citizens in a society like ours.

And there is a lot of political will to do something about injustice in education. We're not going to have a social revolution anytime

soon that eliminates poverty. But there's a lot of political will to do something about education. This seems like the kind of place where philosophical thinking and writing has a contribution to make to actual public discourse and policymaking. If you write in philosophy of education, you can try to influence the direction of public discourse about education or actual policy. I'm not sure that the work that I do will ever reach that level, but it's an important ideal of philosophy that I'm interested in keeping as a part of what motivates me to take on certain projects.

**STANCE:** That connects back to the idea that you wanted to be involved in something that created action.

YOU TRY TO THINK ABOUT WHETHER THERE'S ROOM AT THE MARGINS TO ORIENT YOUR RESEARCH WORK IN A WAY THAT CAN HAVE POSITIVE SOCIAL VALUE.

**S:** Yeah. When I think, "what would it look like for philosophy to be a helping profession?" the first thing I think about is teaching. That's a fairly straightforward way to contribute: teach well. The research part is what risks feeling more self-indulgent. So what do you do? First, you try to resist professional incentives that say you shouldn't care about teaching, you should only care about research. Then you try to think about whether there's room at the margins to orient your research work in a way that can have positive social value. I want to be clear that I'm pretty modest about the sense in which my work has so far done this, but it's an aspiration that I find motivating and uplifting. I think that's not nothing.

**STANCE:** You talk about helping other educators become better in your stereotype threat hypothesis article. We found those ideas really interesting. But we were wondering what you thought undergraduates in the discipline of philosophy could do to improve the retention of women in the field?

**S:** The answer I want to give to this question feels really dangerous because it risks sending a very essentializing message: that a certain kind of classroom conduct risks turning women off because women are too delicate for the aggression and confrontation of philosophy. I think it's really important to recognize that we can say that certain ways of conducting a conversation are disproportionately going to turn off women, and that doesn't entail any kind of essentializing view about what women are like. We just have a lot of social influences on the kinds of

...IF WE MADE  
PHILOSOPHY  
CLASSROOMS, AND  
PHILOSOPHICAL  
CONVERSATIONS  
GENERALLY,  
MORE ABOUT  
COLLABORATION...  
WE WOULD THEREBY  
MAKE OUR DISCIPLINE  
MORE DIVERSE.

environments that we find hospitable, the kinds of ways of thinking and asking and questioning that we find stimulating. I think it's plausible that if we made philosophy classrooms, and philosophical conversations generally, more about collaboration—recognizing a question that we all find perplexing and working together to make some progress toward maybe just clarifying the question, maybe towards realizing that some answers to it aren't really plausible, maybe some progress towards actually answering the question—we would thereby make our discipline more diverse.

We don't have to stop disagreeing or pointing out when our interlocutors make a mistake in order to make those spaces more collaborative. But I think we sometimes just treat philosophy as a game to be won, and we do that to our detriment. And I don't think that's why anyone who loves it is motivated to do it. I don't think that they get into it for those reasons. I think they get into it because they're questioning. I think they want to spend some part of their lives thinking about really important questions and contributing in some way to clarifying the questions or finding the answers. But then that's not the spirit in which many philosophers conduct their actual discourse.

I think that we have good reason to believe that a very antagonistic, confrontational style of doing philosophy is disproportionately off-putting to women. I think we have reason to believe it's disproportionately off-putting to people of color and working-class people. There is survey data about the reasons that people of different demographic groups give when asked, "Why did you come to college?" Women more than men come to college to do something of social value. Working-class people and people from low income backgrounds disproportionately come to college to give back to community. But, our messaging around what philosophy is good for is cast in very individualistic terms: "Learn how to be a critical thinker. Learn how to do really well on the LSAT."

We have so much reason, if we care about the discipline, to think in more collaborative terms, to think in more public spirited terms about the value of the discipline. Doing so will make the discipline better, and it will do that in part by making it more attractive to



the kinds of people whose voices we need in the discipline. But there's only so much that I can do as the person in front of the classroom to set up that kind of environment. I need help. I need the students to be on board with this project too. So, when we're reading something and engaging with it, let's try really hard to find what's great about it, what's right about it, and what we can learn from it. Then we can decide if it's ultimately correct. And let's treat your classmates' contributions in the same spirit. I think that that would make a big difference. I think faculty are kidding themselves if they think they can do that alone. Maybe some can. But *I* haven't been able to create that kind of collaborative classroom environment without first finding a way to motivate students to want to do it too.

**STANCE:** When you talk about educational justice in your article with Harry Brighouse, "Redistributing Justice Among the Less Advantaged: A Problem for the Principles of Justice?" you bring up three principles of justice. Can you please give us a brief summary of those?

SO, WE DON'T HAVE  
EDUCATIONAL  
JUSTICE. TO ACHIEVE  
EDUCATIONAL  
EQUALITY IS  
GOING TO REQUIRE  
MASSIVE REFORM.

**S:** One really important question in educational justice is: how do we want to think about student outcomes? Is it in terms of prospects for life flourishing? Is it in terms of test scores? Or maybe it's not outcomes at all that we care about; it's resource inputs: how much we spend on each student's education. Plug in your favorite student input or outcome to what I will say next. An equality principle of educational justice says that justice demands that all students get *that thing* equally. But on any plausible version of what input or outcome matters, the status quo is one in which some students get more than others. So, we don't have educational justice. To achieve educational equality is going to require massive reform.

Some people think the principle of educational equality isn't a viable principle of justice. One reason is that in order to achieve it, we're going to need to change a lot of things that have nothing to do with schooling. We talk about education as the gateway to opportunity, but a demanding principle of equality in education is going to require, for example, that kids not come to school so stressed out—about whether their parents can feed them, whether they can make the rent, whether they're going to have to move

again—that they can't possibly learn. And we know a lot about how poverty depresses someone's ability to learn in school, even if they're really trying. We're not going to achieve educational equality only through school reform. That's an important thing to say.

Another reason people might think justice can't require equality is that it looks like equality supplies a reason to ignore and neglect the more advantaged students. "Let's not teach them anymore; we gotta keep equality!". This is called the leveling down objection. In response, people who care about equality say, "Equality does give us one reason to bring this person back down to where everyone else is. But we care about other stuff too. We want some people to be rocket scientists or we want some people to be oncologists. That's ultimately going to make us all better off." Equality might tell us to bring this person down, but we have other reasons that we should attend to when we decide what we ought to do. The objection "Equality tells us to bring that person down" isn't convincing when equality is put in full context.

The adequacy principle says, "We just want everyone to be well-enough educated." We bring everyone up to this threshold and if there are inequalities above it, that's fine. So a lot about what adequacy actually demands will depend on where that threshold is.

Prioritarianism, the principle I defend in a different paper, says that policy makers and teachers should be guided by a commitment to attaching more moral importance to benefiting students in proportion to how badly off those students are in terms of their prospects for living a decent life. Taking care of a student with less good prospects has more moral weight than taking care of a student with better prospects. This doesn't mean one should never opt to take care of well-off students. It means that justice always favors working for less well-off student first. This is different than adequacy. Suppose all students are above the threshold. At that point, the adequacy theorists say, "We're done; educational justice is realized; we have no more reasons of justice to send resources to this district rather than to that district, or a teacher has no more reason to work with the struggling student, who is just barely above the threshold than with the overachieving student who is well above the threshold." A prioritarian principle says, "No, the moral importance of benefiting someone less well off persists even after everyone reaches the threshold of being decently well-educated." Prioritarianism may ultimately bring us to equality, but it's more action guiding in circumstances of injustice than are equality principles. So, those are the three principles.



**STANCE:** Okay. Thanks. So, in that article you say that you think that each principle is inadequate in some way. You argue that we either need to come up with a new principle or rethink one of them. What would be your recommendation?

**S:** The reason that they're all inadequate is that we face situations of moral triage. Think about the charter school case. On average, charter schools don't really do better for students than non-charter schools. But, when we zero in on a particular subset of charter schools—for example, Knowledge is Power Program [KIPP] schools, those that are committed to locating in places of extreme disadvantage and educating really disadvantaged children—the data is that they actually do benefit students. Again, the question of what the measure of success is matters. We have evidence that KIPP schools benefit students in terms of college entry, college completion, and test scores. But those measures might matter less than other things because we know KIPP schools get those benefits in part by imposing very regimented disciplinary regimes. Drilling curricula. They don't necessarily focus on teaching students to think critically or to love literature. That might ultimately mean we shouldn't do it. But what we know about high commitment charter schools is that they will raise those students' educational achievement and, thereby, their life prospects.

At the same time, KIPP schools are overenrolled. More people want their kids to go to them than there are spots available. So the schools admit by lottery, and the people who get in to them go there, which lowers the concentration in traditional public schools of kids whose parents are well-enough connected to get their kids enrolled in the lotteries. Charter schools plausibly do well by the students they enroll. But—and this is conjecture based on the importance of peer effects—they plausibly also depress the academic prospects of those who are left behind in traditional public schools.

Now, some of these students who are left behind are the ones whose parents enrolled in the lottery and didn't get a spot. So, we have a nice natural experiment, and we can say the ones who applied and got in end up better off academically than the ones who applied and didn't get in. But the *rest* of the students who end up in the traditional public schools are the ones whose parents didn't enroll them in the lottery, even though they could have. That's not to say those parents don't care about their kid's education. They are parents who maybe have a lot more stressors in their lives. But because those kids end up in traditional public schools

but now with a fewer classmates whose parents are especially well-connected and able to navigate the system, charter schools plausibly raise the academic prospects of some of the least advantaged students *at a cost* to others of the least advantaged students.

THERE'S A LOT  
MORE WORK THAT  
PHILOSOPHERS  
NEED TO DO IF  
THEY WANT THESE  
KINDS OF PRINCIPLES  
TO ACTUALLY  
SERVE AS TOOLS  
THAT TEACHERS,  
ADMINISTRATORS,  
OR  
SUPERINTENDENTS  
CAN USE TO THINK  
ABOUT HOW  
TO ALLOCATE  
RESOURCES...

So, we have a problem of moral triage, and a principle that just tells us to attach more moral importance to students in proportion to how badly off they are, doesn't give us enough fine grain guidance about how to act in those kinds of cases where a benefit to some unfairly badly off students is purchased in part at a cost to others. And plausibly, lots of social policy, given how unjust our society is, is going to be just like that. So, I think there is more work that we need to do to get principles of educational justice refined enough that they can provide guidance in cases like this. I think that prioritarianism, when we look at the abstract level—when we think what are its implications in hypothetical cases and then when we see what kind of action guidance it can give us in real life cases—is the most promising. But there's a lot more work that philosophers need to do if they want these kinds of principles to actually serve as tools that teachers, administrators, or superintendents can use to think about how to allocate resources, or how to allocate the best teachers among the schools in their district, or the best teachers among the different classes in their schools.

**STANCE:** Beyond lotteries for charter schools, you also talk about a lottery system in regard to higher education. Could you explain how a lottery would work in higher education?

**S:** This is from a blog post I wrote, so let's think of this as kind of spit-balling. I'll be interested to learn what people think about this. The first thing that I do in the blog post is point out that, even if we have had perfectly meritocratic admissions processes, even if we actually took the most qualified students, whatever criteria of qualification you think are the right ones to impose, we still have a problem. Maybe you have affirmative admissions in favor of applicants of color if they have been underrepresented. Whatever



EVEN IF PRIMARY  
AND SECONDARY  
SCHOOLS WERE  
DOING ALL THEY  
COULD, WE STILL  
DON'T PROVIDE  
EVERYONE A FAIR  
OPPORTUNITY  
TO *BECOME*  
*MERITORIOUS*  
ALONG WHATEVER  
DIMENSION MATTERS  
FOR COLLEGE  
ACCESS.

you think a perfectly just enrollment management and outreach system is, imagine that we've got it. Are we then able to think of higher education as being a kind of engine of justice? I don't think so. The problem is that, first, our primary and secondary education system is unjust. And even if they *were* just, we still live in a society that doesn't make sure kids have enough food to eat. Even if primary and secondary schools were doing all they could, we still don't provide everyone a fair opportunity to *become meritorious* along whatever dimension matters for college access. You don't have fair developmental opportunities, so even if you have perfect admissions standards, and you implement them perfectly, you are still going to disproportionately draw privileged students. The privileged will disproportionately go to selective colleges, and receive a leg up in all of the subsequent competitions for jobs and things like that.

When you think about that, then you think the most that we can hope to do is minimize the contribution we make to exacerbating social injustice. Is that the aspiration that we want for higher education, to just stop being really effective at amplifying social inequality and *unequal* opportunity? I don't think that's what we want. I think we tend to talk and think about higher education as if it can be better than that: It can help *mitigate* unequal opportunity. But that can't really be accomplished meaningfully by just making admissions more meritocratic. I think there are two upshots. One upshot is we need to think more about the *content* of what we provide students who come into these selective institutions. We need to discourage them from thinking about their education as something the rewards of which ought to be completely internalized. So, some selective institutions produce a lot of hedge fund managers. But the students in these institutions get a tremendous public investment. I think we ought to be a little worried about using public resources to produce so many hedge fund managers. And there are ways to change the institutional incentives so that students think more about the public investment that goes into their education. Not brainwashing, but there are ways of changing the culture that I think would be helpful.

One of those ways of changing the culture would be to impose a standard of excellence: “No applicant admitted to this institution will be below this specified threshold of excellence. But above this threshold of excellence, we admit by lottery, just randomized admissions.” This does a couple of things. First, it makes vivid and undeniable to those who get in what’s already true, which is that they’re there in part because they worked hard, in part because they’re talented, but largely because of luck. That’s true now too because there are so many more very, very talented students than there are spots available in these institutions. So you can learn very little about the difference between two people by saying, “One got into selective college X and one didn’t.” There are just so many great, great people who didn’t get in. But what if everyone who got in knew that the reason that they’re there is that their card was drawn? I think that for some people that would change the way they think about the kind of experience they’re going to have while there, and maybe what they ought to do with either just the credential that they get or the sort of enhanced human capital that we hope they get while they’re there. You’re not going to lower the standards because there are really, really great smart students who can’t get into these places because there are just fewer spots than there are amazingly talented people. You just make vivid to people that you’re here in part because of luck. Again, that’s true now but you would make it more manifest. I think that that would be good for the ethos of the institutions.

**STANCE:** We were wondering in regards to this lottery system if you thought it might discourage students from excelling beyond that minimum requirement to get into the university? Like, what would the incentive be to do better if you don’t have that competition to get into the prestigious universities?

AT THIS POINT, THE  
WAY AMBITION IS  
MANIFESTING ITSELF  
IS PURE WASTE.  
THAT’S NOT THE WAY  
WE WANT PEOPLE TO  
BE THINKING ABOUT  
HOW THEY’RE  
SPENDING THEIR TIME  
IN HIGH SCHOOL.

**S:** This is so interesting. There’s a *modus tollens* here: “If this would cause people to be a little bit less ambitious, then we shouldn’t do it.” The second premise is, “This would cause people to be a little bit less ambitious.” Now, I don’t really think it would cause people to be a little bit less ambitious, but that’s less important to me. So take the first premise. What are the dimensions of merit along which high school students who want to go to a Harvard or a Yale or a Princeton are really trying to show themselves? I’m not in admissions. But it seems to me that it’s how many extracurricular activities you



do, it's how many leadership positions you have on this or that. That's valuable stuff. but it is becoming an arms race. People want to be able to say, "I'm the president of sixteen things and you're only the president of fourteen." At this point, the way ambition is manifesting itself is pure waste. That's not the way we want people to be thinking about how they're spending their time in high school. They're thinking so much about the extrinsic value of the things that they do, in terms of how it looks on a college application. If that's the kind of ambition that we lose with lottery admissions, I am happy to let it go.

**STANCE:** In addition to education, your work focuses a lot on issues of gender. In a blog post about whether it matters that Hillary Clinton is a woman you say "for any particular role of power or prestige, given existing gender imbalances, we have some reason to support women in pursuit of that role." But then you go on to say that, "We should not have supported Carly Fiorina, after all." So, we were wondering if this was to imply that rectifying gender imbalance is only important insofar as our own personal political interests align with the candidate's interests, and how do you balance your own political interests with trying to rectify that gender imbalance?

**S:** That's a really great question. That blog post was about the democratic primary between Clinton and Sanders. So there's an implied audience when I'm saying, "Should we support Clinton because she's a woman?" The audience of that article is people who are deliberating between these two options. My claim was that for the most public, visible, highest-level leadership positions in society, in our circumstances, we plausibly always have some reason to want those positions to be filled by women. Because what we know is that there are lots of little girls who don't even consider that they would be the president. We have lots of social science research that shows that seeing someone that you think is like you along the dimensions of likeness that are salient in your environment is really important to the possibility of you aspiring for something. So if we want to live in a society where little girls can aspire to be president, then we always have some reason to hope for a woman president. I think that that's true. But this is a defeasible reason, and that's true in the quote of mine that you just read as well. We have *some* reason. A lot of things that we have reason to do, those reasons could be trumped by something else. I really want to go to the zoo so I have some reason to go to the zoo because it would satisfy this desire I have to see the animals. But it turns out that one of the lions is loose and he's tearing people limb from limb. So, I don't have most all things considered reason. I better stay out of the zoo. Maybe, unless I should go in there to save somebody or something.

I think we always have some reason to want the people who are visibly exercising authority and making decisions on behalf of the public to be women. The question is, how weighty is it? How much of a consideration on the other side can trump it? My question was, “What would the woman have to be like, or what would the alternative have to be like, such that the woman-favoring reason would be outweighed in these circumstances?” I make that point by saying, you, my intended audience of this article, are not supporting Carly. So, you don’t think this is a *decisive* reason. I was interested in arguing that various differences between Clinton and Sanders justified us thinking the woman-favoring reason is outweighed in this case, even though it would be great if we could have a woman president. In this case it’s fine. We can be on “Team Sisterhood” and still “Feel the Bern.”

**STANCE:** In your book you focus on the gendered division of labor and trying to come up with an argument for gender egalitarian intervention. Can you give us an elevator pitch of your argument in the book?

SO, TO CHANGE  
OUR SOCIETY IN  
ANY MEANINGFUL  
WAY, WE’RE GOING  
TO NEED POLITICS.  
WE’RE GOING TO  
NEED THE TOOLS OF  
ALL OF US COMING  
TOGETHER AND  
DECIDING THAT  
WE’RE GOING TO  
CHART THIS OR  
THAT COURSE.

S: First, the question of the book is a question of legitimacy. So to just get a sense for what this concept “legitimacy” even is, imagine for yourself a sort of North Star, a perfectly just society. Here’s where the legitimacy question comes in. We notice that we all have a different vision of what that North Star, perfectly just society is, and we live in a society where we think that those disagreements matter, and any way of getting there from here is going to require some way of overcoming the collective action problem or the collective inaction problem. So, to change our society in any meaningful way, we’re going to need politics. We’re going to need the tools of all of us coming together and deciding that we’re going to chart this or that course. But, in a democratic society, we think the fact that we disagree about where we ought to head matters. We think the fact that heading in this direction rather than that is going to impose costs on you more than it imposes costs on me matters morally. So, we have questions about justice—about what the right direction to go is. But what I’m really interested in in this book is questions

about what principles constrain our use of politics, of our collective democratic power, as we try to move closer to some version, or some range of versions, of the North Star.

I TRY TO ARGUE  
THAT EVEN WITHIN  
THESE PRINCIPLES,  
IF WE UNDERSTAND  
THEM CORRECTLY,  
THEY ALLOW FOR  
SOME PRETTY  
PROGRESSIVE  
POLITICAL ACTION  
TO BRING ABOUT  
JUSTICE.

I think the right principles of legitimacy impose constraints not just on what we can aim for, but on how we can get there from here. I take on a particularly restrictive, constraining set of principles, and I try to argue that even within these principles, if we understand them correctly, they allow for some pretty progressive political action to bring about justice. In this book I make the case with respect to some policies that would push us more toward a society where we have fewer gender norms and less collective social messaging that perpetuates gendered choices about who should specialize in caregiving and who should specialize in bread winning. But as an aside, I think these principles can also guide us in thinking about, for example, how radical our educational reform legitimately can be or—to refer back—what kind of culture of higher education we can legitimately promote. So the framework, I think, is helpfully applicable across lots of policy questions and contexts.

In the book, I argue that we can legitimately impose a pretty controversial regime of family support policies. So consider: There are lots of social democratic European states that offer significant amounts of paid leave when you have a kid; you can stay home with your kid for a while. They offer it on a gender-neutral basis, so dads get it, moms get it. The data shows that such policies don't really erode the gender division of labor because you just free people from the financial need to stay attached to paid labor. If you free people from that need, then you effectively free *women* from that need because, given existing gender norms, women are going to take up leave at much higher rates than men. So, one thing that has effectively been done is to allocate leave to individuals rather than to the domestic unit. You can say, "If you're in a two-parent family, then each parent gets an allocation of leave, but for each parent if they don't use it, they lose it." This is a built-in inducement. The opportunity costs of men leaving their leave on the table are much higher because they can't default their leave to

their partner. This seems intrusive in various ways. I mean, I can describe it in a way that makes it sound really neutral: “Allocate the leave to the individual rather than to the household.” But we are restricting the way people can use a social provision. Relative to the status quo where we don’t give parents anything, it’s still very generous and maybe nobody will complain. But it seems like we need some sort of justification for attaching these levers to family leave policy to try to very gently nudge people into a certain way of using it. I try to make the case in the book that we can do it.

**STANCE:** Towards the end of the book you talk about how one of your worries with your argument is that it might not be accessible to the public. Do you think that citizens can affirm an argument that they don’t understand? How do you think you could make the argument more accessible to your average person who doesn’t have a philosophy background?

THE QUESTION IS,  
ARE THERE REASONS  
SUFFICIENT TO  
JUSTIFY WHAT I  
THINK WE SHOULD  
DO POLITICALLY,  
THAT I CAN OFFER  
TO SOMEONE WHO  
IS IDEOLOGICALLY  
VERY OPPOSED TO  
WHAT I’M SAYING,  
REASONS THAT  
REST ON INTERESTS  
THAT WE SHARE AS  
FREE AND EQUAL  
CITIZENS?

S: What I say in the conclusion of the book is that the way I think about legitimacy asks, are there reasons that can justify this policy, that everyone can affirm *as* reasons, regardless of their particular set of values? Someone who really wants a traditional gender division of labor, who effectively has to leave half of their family’s leave allotment on the table because only mom is going to take off work and stay home with the kids, only gets half of the social support compared to a different family who would spread it equally. Can we justify to them what we’re doing, without denying the truth or the validity of the way of life they want to live? I don’t think it’s legitimate to do this kind of policy if the only grounds that we can give to citizens is, “Gender equality is right, and you’re making a mistake if you want to have a housewife and a bread-winner husband.” I don’t think we should do that because I don’t think it’s *true* that they’re making a mistake. But even if I thought they were making a mistake, in a democratic society, I shouldn’t be able to assume that they are for the sake of justifying my policy. The question is, are there reasons sufficient to justify what I think we should do politically, that I can offer to someone who is

ideologically very opposed to what I'm saying, reasons that rest on interests that we share as free and equal citizens? I argue over the course of the book that, yes, there are such reasons. But—and this is where you question comes in—having the existence of these reasons is very different than it being the case that all citizens can reason from these premises to that conclusion.

What I find unsatisfying about the argument is that it's not the kind of argument that you can imagine being offered in public discourse, at least as our public is comprised now. The question is, in addition to having a public reasons case for some policy, does it also need to be the kind of case that could actually be offered in public discourse? My thinking on this is that, yes, it does, but that can't mean that it has to be so simple that anyone as currently constituted could follow it. Why can't it mean that? Because one thing everyone agrees on is that we should protect certain basic liberties, even if lots of people don't want to. Even in a society where the vast majority of people think that only white people should get to vote, the vast majority shouldn't get their way. We should let everybody vote; we should let everybody have basic political equality. Now, the argument for why we should do that, and more importantly the argument for why we should insulate that political protection from majoritarian democratic processes, is complicated. That's not necessarily an argument that everyone can follow. So saying that the argument has to be followable by everyone as currently constituted is too high a standard. It would rule out kinds of political protections that I think we should treat as a fixed point.

WE HAVE TO  
PREPARE CITIZENS  
TO BE ABLE TO  
FOLLOW COMPLEX  
ARGUMENTS  
BECAUSE THE  
WORLD IS COMPLEX.

But what this means is that, in order for our public to operate on these kinds of principles of reciprocity and justificatory community, we actually have to think very seriously about what public education is going to look like. We have to prepare citizens to be able to follow complex arguments because the world is complex. Citizens need to be able to understand complicated arguments in order for us to be able to live up to the aspiration of democratic community. So I think its complicatedness is ultimately not a great reason to reject my argument, but the complicatedness of political justification is a very good reason to think seriously about the ways we have to change the public political forum to allow for

the exchange of more complicated sets of public reasons and public reasoning. And it is a reason to change education.

**STANCE:** You talk about the gendered division of labor as being an injustice where it would be wrong of us not to intervene and do something under political liberalism. Additionally, in one of your previous answers, you talked about how education might be another place where this could apply. What are other pressing social issues that you think we have an obligation to intervene in right now?

**S:** There's one question about what we have to do if we're going to realize justice. The thing I'm doing more in my work is saying, "What do we have to do if we want to live up even to the more minimalist standard of legitimacy?" It's about which principles constrain how we can permissibly act to get to our North Star from where we are now. But I think that once we realize the values that inform the constraint, we can see that those values actually demand some things, too. Some of their demands are non-controversial ones, like protection for certain basic liberties. When the majority votes against something that is crucial for people to be able to exercise their basic political liberties, I think that's when we have a role for the judiciary to come in and say, "What the majority wants just doesn't win the day in this case because this is the kind of basic citizenship interests that we are going to protect for everyone, even if the mood of the country right now doesn't favor that." That's a kind of clear case that I think most people will get on board with. Or, think about *Brown v. Board of Education*. Most people look back on this and think that was the right thing to do in that case. Controversial or not, it was legitimate—and indeed demanded by legitimacy—to intervene politically to right a wrong. For me, what makes it the case that we must intervene politically to right a wrong is that I can say to all of the people who don't want to do that, "Let's get down to the very bottom, bedrock values that we have to get on board with in order for us to have any hope of living together in a functioning society, and make the case from there." These values include the ideal of mutual respect among citizens who are free and equal, but who disagree profoundly about what kind of society we should live in. There's a lot of moral content embedded in this ideal: mutual respect; free and equal citizenship. If I can make a case that we have to protect basic liberties that at bottom rests on only those values, then unless you're not even on board with the basic project of democratic governance and having a society of equals that's regulated on terms of mutual respect, then you should agree that we can do this thing to protect basic liberties. I think some of the more substantive measures for voter

re-enfranchisement that progressives are now agitating for can be justified in this way. We need to build the case, we need to make it clear why a commitment to mutual respect among free and equal citizens leads to saying you basically shouldn't do the modern equivalent of poll taxes. But I think the case is available.

**STANCE:** In your book, you acknowledge that the interventions you're justifying using political liberalism go beyond the kind of interventions that are normally justified by political liberalism. Do you view yourself as making an addendum to Rawls, or do you think you're using his work to create a new distinct kind of theory?

**S:** I want to say the latter, but it sounds bolder than I'm comfortable being and it sounds a little bit audacious. I'm not trying to do Rawls *scholarship*. I think that there are these ideals at the heart of the project of late Rawlsianism that are right. And then Rawls builds this edifice atop those ideals. I think some of his buildup goes wrong in certain ways. I think most Rawlsians think that, though they disagree about which ways. But the foundational aspiration is right: The ideal of arranging the terms of our social cooperation to preserve mutual respect among citizens understood as free and equal *should* be the guiding ideal of arranging social cooperation. Now there are all these questions, "What does it mean to be free and equal?" and, "What is mutual respect, how do we understand that in a society where everyone disagrees?" But I think we can start there, and then think about what that means for education or for our tax-and-transfer system. I am generally less interested in the question: "Do you have a right to call this Rawlsianism?" It is definitely a departure from the extension of the theory that Rawls was going for, but I think it starts with the same fundamental commitment that he started with. I certainly can't call it Rawlsian political liberalism, but it's very much inspired by what I take to be the commitment of political liberalism as he understood it, not on the right *textual* interpretation of what Rawls was doing, but on the interpretation that gets him close to being right about the facts that should guide us in terms of thinking about our social cooperation.

**STANCE:** Since Rawls is a big influence on your work and you work at Harvard, do you ever write philosophy in his office that's about him?

**S:** I asked my colleague Chris Korsgaard about whether Rawls had ever been in the office I now use. She said, "No. Rawls's office actually was the office that I have." Her office is next door to mine, so, I write philosophy in the office next door to Rawls's old office.

Chris went to Harvard for grad school, so she went to advising meetings in that office. And she said, “To this day I don’t really think of it as my office, I feel sort of like an interloper in his office.” I asked her if it was okay that I share that because I think it’s such a lovely tribute, and she said it was okay.

**STANCE:** Do you think that taking a job at Harvard, a very prestigious school, undermines your stated egalitarian aims in education? Harvard may exemplify some of the problems you have with education?

**S:** Before Harvard, I was teaching at Illinois State, a regional public institution. I taught a lot of first generation and low income students. It felt like if I worked really hard and taught them really well, that was a good contribution. I would be doing important work.

As I was deciding what to do, someone sent me an article about social class and race at Harvard. Now, Harvard provides massive amounts of financial aid. They’ve done lots of outreach to try to make sure that everyone knows that they shouldn’t not apply to Harvard because of money. But none of that really was what convinced me. What convinced me was this article about how the effects of this social and economic heterogeneity play out in the classroom. There are all of these students, first generation college students from low-income, working-class backgrounds who show up at Harvard and it’s culturally so alien to them. They don’t know about office hours. Their peers seem so confident and performative in the classroom. These students can feel like they have no idea what’s going on, and everyone else fits in effortlessly.

I CAME TO THINK  
THAT THERE WOULD  
BE INTERESTING  
CHALLENGES THERE  
FOR SOMEONE WHO  
WANTED TO GET INTO  
THIS POSITION AND  
REACH OUT TO THE  
STUDENTS WHO FELT  
ALIEN IN THAT PLACE  
AND SUPPORT THEM  
IN VARIOUS WAYS.

I came to think that at Harvard, I could teach students who would go on to be leaders—not that that’s not true at Illinois State—and I could help them think about the kinds of decisions they would make in positions of leadership more critically, informed by a faculty with moral considerations. I would also have an awareness of the problems that the students who are at Harvard who aren’t culturally *of* Harvard might be confronting and try to raise awareness of that. In general, I think the privilege of getting to work at Harvard is a tool, and you can do good things with it or you could do bad things with it. I came to think that there would be interesting challenges there for someone who wanted to



get into this position and reach out to the students who felt alien in that place and support them in various ways. But the real answer is that this question bothers me a lot.

**STANCE:** As someone who started out like us and has had a successful career in academic philosophy, the last question we wanted to ask you is, what advice do you have for undergraduates who are interested in pursuing academic philosophy as a career?

**S:** I was thinking about the advice that I got that has stuck with me, and there are two things. One came from my parents. They always said, “You should do what makes you happy, and you should work hard at it. You can take a risk and do what makes you happy.” I’m pretty sure that there aren’t a lot of people who have that kind of support. I’m pretty sure neither of my parents got that advice, for example. And that’s not because their parents *didn’t* want them to be happy. It’s because the kind of support that comes with that advice is something that lots of people won’t be in a position to give. Part of what came with that bit of advice from *my* parents to *me* was also the knowledge that... I wasn’t going to be homeless, because they were working really hard to make sure that I would have a home to come back to when I tried to be a philosophy professor and failed! That is the kind of advice that I can’t give you because I’m not going to give you a home. But the advice I *can* give is this: If you have that freedom, you should just remember how rare it is. It’s a pretty special thing.

HE TOLD ME THAT  
I SHOULD PURSUE  
PHILOSOPHY ONLY IF  
I COULDN’T IMAGINE  
NOT DOING IT.

The second piece of advice came from Dave Concepción. He told me that I should pursue philosophy only if I couldn’t imagine *not* doing it. I think that was great advice. It has really stuck with me, and I’ve passed it along. I confess that I didn’t follow *the letter* of that law, because I *could* imagine doing other things—but I couldn’t imagine anything else that would be as meaningful to me. And so I think I followed the spirit of the advice.

I would add, not the sort of soaring advice that I was fortunate to receive, but a couple of mundane things. First, you have to work really hard. Philosophical skill isn’t something you either have or lack. You have to think of this as a craft that you invest in honing, and it takes a lot of work. Lastly, think about what you can do to leave the profession and the discipline better than you found it. There’s a lot that’s great about philosophy. The people

PHILOSOPHICAL  
SKILL ISN'T  
SOMETHING YOU  
EITHER HAVE OR  
LACK. YOU HAVE TO  
THINK OF THIS AS A  
CRAFT THAT YOU  
INVEST IN HONING,  
AND IT TAKES A LOT  
OF WORK.

who are thinking about doing this as a profession probably love it the way that I love it. But there are a lot of contingent things about what it looks like to do philosophy professionally that a lot of us regret. If a lot of us are working hard at the margins to make it a more hospitable place for more people, then we will make it better. And we can make it better in a lot of other ways, too. We can resist the incentives of the profession that we don't necessarily think are right, for example the incentives to not care much about teaching because that's not what gets you tenure. I'm not saying that people who are adjunct faculty are doing something wrong when they are just trying to publish. But if you reach a point where you have a little bit of comfort and you have a little bit of space to try to buck the incentive structure, then do that. Think about why you love the discipline and what you can do to help it stay true to those things about it that light us up.

**STANCE:** Thank you again so much for coming. We appreciate it a lot.

**S:** Thank you.

