



# Essays in Philosophy

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## Engaged Philosophy: Showcasing Philosophers-Activists Working with the Media, Community Groups, Political Groups, Prisons, and Students

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### Abstract

By drawing on a selection of interviews from the website Engaged Philosophy, this paper highlights the work of philosopher-activists within their classrooms and communities. These philosophers have stepped out of the ivory towers and work directly with media, community and political groups, people in prison; or they encourage their students to engage in activist projects. The variety of approaches presented here shows the many ways philosophically inspired activism can give voice to those who are marginalized, shine a light on injustices, expose the root of social problems, and empower others to seek solutions. This work shows the relevance of philosophy to practical problems and the powerful effects it can have in the world.

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Philosophers-activists combine their academic discipline and their passion for activism in exciting and fruitful ways, using their skills and interests to make tangible change. The three of us—Susan Hawthorne, Ramona Ilea, and Mo Janzen—have showcased our work in dozens of interviews presented on our website, *Engaged Philosophy*. Here we offer a sampling from those interviews; these summaries highlight projects of philosopher-activists who engage with media, community and political groups, and people in prisons, or who encourage their students to work on activist projects.

These philosophers clearly do not fit a single profile. They work in a wide variety of philosophical areas, including ethics, social and political philosophy, feminist philosophy, philosophy of science, and metaphysics. They come from every type of educational institution, including top-tier universities and community colleges. Some are well-known philosophers who have been tenured for decades, while others are independent scholars or graduate students. Those who work in media raise awareness of social issues among wide audiences; philosophers (often together with their students) who partner with the community use skills of listening, charitable interpretation, and analysis to find solutions; those who work in prisons confront challenges to both prisoner-student and teacher; and those who include student-led activist projects in philosophy courses help make philosophy engaging and transformative.

Our hope is that these projects can inspire readers to develop projects of their own. The *Engaged Philosophy* website offers [guidance](#). The interviews provide helpful inspiration and a wide variety of models that can be replicated by other philosophers. The site also includes multiple tools to implement activist or civic engagement projects in philosophy classes, including examples of projects our students have done for the past ten years, assignment guidelines, grading rubrics, and assessment data.

In the summaries that follow, we have used present tense unless the example was clearly in the past. People might be working on different projects now. Each person's affiliation also reflects where they were at the time the interview was conducted, not necessarily their present affiliation.

## Media

One goal of activism is to educate the wider public about a problem and raise awareness. The philosophers showcased in this section achieve this aim by using their platforms to highlight the philosophical issues on which they work. They connect philosophy to the world outside of academia and advance social justice projects by working with the media: podcasts, monthly columns, radio shows, and even movies.

**Peter Singer** is Ira W. DeCamp Professor of Bioethics in the University Center for Human Values at Princeton University and Laureate Professor at the University of Melbourne. He has reached countless people all over the globe with his accessible and highly influential books on the treatment of non-human animals, bioethics, and effective altruism. But he also has a [monthly column](#) that is distributed to newspapers in over a hundred countries, as well as a website based on his book *The Life You Can Save*—now available as a free ebook or audiobook—that has directed millions of dollars to its recommended charities. While his views often stir up controversy, Singer remains focused on using a variety of platforms to reduce unnecessary suffering and make the world a better place.

**Eric Weber**, currently at University of Kentucky, uses many media to bring a philosophical lens to topics of importance to the public. He writes columns for *The Clarion Ledger* of Jackson, MS, *The Lexington Herald-Leader*, and *The Prindle Post* at the [Prindle Institute for Ethics](#); and serves as Executive Director of [The Society of Philosophers in America \(SOPHIA\)](#). His recent books, such as *Democracy and Leadership* and *Uniting Mississippi*, are written accessibly to reach wide audiences. Together with [Anthony Cashio](#), he creates the popular radio show and podcast *Philosophy Bakes Bread*, which has tackled dozens of issues including disability, feminism, environmental issues, democratic activism, and social change.

**Joseph Stramondo** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Philosophy at San Diego State University. His work shows how systems of power work through narrative to oppress disabled people by distorting their identity and agency—and challenges that oppression. While he uses a variety of strategies in this work, a recent project was his and his spouse's participation in the documentary film *Far from the Tree*, which is streaming on Amazon Prime and Hulu among other platforms. The film challenges the “bad-difference” narrative of disability in favor of a “mere-difference” narrative. It allows Stramondo a far-reaching public platform to make the case for disability pride by discussing his and his spouse's identity as Little People.

**Perry Zurn** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religion at American University. His often-collaborative work in curiosity studies, critical prison studies, and trans philosophy crosses university-community boundaries as well as disciplines. He unites his research with outreach. For example, as his edited collection *Curiosity Studies: A New Ecology of Knowledge* was being prepared for publication, he worked on a podcast, *Choose to Be Curious*, with radio host Lynn Borton and the book's contributors. Another project, the university-community collaborative Curiosity, Mindfulness, and Education, works to enhance learning processes and increase awareness of social

location and histories of inequality. Studying curiosity, Zurn says, “is inseparable from re-imagining curiosity for underserved and/or neurodiverse learners.”

**Barry Lam**, Associate Professor of Philosophy at Vassar College, is the founder, host, and executive producer of the popular podcast *Hi-Phi Nation* for Slate.com. Using narrative-driven approaches, the podcast tackles knotty philosophical problems in current events, history, and daily life. Reaching broad audiences brings Lam in touch with people who can make a difference on the ground. For example, after an episode on predictive policing, an officer in charge of implementing the technology contacted Lam about appreciating the show’s fair treatment of the issues, and made a decision informed by the ideas presented.

**Peter Shea** is an independent scholar who received his PhD in philosophy from the University of Minnesota. He has, for more than two decades, interviewed one thoughtful person per week for his regional cable show, *The Bat of Minerva*. Rather than topics, the series focuses on lives—urban, rural, academic, nonacademic, rich, smart, glamorous, ordinary. It makes the interviewee’s life available to others, so that they can think about their own lives in comparison. The interviews also model prolonged and civil conversation, and they archive the ways individuals made decisions amid the dynamics from 1995 to the present.

### Community Groups (Including Politics)

While many philosophers have long felt that the classroom is their arena, some philosophers step outside the ivory walls and bring their skills to community groups, including political entities. The philosophers showcased in this section engage in activism by giving voice to injustice and seeking positive solutions to these problems with their community partners. While there are a variety of approaches highlighted here, the common theme is that philosophy is not done to the community but with the community.

**Roksana Alavi** is a renewable-term Associate Professor in the Interdisciplinary Studies Program at the University of Oklahoma Extended Campus (College of Professional and Continuing Studies); she also contributes to OU’s Women and Gender Studies and Iranian Studies programs, as well as to its Social Justice Center. She serves on a state-wide task force on human trafficking, focusing her work on prevention and community partnership. The 40-person task force developed training modules for various professionals that take cultural diversity and ethical issues around vulnerable populations into account. They have made community alliances by supporting youth programs, employment pro-

grams for at-risk adults, and local NGOs that serve at-risk people. Alavi recommends beginning such work by showing up to learn and gradually increasing involvement.

**Adam Briggles**, Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religion at the University of North Texas, does “field philosophy,” which wrestles with the philosophical issues embedded in real-world problems. Field philosophy requires active engagement with the problem and the community, including real-world efforts to make change. For example, Briggles and his students worked in Denton, TX, to engage community members, other stakeholders, and the City Council in an effort to ban hydraulic fracturing (fracking) within city limits. This and other projects tie the resources of philosophy and of Briggles’s land-grant institution to community need.

**Zachary Piso** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Dayton. He engages stakeholders in his community around issues of food justice, helping large-scale farmers, smallholders, urban growers, cooperative grocers, agricultural scientists, and others, to co-construct shared priorities and projects. Doing practically-oriented conceptual analysis with such groups has aided mutual understanding around agricultural values such as safety, community building, sustainability, economic growth, and expectations for governance. In this work, he collaborates with social scientists who have core expertise in community-engaged, participatory, and place-based research.

**Andrea Christelle**, founder of [Sedona Philosophy](#), based in Arizona’s Verde Valley, specializes in bringing philosophy into people’s everyday lives. Sedona Philosophy engages residents and visitors to the Sedona area in ways that create opportunities for dialogue and enrich people’s lives. Community-based programs include a local [SOPHIA](#) chapter collaboration with Ben Franklin Circles, and a League of Women Voters series on philosophy and politics. To visitors, they offer hiking or river trips during which they engage in dialogue to help people connect to the natural world and to philosophical thinking that can have an impact in their lives.

**Adam Blazej** is a graduate student in the Department of Philosophy at Columbia University. He facilitates reciprocal, transformative, philosophical discussion with members of marginalized communities in the NYC area. Blazej coordinates [Rethink](#), a group of volunteers based at his university’s philosophy department who reach out to marginalized communities such as formerly incarcerated youth and victims of gender-based violence. For example, they partner with the Justice Community of the Osborne Association to facilitate philosophical discussions that the students and staff at the Association help plan. These community members, and others they work with,

share their expertise to help the volunteers develop socially and emotionally appropriate approaches to philosophical dialogue.

### **Specific Community Projects with Students**

Similar to the group above, this group of interviews highlights the work of philosophers who step outside the university's boundaries, but they do so with their students. Together, they help expose the root of social problems and work with communities to address important social issues. The classroom provides a forum for students to understand and wrestle with theoretical concepts, but these philosophers invite their students to do more: to work as a team, to cultivate their particular interests, and to make connections between what they learn in class and what is going on in their communities.

**Sharon Meagher** is a philosopher of the city and an advocate for socially responsible higher education. Formerly Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences at Widener University, she is now Academic Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of the Faculty at Marymount Manhattan College. She has developed a partnership and a college course with Xasasti Yolistli, an indigenous women's economic cooperative in rural Puebla, Mexico. Students work on eco-development projects requested by co-op members. They also study the area's ecology and the ethical and political imperatives of eco-friendly technologies. The partnership and course emphasize solidarity and awareness of the community's assets. They also aim to teach students lessons of determination and grit—tools they can use as they put their ideals into action.

**John Torrey**, a philosophy PhD candidate at the University of Memphis, runs an outreach program, **Philosophical Horizons**, through which undergraduate and graduate philosophy students conduct philosophy discussion groups or classes with pre-college students—in particular, pre-college students from groups underrepresented in philosophy. The project entails building school partnerships, recruiting and training student leaders, and ongoing program evaluation. Torrey finds that the philosophical engagement helps participants understand who they are as individuals and as community members, and it gives them tools to engage with and contribute to their communities.

**Kathie Jenni** is a Professor of Philosophy and Director of Human-Animal Studies at the University of Redlands. Her engaged work with students focuses on working with and for animals. She teaches a one-month seminar that combines study of animal ethics with service at rescues and shelters for domestic and wild animals. Typically, the service is direct—like mucking out pastures. Through the service, students form relationships with non-human animals, and they experience animals' emotional and mental capacities, as

well as facts like killing in shelters. Many students find the study and experience transformational, choosing after the course to dedicate their lives to working for animals.

**Amy Reed-Sandoval** is an Assistant Professor and Director of Graduate Studies in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Texas at El Paso. She directs the Philosophy for Children (P4C) in the Borderlands program, in which college students facilitate bilingual P4C classes in cooperation with community partners in Texas and Mexico. The college students—some studying P4C, some volunteers—appreciate giving back to their communities, and they deepen their interest in thinking philosophically. Around 150 children annually benefit directly from participation, and the surrounding community has embraced the P4C movement, adopting its methodologies in other programs that empower children and youth.

**Sharyn Clough** is a Professor of Philosophy in the School of History, Philosophy, and Religion at Oregon State University. She is also the Director of Undergraduate Studies in Philosophy and the Curriculum Coordinator for the Peace Literacy Program. Moreover, she directs the [Phronesis Lab: Experiments in Engaged Ethics](#) which brings undergraduate and graduate college students together with “at risk” students at a local high school. The curricula, such as one based on peace literacy, model engaged philosophy; focus on social justice at the community level; and develop students’ identity, participation, motivation, and self-efficacy. The philosophically informed social justice work the students do is transformative for them and for the community.

## Prison

Activism seeks to empower those who are marginalized, and prisons offer a unique opportunity in which to do this. In fact, we have been struck by the remarkable number of philosophers who work with those in prison. While prisoners experience a limitation of their physical freedom, prison philosophy programs invite them to experience freedom of the mind—they offer prisoners a place to explore new ideas, gain educational skills, and participate in meaningful discussions.

**Nancy McHugh** is a Professor and Chair of Philosophy at Wittenberg University. She teaches traditional undergraduates and incarcerated students as part of the [Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program](#). Courses meet in a local prison, bringing together 15 inside students (inmates) and 15 outside students (traditional college students). Her Inside-Out courses have included Many Faces of “Justice,” “Knowing Bodies,” “Global Health Justice,” and “The Art of Living Ethically.” The inside students are highly engaged learn-



ers; the outside students find their perceptions challenged; and the instructor is compelled to think about justice, ethics, obligations to others, and the power of philosophy.

**Eduardo Mendieta**, Professor of Philosophy at Penn State University Park and Associate Director of the Rock Ethics Institute, partnered with **Efrain Marimon** to launch the **Restorative Justice Initiative** at Penn State's Rock Ethics Institute. Its activities include an education program for prison inmates. Mendieta teaches a course called "Quest of the Hero" at the State Correctional Institution at Benner. While the Restorative Justice Institute is working toward delivering degree-granting programs in prisons, among other initiatives, Mendieta personally focuses on caring about the "forgotten citizens" he teaches.

**Lori Gruen** is the William Griffin Professor of Philosophy and Professor of Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and Science in Society at Wesleyan University. She coordinates Wesleyan Animal Studies and she teaches introductory ethics and political philosophy, environmental ethics, and advanced philosophy seminars at a maximum-security men's prison. Rather than falling into the trap of speaking for others, Gruen works to help incarcerated students pursue their own philosophical interests, and she is motivated and inspired by observing their resourcefulness and passion. She has helped some of her incarcerated students publish their work, and she has presented their work at a philosophy conference on care ethics.

**Katheryn Doran**, an Associate Professor and Chair of the Philosophy Department at Hamilton College, runs a book group for incarcerated men through the Hamilton Oneida Prison Education (HOPE) faculty group. Book group members, who tackle texts like Michael Sandel's *Justice* and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, are remarkable for their persistence and for their unwillingness to passively accept the writers' authority or to tolerate inauthenticity or limited perspectives. Participation is also a steppingstone toward a GED, for-credit college courses while in prison, and new identities as readers.

### **Student Activist Projects**

Traditionally, philosophy has been conducted in classrooms. Students explore new ideas and gain theoretical knowledge about important topics. Those we interviewed take an additional step. They invite students to practice theoretical ideas out in the world, requiring students to develop practical skills but also skills vital to citizenship: independent thinking, leadership, time management, task-delegation, follow-through, communication, organizational, and problem-solving skills. Activism helps awaken passion and care for others and for social issues. The philosophers showcased in this section encourage



their students to make a difference in their communities by exercising their agency and putting their philosophical ideas into practice.

**Monica Janzen** is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Anoka-Ramsey Community College where she teaches students from diverse economic, cultural, and political backgrounds. Her “Experiments in Ethics” assignments encourages ethics students to explore topics and build skills. Scaffolding the hands-on [assignments](#)—giving games, self-chosen volunteer activities, writing a letter to a person in power, cultivating a virtue, and organizing a change-making activity—equips students to handle the more complex assignments. Janzen wants students to know that they are cared for, and that they can make a difference.

**Yi Deng** is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of North Georgia. She builds her lower-division Ethics from a Global Perspective course around the [Engaged Philosophy](#) model. In multiple sections of the course, Deng’s students might, collectively, have over 30 projects underway. Students collaborate with local organizations to complete projects on campus rape, river pollution, food poverty, homelessness, recycling, sex trafficking, kindness, animal welfare, Down syndrome awareness, and many others. Deng finds that the projects do immediate good, and illustrate the relevance and value of philosophy in students’ lives.

**Stephen Bloch-Schulman**, Associate Professor of Philosophy at Elon University, maintains relationships with partners and allies on and off campus, enabling him to introduce students to varied opportunities that meet his—and their—pedagogical goals. For example, students in a Women, Gender and Sexuality course performed monologues that inspired the campus community to discuss gender injustice. Students in an Ethical Practice course explored trust by talking to strangers to produce a blog called “Humans of Alamance County,” and others have worked with the local community’s participatory budget process.

**Danielle Lake**, Director of Design Thinking and Associate Professor at Elon University, teaches engaged, interdisciplinary courses that combine design thinking, community engagement, and philosophical work on wicked problems. Design Thinking is a project-based, collaborative process students use to solve real problems in their communities. For example, one group of students discovered that access to clean, fitting uniforms was a barrier to K-8 school attendance in their community. They prototyped a now-thriving uniform swap program. The pedagogy fosters relationship across difference, builds student capacity for change, and supports community resiliency.

**Lisa Kretz** is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Director of the Ethics program at the University of Evansville. While teaching in an [Ethics and Social Change major](#), she uses civic engagement to empower students. In stages of complexity as students progress through the program, projects include volunteering and reflection; self-identified short-term action projects, such as a river clean-up day; and semester-long community engagements requiring research and action. Kretz finds that unlike classroom-based ethics courses, in which students often feel overwhelmed by world problems, civic engagement courses assure students that they can change the world for the better.

**Sarah Donovan** is Interim Dean of Integrated Learning and Associate Professor of Philosophy at Wagner College in Staten Island, NY. She teaches within learning communities of 20-30 students. Each cohort takes introductory ethics, either Spanish language and culture or documentary filmmaking, and a reflective tutorial; and they undertake community outreach. The Spanish language cohort tutors children at an immigrant center; the documentary filmmaking cohort partners with a local nonprofit to create short films of family's lives, helping connect families with kin remaining in Mexico. The civic engagement creates common experiences that enrich classroom discussion.

**Chad Wiener**, a Lecturer in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Old Dominion University, teaches his Honors Introduction to Ethics course using the [Engaged Philosophy](#) model for civic engagement: Students develop their own semester-long projects; they may or may not partner with local organizations. Projects have included a toy drive for hospitalized toddlers, a college-awareness initiative for a local high school, and bringing a drag show to campus to benefit a local charity. Wiener finds that the projects help students examine their actions, society, and lives in ways unlikely with classroom-only experience.

## Conclusion

The interview summaries here—along with the many other interviews at [Engaged Philosophy](#)—represent a growing community of philosophers undertaking activist or socially engaged work. We hope to interview many more philosopher-activists in the future.

Remarkably, although the range of projects is broad, our interviewees consistently say that such work is very fulfilling—it has tangible results in communities, it brings new perspectives to their academic work and teaching, and it is satisfying in and of itself.

If you're inspired to get started, there are resources available on the *Engaged Philosophy* site: [teaching materials](#), [examples of student projects](#), important [publications](#), and a list of relevant organizations such as the [Public Philosophy Network](#), which hosts a regular meeting at which projects, successes, and questions are discussed; the American Philosophical Association, which provided the seed grant to launch *Engaged Philosophy*, also has a [Public Philosophy Committee](#); the [American Association of Philosophy Teachers](#) and its workshops and conferences; [PLATO](#) (Philosophy Learning and Teaching Organization), a national organization that advocates and supports introducing philosophy to pre-college students; and organizations highlighted in the interviews, such as SOPHIA and the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program.

In a time when institutions of higher education are making cuts and determining which departments contribute to their missions, some think philosophy has lost its relevance. We hope that this selection of interviews shows quite the opposite. Philosophers are out in the world framing important issues, engaging students in meaningful work, and working for justice.

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