Committee on Public Philosophy

2021–2022 Membership

Lewis Gordon, chair (2023)
Helen De Cruz (2022)
Inmaculada de Melo-Martin (2022)
Aubrey Spivey (2022)
Kal Alston (2023)
Jeanette Joy Harris (2023)
Nathan M. Nobis (2023)
Peg Brand Weiser (2024)
Thom Brooks (2024)
Michael A. Vazquez (2024)
American Philosophical Association Public Philosophy Committee Report
September 2022

The Committee on Public Philosophy’s most significant achievements over the last few years are (1) increasing awareness of the importance of public philosophy and publicly engaged philosophical work among professional philosophers in the United States, (2) transforming public philosophy from an activity regarded as extraneous to philosophy into its growing status as a subfield of the discipline of philosophy, and (3) supporting the work of public philosophers through developing resources of recognition in the profession and supporting specific institutional development, through academic institutions and other forms of learning centers and public forums, of ways through which public philosophers could reach their targeted audience.

A common misconception of public philosophy is that it is an area of “applied philosophy” instead of the development of original research and pedagogical activity. This often takes the form of critics asserting a condescending interpretation of public philosophical work as confined to writing op. eds. The difficulty here is that responses could affirm instead of challenging the derision of philosophical op. eds. Additionally, that view elides the history of philosophy as a publicly engaged practice from antiquity through the various epochs to the present. In fact, it was the tumultuous period of the Cold War that led, primarily in Anglophone countries, to the valorization of philosophical work that ignored the world beyond silos of like-minded professionals.

The initial charge of the Committee on Public Philosophy (henceforth CPP) focused on addressing issues of pressing public interest. As the context of this committee’s formal work is the American Philosophical Association (APA), the professional gatherings led to intellectual exchange through which rethinking the idea of public philosophy came to the fore. The CPP is not the only committee reflecting on these issues, as there are committees, ranging from the Committee on the Status of Black Philosophers to the Committee on LGBQT People in the Profession to the Committee on the Status of Women, devoted to problems of equity, social justice, and disciplinary practices of exclusion, among many other issues outlined in their statements of purpose. Members of the CPP have been members of the others. The intersections and sharing of ideas led to an ongoing development of ways in which these various committees complement each other. The CPP plays an important role in, through such organic collaborations, contributing the increased profiles of once marginalized areas of philosophy. This collaborative effort led to a reflection on public philosophy in its own terms. Among the conclusions of some of the writings of public philosophers, such as past Chairs Lynne Tirrell and Jason Stanley, and the current Chair, is that “private philosophy” contradicts the ethos of philosophy, whose enduring conception is the quest for truth through, as the Allegory of the Cave in Plato’s Republic avers, humanity stepping increasingly out of ignorance.

As a public-oriented practice, public philosophy is produced through multiple platforms. All public philosophers also specialize in other subfields ranging from aesthetics, epistemology and
ethics to metaphysics, philosophy of language, logic, social and political philosophy and more. This affords access to varieties of professional publishing platforms from journals to book publishers. The CPP’s approach in other areas ranging from blogs to newsletters to national newspapers of record was and continues to be to elevate the quality of what is produced in those mediums in addition to doing the same in the academically hegemonic ones. This approach applies as well to institutions of learning ranging from middle through secondary schools to community colleges, senior colleges, and research universities. Further, the CPP addresses openness and reach through its members’ work in unconventional institutions of learning such as carceral facilities, community center, political workshops, unions, and those organized by nonprofit organizations and, depending on the expertise of the member, private companies invested in concerns of public responsibility.

It is crucial to consider that the past two decades are marked by historical challenges many of which were intensified since 2016 and exacerbated after the 2020 US Presidential Election and the subsequent attempted coup on January 6, 2021, and the ongoing efforts of its perpetuators. These problems of imperialism, radicalized economic inequalities, racism, and rising fascism led to members of the CPP being pulled in many directions in addition to their formal, ongoing duties in their places of employment.

This is the CPP’s stated charge:

On the belief that the broader presence of philosophy in public life is important both to our society and to our profession, the basic charge of the committee will be to find and create opportunities to demonstrate the personal value and social usefulness of philosophy.

The work of this committee, which will be coordinated wherever possible with the work of the other APA committees, is expected to include the following kinds of activities:

1. Organize and support programs that demonstrate the personal value and social usefulness of philosophy, such as suitable lecture series, and radio and television appearances by philosophers.

2. Organize and support programs that bring public attention to philosophy and philosophers, such as book signings.

3. Establish ties to national and local media.

4. Prepare appropriate news releases for the divisional meetings of the APA and for other events of philosophical significance.

5. Serve as a conduit so that media and other inquiries can be channeled to appropriate individuals in the profession.

6. Create or support the creation of audiovisual materials useful for calling attention to philosophy and for garnering support for philosophy.

7. Encourage APA members to engage in public debate about significant issues by such means as sponsoring op-ed essay contests.
8. Establish contact with politicians, civil servants, and opinion makers to impress upon them the full scope of the contributions philosophers can make.

9. Make common cause with ethics institutes and other organizations in promoting the engagement of philosophy with broader publics.

The transition to the current instantiation of the CPP was marked by a few bumps because the chair nearly passed away from COVID-19 and was then hit with prolonged illness of long-COVID. Nevertheless, many of the directives of the committee were achieved with some expansion.

The first was the preparation of “Guidelines for Evaluating Public Philosophers.” That is included as an appendix with this document.

There were other achievements, such as the selection of the winners of the Public Philosophy Op Ed Contest:

Brownlee, Kimberley: “Social Needs Are a Human Right”
Craig, Megan: “The Courage to be Alone”
Fileva, Iskra: “What Do We Owe the Dead?”
 Schroeder, Andrew: “How Many Have Died?”

Winners of the Berry Fund grants:

Dena Dshottenkirk: “European Collaboration with talkPOPC”
Alice Winham: “opp (oxfordpublicphilosophy.com)—philosophy online educational platform”
Kyle Vanoosterum: “The Philosopher's Nest”
Chelsea Harry: “Philosophy in New Haven Public Schools”

There were four outstanding applicants recommended by the committee for the Whiting Public Engagement Fellowship. Melissa Jacquart was selected by the organization as a Fellow.

The CPP was more active in 2021 than 2022 primarily through monthly MicrosoftTeams meetings on the Channel created by the Chair. Spring 2022 through summer had disruptions because of many conflicts in schedules. There were, however, some Zoom meetings to discuss collaborating on various projects of the members. These include Kal Alston’s Imagining America Project, Aubrey Spivey’s work in prison education, and Nathan Nobis’s efforts to heighten the profile of Historical Black Colleges and Universities in the APA. The CPP also worked with the APA Blogs, especially Black Issues in Philosophy.
Finally, Thom Brooks is the elected Associate Chair of the Committee, which means he will be as of July 2023 the next chair. He is an excellent choice who will continue the global profile of the committee.

Lewis R Gordon,
Chair of the Committee on Public Philosophy
Academic philosophers and political theorists working in public philosophy are inevitably evaluated for their research, teaching, and service at their institutions. A misunderstanding that at times occurs is that public philosophy is relegated to “service” or “citizenship.” Although some publications and contexts in which public philosophers teach could be properly regarded in such terms—for example, conducting a community workshop or writing guidelines for community service—there is also a vibrant environment of research, scholarship, and teaching on and of public philosophy in its own terms. The Committee on Public Philosophy offers these guidelines or considerations for faculty and administrators charged with evaluating the research and scholarship of scholars specializing in public philosophy.

Research and scholarship could easily be assessed in terms of publications. The issue is about venues and targeted audience. By definition, public philosophy addresses not only concerns of public interest but also questions of what constitutes and should be of public interest. This can be done in journals and publishing houses geared for reflection in scholarly communities, but it more than often focuses on forums with wider readership across disciplines and contexts. This includes what are at times called “public intellectual” periodicals such as Les Temps modernes and Tumultes in France, or Radical Philosophy and The London Times in the UK or, in the USA, Dissent, The New York Times philosophy forum The Stone, The New Yorker, The Atlantic, and journals such as Radical Philosophy Review, Public Culture, Critical Inquiry, The American Scholar, The Kettering Review, Philosophy and Global Affairs, and more. As well, in some of the “mainstream” journals there are articles published in public philosophy. Philosophy and Public Affairs, Critical Philosophy of Race, Social and Political Philosophy, Philosophy Today are noted examples. The political theory journals Theory and Event and Contemporary Political Theory are also noteworthy examples, as well as Law Reviews and Public Health journals. There are also journals that may not at first appear to be venues for public philosopher such as The Journal of Consciousness Studies, Applied Philosophy, and Environmental Philosophy, but they have published articles at the intersection of their main focus and public philosophy. Although blogs are at times frowned upon by many academics, some are of high quality and go through peer-review processes. The APA Blogs are of that quality. So, too, are those for the World Health Organization and UNESCO. What is crucial in these cases is that they are not personal blogs by the candidate but instead those in which the work is subject to review and can thus be rejected if of low quality.

We are aware of scholars whose colleagues speak derisively of work in public philosophy as “op eds.” The trap here is a familiar fallacy. Not all op. eds are the same—just as not all journal articles are the same and of high quality, regardless of the reputation of the journal in which they are published—so to ignore reading and assessing them simply on the basis of their being in the form of an op. ed. betrays epistemic and professional chauvinism. The advice of the committee is for the scholars to set an agreement with their department chair or promotion and tenure committee or officer at their institution that their work in public philosophy may include
publications in that form that the candidates would, if the publication is taking the form of a philosophical argument, include in their dossier of published work to receive external evaluation.

With regard to publishing houses for public philosophy, there is the usual range from university presses (Cambridge UP, Duke UP Harvard UP, Indiana UP, MIT Press, Princeton UP, Oxford UP, U. Minnesota—U. Arizona, U. Oklahoma, and U. Nebraska [especially for public philosophical work in the field of Native American Philosophy]) to academic trade (such as Beacon, Blackwell, Bloomsbury, Hurst, Palgrave Macmillan, Polity, Rowman & Littlefield, Routledge, and Verso), and mega-trade presses (such as Giroux Farrar & Strauss, HarperCollins, Macmillan, Mifflin, Penguin Random House, and Simon & Schuster). There are also organizations from UNESCO to OXFAM and a variety of public research institutes that publish work dedicated to research in the public interest.

Thus far, we have been concentrating on public philosophy scholarship. Harder to evaluate but also important is the engaged citizenship aspect of public philosophy. Contributions to radio, tv, podcasts, webinars, and websites are examples of contributions along these lines.

There is also a critical pedagogy aspect to public philosophy. A paradigm example is teaching philosophy in correctional facilities, with programs such as the Center for Prison Education at Wesleyan and the Northwestern Prison Education Program having prominent philosophical programs and founders. We also include under critical pedagogy philosophy teaching in community centers and other off-campus sites such as elementary and secondary schools.

There is also a service component to public philosophy as far as public outreach is concerned. Founding a public philosophy journal or outlet would be an example or testifying before public boards from municipal councils to the federal government and to international organizations such as the United Nations and Oxfam. Another example is participating in Amicus briefs for courts.

**Departments Strong in Public Philosophy**

To compile such a list will always fall short of expectations. Our apologies for any program not mentioned here. This list is to offer a point of departure for those researching on and making such assessments. Departments strong in public philosophy range from those at research institutions to “teaching” colleges. We place “teaching” in quotation marks since all faculty in higher education is expected to be involved in research if even on the subject of teaching. A reputation in an area is often premised on having an influential scholar in that field. Some institutions have a group of scholars. Additionally, some institutions, by virtue of their mission statements, require scholars in each discipline to be strong in civic engagement. Many Catholic universities, for instance, expect a public and civic presence from their faculty on social themes reflecting their values. Additionally, many Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and institutions devoted to the education of women offer a strong presence of scholars in public philosophy.
With those considerations in mind, we offer the following non-exhaustive list of institutions with asterisks next to those with a group of scholars (as opposed to having only a single scholar) who write on, in, and identify public philosophy as one of their specializations:

- American University*
- Binghamton University*
- College of Wooster
- Cornell University
- CUNY (all the colleges, but especially Brooklyn, Hunter, John Jay, Lehman)*
- Dartmouth College
- Emory University*
- Florida Atlantic University
- Fordham University
- Georgetown University*
- George Washington University*
- Harvard University
- Haverford College*
- Howard University*
- Johns Hopkins
- Marquette University
- McGill University
- Michigan State University*
- Mississippi State University
- Morgan State University*
- Muhlenberg College
- New School University*
- Northwestern University
- Oakton Community College
- Penn State University*
- Queens University (Canada)
- San Francisco State University*
- Swarthmore College
- Spelman College
- Vanderbilt University
- Vassar College
- Wesleyan University
- Purdue University*
- University of Connecticut*
- University of Massachusetts at Boston
- University of Memphis*
- University of New England
- University of San Francisco*
- University of Toronto*
- Yale University*