Report on Berry Fund Grant for Ask a Philosopher

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Overview

I received a grant from the Berry Fund to facilitate the launch of Brooklyn Public Philosophers’ Ask a Philosopher booth. The plan for the booth was straightforward. Some local philosophers and I would set up a table at a venue with significant foot traffic. We would talk to passersby about their philosophical questions and, where appropriate, recommend philosophical resources for visitors to check out for themselves. I would be there for the entire event, and other philosophers would work in two hour shifts. We would also advertise upcoming talks at the Brooklyn Public Philosophers speaker series. We discovered at the first event that it would be helpful to provide questions and prompts for visitors who didn’t have questions of their own. At subsequent events, I brought a bowl of philosophical questions (e.g. “Who do you trust?”, “What was the happiest day of your life?”, “Can the news be objective?”), a bowl of thought experiments (e.g. Sen’s flute case, Avicenna’s flying man, the ring of Gyges, the beetle in the box), and a bowl of candy.

We have held four Ask a Philosopher booths so far – one at the Grand Army Plaza Greenmarket in Brooklyn, two in the Union Square Greenmarket in Manhattan, and, most recently, one at the Brooklyn Book Festival. The first event ran for eight hours. The others ran for six.

Spending

I used the grant from the Berry Fund to purchase a canopy and a banner I had designed saying “Ask a Philosopher”, with the logos of Brooklyn Public Philosophers and the Brooklyn Public Library (which hosts the speaker series). I provided the table, chairs, and candy. I and the other philosophers volunteered their time.

Evaluation

The goal of the Ask a Philosopher booth is to demonstrate the value of philosophy for addressing non-philosophers’ spontaneous concerns and to encourage people to find out more about philosophy. It’s hard to measure success in achieving those goals, but we did get a sense of (a) how many people visited the booth, (b) how many people signed up for the Brooklyn Public Philosophers mailing list, (c) whether visitors to the booth came to subsequent Brooklyn Public Philosophers events, (d) whether the events received any additional attention from the press, and, more subjectively, (e) of the quality of the discussions we had.

We didn’t keep a precise count of visitors to the booth, but I would estimate that 350 stopped by over the course of the four events, most of whom engaged in substantial discussion. Some visitors to the booth had significant formal training or background knowledge in philosophy, but the vast majority did not. Visitors were also diverse in age, ethnicity, and occupation. Around 70 people signed up for the
Brooklyn Public Philosophers mailing list. I noticed several people at Brooklyn Public Philosophers talks whom I first met at an Ask a Philosopher booth. The Brooklyn Paper and The New York Times wrote about the booths, and I wrote two pieces (here and here) about the booths for the APA Blog. The booths were also promoted by local events listings, such as the skint.

The quality of the discussions was, overall, quite high. In addition to the questions we posed ourselves, visitors asked and talked about: individualism and civic virtue, whether you are an expert about how happy you are, gentrification, the social function of the library, whether there are more positive numbers than positive odd numbers, what artificial intelligence might teach about personal identity, the existence of god, logicism, whether international business transactions with workers in poor countries are necessarily imperialistic, what philosophy is, integrity and utilitarianism, the ethics of drone warfare, the metaphysics of sexual orientation, why there is something rather than nothing, strategic voting, gun violence and political corruption, how to help older men deal with changing norms of masculinity, libertarianism, what you can do with a degree in philosophy, people’s relationship problems, when it makes sense to take someone’s death personally, whether anything really matters, effecting change in people’s moral attitudes and decision-making, free will, Ayn Rand, and legislating morality. In several instances, visitors to the booth – complete strangers – stuck around talking with each other even after I and the other philosophers had turned our attention to other visitors.

The future of the Ask a Philosopher booth looks bright. The Brooklyn Public Library is interested in funding and promoting future events. We are planning to set up Ask a Philosopher booths at retail spaces, airports, subway stations, hospitals, campfires, museums, and cemeteries around the city.

While I don’t have significant information about whether the booths sparked further thought and discussion, my sense is that they were very successful.

I have included below some pictures taken from the events we’ve held so far.