The Role of Commentator at APA Meetings

Philosophers follow a long-standing disciplinary norm governing presentations at conferences, including the annual meetings of the American Philosophical Association: a philosopher presents a paper, followed by prepared comments on the paper by one or more commentators. This norm requires that the speaker share the paper with the commentator in advance, that the commentator prepare and share their commentary with the speaker in advance, and that neither alter their work prior to the presentation.

At the annual meetings of the APA, colloquia include one speaker and one commentator, symposia include one speaker and two or more commentators, and book symposia include one speaker and two or more commentators. In other words, the contributions of commentators are a significant part of philosophical presentations at annual meetings of the APA.

Philosophers continue to practice this norm that places commentary at the heart of philosophical presentation because philosophy is a fundamentally dialogical, communicative, social practice. In short, philosophy is done in conversation. Without commentators, we cannot do philosophy. The role of a commentator who has thought about the paper in advance, at length, and in writing focuses live discussion at the conference on the key issues and provokes deeper and more decisive philosophical exchange. Audiences at annual meetings of the APA attend sessions to see philosophers in dialogue with one another, something that would be impossible without commentators.

In addition, such philosophical commentary often leads to marked advances in the research and thinking of the commenting philosopher. Nearly all experienced philosophers have one or more papers on their CVs that began life as a comment on another philosopher’s work, and many debates arising from the paper/comment format have gone on to shape the field of inquiry in important ways.

Thus, participation in conferences as a commentator is an important part of a philosopher’s scholarly and professional contribution and development, and it is good practice to treat this role on all fours with paper presentation itself in institutional funding policies regarding travel and reimbursement. We recognize that travel and research funding is increasingly limited at colleges and universities. We hope that this statement on the role of commentators at annual meetings of the APA will clarify the unique and vital role that commentators play in philosophical work.