

ON DEVELOPING CRITICAL AWARENESS

Jonathon Hawkins (JH): As a starting point, could you tell me a bit more about who you are and what you do? This issue is about public philosophy, so I'm interested to know: do you consider yourself a public philosopher?

Jack Symes (JS): I am currently a teacher and researcher at Durham University where my work focuses on philosophy of mind and religion. Outside of the university, much of my work falls into the category of 'public philosophy'. For the past eight years, I have been producing *The Panpsycast Philosophy Podcast*, which – thanks to the work of our incredible team – regularly features amongst the world's most popular higher education podcasts. I am also the editor of *Talking about Philosophy*, a series of books that include interviews and essays from the world's leading thinkers. The first book in the series, *Philosophers on Consciousness*, was published in 2022, and the second, *Philosophers on God*, will be available in February 2024. Finally, the team and I also produce live events, featuring prominent philosophers in debate and discussion. This year, over six hundred people registered for tickets for our show at the Royal Institution Theatre. That was a wonderful thing to be a part of!

The goal of our work is to make philosophy engaging and accessible to the public. As a team, which consists of both philosophers and teachers, we often reflect on how we should be presenting ideas. We have come to think that the purpose of public philosophy ought to go beyond teaching people *about* philosophy; as public philosophers, we have to support people in the *practice* of philosophy and bring people into the conversation.

JH: What is public philosophy? And what exactly is it that makes someone a public philosopher? Public opinion often embraces the distinction between 'field,' 'popular,' and 'activist' philosophy. However, in my interview with David Edmonds, he questioned whether public philosophy should be defined in this way. Do you agree, or does your definition encapsulate this distinction?

JS: Public philosophy, in its broadest sense, is philosophy for the wider public and not just those in academia. Within this definition, there are various views that one could take, which brings me to your second question. The public engages with the work of public philosophers directly. That's what it means to be a

a conversation with Jack Symes

‘public philosopher’. I think this raises some interesting questions. For example, when composing their work, must a philosopher *intend* for their project to reach the public? And *how many* non-academics need to engage with their work before it should be considered as *public*?

In my view, public philosophers are on a spectrum; each of us exists somewhere between highly effective and highly ineffective. Personally, I don’t think you need to have a large body of work or a significant amount of public engagement to be considered a public philosopher. Similarly, I don’t think public philosophers need to be motivated, desire, or even identify as public philosophers. You know what they say about ducks right? If you walk, swim, and quack like a duck...

JH: Then you’re probably a duck?

JS: Well, yes, or a rabbit! As to your other question, I like the distinctions people draw between different types of philosophy – such as ‘field’, ‘popular’, and ‘activist’. I don’t have a problem with those who carve up public philosophy and say, ‘*This is the purpose of this content*’, so long as they’re prepared to accept that there’s going to be overlap. I would be interested to hear what David Edmonds thinks about your distinctions. After all, I am sure he would accept that there are meaningful differences between *Philosophy Bites* and *The Panpsycast*.

JH: What sort of differences do you have in mind?

JS: Well, *Philosophy Bites* allows professional philosophers to offer concise and accessible summaries of their work. In contrast, *The Panpsycast* produces deeper, critical guides to their work. Both have their place, and they both serve meaningful purposes, but they’re very different projects.

JH: I think we can agree that public philosophy comes in lots of different forms. But on your definition, what should its aim be, if anything?

JS: I don’t see the aims of public philosophy to be much different to those of philosophy teachers. Our team – especially Andrew Horton and Oliver Marley – have spent a long time perfecting their teaching practice. Whether they’re in the classroom or producing public philosophy, their focus is always about helping audiences cultivate the skills they need to practice philosophy.

Our responsibility as public philosophers, especially as we move further into the Age of Information, is not just to disseminate the best ideas in philosophy but to do so in ways that allow audiences to develop their critical awareness. Sometimes we need to look under the bonnet and get our heads dirty. After all, we don’t just want car enthusiasts, we want car mechanics!

JH: What role, if any, do you think academics should play in helping the public cultivate these skills? Do you think that academic philosophers have an obligation to produce, or at least engage in, philosophy in the public sphere?

JS: I think there’s a place for everyone. Whether academics are on the front line or making progress behind the scenes, we all have our part to play. Some commentators believe that all academics should be reaching out to the public. I don’t think that’s right. After all, good public philosophy depends on good academic philosophy; the best ideas are, more than likely, going to be the ones that can withstand academic scrutiny. By chipping away at their research, philosophers can still make important, *indirect* contributions to public philosophy.

This is also my answer to your question as to whether philosophers have an obligation to produce public philosophy. I think it’s enough for philosophers to make indirect contributions. After all, if academic philosophers aren’t making progress on the big questions, then what are public philosophers going to talk about?

IF ACADEMIC PHILOSOPHERS AREN’T MAKING PROGRESS ON THE BIG QUESTIONS, THEN WHAT ARE PUBLIC PHILOSOPHERS GOING TO TALK ABOUT?

JH: What do you make of the view that not everybody is ‘cut out’ to be a public philosopher?



JS: Granted, it's a lot easier to produce podcasts, books, and magazines with those who are familiar with producing public content. However, public philosophy isn't about picking from the scholars and ideas that are already popular. I think it's crucial that we support academics in the differentiation and dissemination of underrepresented ideas. Now, if an academic is willing but unprepared to make a direct contribution, then we need to offer them our patience, planning, and guidance. However, if somebody doesn't want to get involved with public philosophy directly, then that's fine too. In the rare case where philosophers are unwilling to engage in public philosophy, it's up to us to make their ideas accessible to the public on their behalf.

JH: Who, if anyone, should make the final call on what counts as public philosophy? Is it academics? Public philosophers? Or popular figures claiming to be doing public philosophy in the mainstream media? In short, who gets to say that quacking and swimming are all it takes to be a duck?

JS: I don't think you have to be disseminating academic research in order to be doing philosophy. As your

question suggests, there are lots of public figures whose ideas haven't been subjected to the same scrutiny as professional philosophers. That's not necessarily a bad thing; we ought to be encouraging people from all walks of life, public figures or not, to be engaging with philosophy. With that said, I think the best public philosophy is going to be informed by the research. That's why, in my view, we need to be supporting those who are working at the intersection of public engagement and academic research.

JH: You have recently received criticism for platforming some popular figures rather than philosophers. The most recent example being Richard Dawkins, who was featured in your recent live event (*The Mystery of Existence*), on your podcast (*The Panpsycast*), and in your forthcoming book (*Philosophers on God*). What motivates this criticism and how do you go about responding to it?

JS: I think the criticism comes from a good place. Our audience wants to engage with the best that philosophy has to offer. Who can argue with that? With that said, I think there are competing aims at play. Let's take your example of Dawkins. In each of the examples you've cited, the main criticisms I have encountered are that (one) Dawkins is not a philosopher and that (two) he doesn't represent the type of thinking that the public ought to be engaging with.

Let's take each in turn. On the first point, let's assume the criticism is right: Dawkins, as he claims himself, is not a philosopher. However, as peculiar as it might sound, I don't think that public philosophy should be restricted to philosophy. Science and philosophy, for example, have a lot to learn from each other, and demonstrating this to the public can benefit both fields. On the second point, I think an important part of public philosophy is engaging with the public and their worldviews. Dawkins's ideas are very popular with the public and, therefore, I think it's important to discuss them. Furthermore, by bringing Dawkins into conversation with other thinkers and perspectives, you bring the public along with him, and promote work that – according to the critic, at least – the public 'ought' to be engaging with.

JH: Yet, by promoting Richard Dawkins's work, aren't you just making somebody who is already popular, even more popular?

JS: In one sense, but I think the criticism overlooks the deeper purpose of our work. As I said, the goal is to get Dawkins – and, by extension, the public – to engage with the best research in academic philosophy. I think the examples you mentioned have achieved this. Moreover, it’s important to recognise that our project also aims to support students and teachers of A-level Religious Studies. As part of their qualifications, students of Religious Studies, in the UK at least, have to study Dawkins’s views on a range of philosophical questions. Many of the exam boards specify him by name. His work is an *essential* component of the existing courses. I don’t think many people consider this when they criticise our collaborations with Dawkins. Our project works to support existing students and, therefore, it’s important that we cover the relevant material.

In short, I don’t think we should be ignoring science, exam specifications, public figures, or the views of the public. If our goal is broadening conversations and cultivating engagement, then I think we can have our cake and eat it too!

JH: What do you hope the future holds for public philosophy?

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JS: I would like to see more work promoting in-person, public engagement with multicultural philosophy. I think in-person engagement with philosophy has become a bit of a luxury. Most large-scale events in public philosophy are paid events that typically take place within Anglo-European countries. Furthermore,

these events often focus on traditions from their own cultures. In 2023, for example, *HowTheLightGetsIn* – the world’s ‘largest philosophy festival’ – listed 150 speakers. I was surprised to learn that just two of these speakers were philosophers from underrepresented regions (that is, countries outside of Australia, Europe, or North America). I have a lot of positive things to say about *HowTheLightGetsIn*, and the criticism I raise is not unique to them – our own projects, for example, needs to do a lot more to promote multicultural philosophy – but it’s something I’d like us to address.

To some extent, I think this trend has sustained ethnocentric biases in philosophy more generally. If we’re not cultivating public interest in ideas beyond those of our own cultures, then our philosophy departments will continue to be restricted to their localised traditions. I think this is going to change, and it’s a change that I’m excited about.

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