

PUBLIC PHILOSOPHY PANEL
INTRODUCTION

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In 2017, I had the honor to be encouraged to propose a panel of papers on public philosophy for *Dewey Studies*. John Dewey was the quintessential public philosopher. He did not have all the answers, but he saw how important it was for philosophy not merely to play with fun ideas for privileged scholars, but to consider the obligations that intellectuals have for making life better for and with our fellows.

Among the authors of each of the three papers included in this panel is at least one member of the Society of Philosophers in America (SOPHIA), whose mission is “to use the tools of philosophical inquiry to improve people’s lives and enrich the profession of philosophy through conversation and community building.” John Dewey was a champion of the instrumentalist outlook, which saw ideas as tools for making life better.

In their paper, “Philosopher-as-Liaison? Lessons from Sustainable Knowledge and American Philosophy,” Danielle Lake and Paul Thompson demonstrate how obstructive the impediments to interdisciplinary and publicly engaged scholarship can be in our colleges and universities. There are scholars engaged in such work, but institutional structures and disciplinary traditions threaten public scholars in real, meaningful, and troubling ways. Any future in which public philosophy is to be encouraged must take into account the considerations that Lake and Thompson raise, and can, as they argue, benefit from the example they highlight from sustainability science. We need not reinvent the wheel when we have good examples available to us about how to combat entrenched traditional and disciplinary challenges. The Deweyan idea of the liaison-officer has been fruitful in sustainability sciences, and can be applied elsewhere with benefit. Among their most useful insights in learning from sustainability practices is the overall orientation that they clarify, which draws on the liaison-officer concept from Dewey, while addressing the problems of disciplinary navel-gazing, interdisciplinary out-ward looking from one’s discipline, and feed-back loop dangers that stem from traditional disciplines. Lake and Thompson explain how the liaison officer metaphor informs an approach akin to bridge-building between different disciplines to span boundaries necessary

for addressing problems that reside between the spaces of traditional disciplines. Lake and Thompson are clear about the challenges, dangers, and potential costs to such work, but the risks of failing to engage in boundary-spanning inquiry can mean the failure to address some of humanity's deepest existential threats.

It is important to appreciate the threats and impediments to good public philosophy, a theme in Lake and Thompson's essay as well as in the other two. In their powerful piece, "Taking it to the People: Translating Empirical Findings about Black Men and Black Families through a Black Public Philosophy," Tommy J. Curry and Gwenetta D. Curry note and highlight the threats to philosophers who speak against the more accepted, dominant themes that seem non-threatening to white liberal scholars and journalists. Curry and Curry reveal how some people find it radical to expect empirical evidence for the claims that some theorists advance, especially about Black males. Curry and Curry showcase not only the power and importance of resisting harmful mythologies and unwarranted yet commonly accepted narratives about Black men, but they address debates among scholars in colleges and universities as well as the larger public. Curry and Curry reveal the potential power for self-identity that Black public philosophers can offer for members of the Black community, beyond the academy. They sensitively note that no generalization is hard and fast about all members of any group, yet powerful and harmful narratives that rest on empirically rebuttable claims pervade American culture. These accepted myths and sources of injury are not only levied by a long history of troubling social science research practices insensitive to white supremacy, but also by many prominent public intellectuals of color. Curry and Curry explain how some Black public intellectuals gain prominence in the public view through appeals to narratives that reinforce false beliefs about absentee parenthood and myths about unidirectional intimate partner violence. Curry and Curry demonstrate the enormity of the task of the Black public philosopher, yet at the same time show what kind of difference could be made by a sensitive, confident, and empirically informed public philosophical movement.

The remaining paper, which I coauthored with Anthony

Cashio, my co-host on the Philosophy Bakes Bread radio show and podcast, “Evaluating Public Philosophy in Higher Education: Lessons Learned Baking Philosophical Bread,” concerns our thinking about what we have been doing since the fall of 2016, in planning and then launching the show. We have sought to follow in John Dewey’s footsteps today. What would Dewey do, one might ask? He would be engaging the public by means of writings, talks, newspaper and television interviews, and radio. He would remain engaged in substantive philosophical reflection and dialogue but would not think it enough to enjoy discussions in the comfort of the ivory tower alone. Philosophers can have some fun outside of the cave, but in Plato’s still important metaphor, our friends are inside. And, in fact, in a sense, we still are too, at least about the many things that we fail to think philosophically about. Our friends and the fellows we engage in public philosophy can teach us many things. Still, we have obligations to practice public philosophy. The simple reason is that our world needs more thoughtful, civil discourse as much as it ever has, and at a time when our powers to harm ourselves and our fellows are greater than they have ever been before. At the same time, our institutions of higher education need tools for recognizing, evaluating, and supporting public philosophy. Cashio and I offer four simple criteria as possible tools to that end: namely substance, accessibility, invitingness, and community-building.

I hope that these essays will nudge philosophers out beyond mere speculation about the potential value of public philosophy, only discussed in theory. While there remains need for deep and sometimes technical reflection on what we do and ought to do, each of the philosophers contributing on this panel has practiced public engagement and public philosophy. Each has seen and felt its challenges and has gotten up again to continue the work that Dewey has called our supreme intellectual obligation. The last decade has seen a significant, though still early and budding resurgence of public philosophy. There is still much to be done, however, and scholars inspired by Dewey’s example could be among the leaders and exemplars of this vital, growing, and greatly needed movement.