

# Coming Out of the Shade

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(Forthcoming in Damien Broderick and Russell Blackford (Eds.). *Philosophy's Future: The Problem of Philosophical Progress*. Wiley-Blackwell)

**Abstract:** I claim that professional philosophers need to seriously rethink *how* they do philosophy, *where* they do philosophy, and *with whom* they do philosophy. My suggestion is that they “leave the shade” of their philosophical bubbles by making their work accessible to each other and to the public and by engaging with thinkers outside of philosophy. I argue that if philosophers do not “leave the shade,” we may witness the decline and even the eradication of the field of philosophy, as we know it.

**Keywords:** public philosophy, David Hume, blogs, professional philosophy, accessibility, interdisciplinary, journals, Cornel West, academic writing, Martha Nussbaum

Like any professional, I often get asked, “So what do you do?” When I explain to people that I am a philosopher, they are always blown away. I take it that they have not met many philosophers and so I stand before them as a rare breed, perhaps even an endangered species. “So what do you do?” is usually followed by another question; the same question. Although they are impressed that I am a philosopher they cannot really understand what it is that I do. Recently I was asked if I did philosophy “like that other guy.” I said, “Yes.” My inquirer was still confused. He could not connect the dots. Although he understood my academic pursuits (I said I write and teach), he could not understand how I could do philosophy and do anything meaningful or relevant. Days later, I was told by someone pursuing a doctoral degree in another department, but quite familiar with the philosophy department, that, “it is a privilege for philosophers to just think about stuff.” For her, we philosophers are privileged to make a career of disengaging from the world in order to think and this disengagement makes no contribution to the real world.

Although my mother taught me a long time ago not to be concerned about what people think of me, I cannot forget these kinds of encounters. Sometimes I have similar thoughts. I, for example, often participate in a university wide collegium for fellows. My participation makes me quite privy to what other academics are doing in other disciplines across the university. Several of my science colleagues are working on more effective diagnoses and cures for cancers. Another humanities colleague is studying Latino identification. When I stand to present, I

worry that what I say may sound foreign, insignificant, or irrelevant to them. Will they see me as out of touch with the real world?

I am not suggesting that these anecdotes are representative of what all people think of philosophy but it has been my experience. At times what philosophers do in philosophy can be viewed as out of touch with the world or at least with real people and real issues in the world. This is reflected in the decline of undergraduates taking philosophy courses, the closing of philosophy departments or their merging with other departments, the few philosophers who serve as public intellectuals, the few non-philosophers who have access to or who have engaged in philosophical research, and the questions I get asked about the mystery of the profession. Scottish philosopher David Hume, over two hundred years ago, made a similar assessment of the philosopher.

The mere philosopher is a character, which is commonly but little acceptable in the world, as being supposed to contribute nothing either to the advantage or pleasure of society; while he lives remote from communication with mankind, and is wrapped up in principles and notions equally remote from their comprehension. (Hume 1975, 8)

Not all philosophers fit Hume's description. He thought that he was doing philosophy in a radically different way attempting to make sense of human nature rather than ignore human beings. Still, the perception of philosophy Hume rebuked is commonly expressed. In the 2015 Republican presidential debate, candidate Marco Rubio received applause for stating "we need more welders, and less philosophers." I think things can change in philosophy. In order for this change to occur, professional philosophers need to seriously rethink *how* we do philosophy, *where* we do philosophy, and *with whom* we do philosophy. If we don't, we may witness the decline and even the eradication of the field of philosophy as we know it.

David Hume claims, "abstruse philosophy... vanishes when the philosopher *leaves the shade*, and comes into open day" (1975, 7). I read Hume's reference to "leaving the shade" as saying that the complicated, otherworldly, and out-of-touch nature of philosophy disappears when, for example, philosophers get off of their isolated armchairs and become accessible, speak clearly, and engage with the public and with other thinkers. Coming out of the shade is the act of philosophers leaving their philosophical bubbles. It entails: (1) making philosophical work accessible in form and in medium; (2) not ghettoizing public philosophy but seeing it as a serious part of one's overall academic project; (3) doing philosophy in a way that engages with work in science, social science, and the humanities; and (4) getting over the fear and suspicion of public engagement. In the following I offer several suggestions for how philosophers can come out of the shade and engage with the world.

## Accessibility in Form and Medium

Coming out of the shade requires that philosophers no longer write in an inaccessible language that only a few specialists can understand. It requires that philosophers no longer write so abstractly even if it brings with it the reward that the field will label it as “brilliant”—not because they understand it, but because it is impenetrable. As David Hume notes, they are wrapped up in principles and notions that they cannot possibly understand. Even if the philosopher’s words are clear, it is also important that this clear research is not kept locked away in the hidden archives of philosophical journals to be discovered and viewed only by the few.

Philosophy prides itself on rigor. Some philosophical texts are excluded from the canon and some articles are rejected from journals, not because they are not saying anything intellectually valuable, but based on the view that they lack rigor. If it is not confusing (I mean rigorous) enough, philosophers at times question if it is even philosophy. While I think rigor is important, it does not equate to abstruse, inaccessible prose. A writer can be rigorous and yet be clear. This obsession with rigor has not only excluded certain voices but it is preventing philosophers from coming out of the shade—thus limiting their own voices. We all want our research to be the very best it can be; for it to be representative of thoughtfulness and intellectual insight so that we can make a valuable contribution. However, just as rigor can vary in its presentation, it can also vary in its intention.

The obsession of some philosophers with rigor suggests intellectual posturing and elitism. On this view, the more rigorous a philosopher is, the smarter they look. The more effort a work takes to be understood, the more intelligent and philosophical the philosopher seems. Since the days of ancient Greek thinkers, the philosopher has been perceived as special and different from the regular citizen. For Plato, only philosophers are fit to rule. If the unexamined life is not worth living, according to Socrates, then we can infer that only those who examine their lives (philosophers) have a life that is worth living. In Greek society, philosophical thinking was an activity for the wealthy because they had the leisure time to philosophize. Today, I think rigor has been used as a way to exclude others from this “special” activity; an activity that some suppose only they are gifted enough to understand and engage with. Instead of coming out of the shade, the shade has become their country club and their tent of intellectual apartheid that allows them to think of themselves as superior and special. Accessibility is a threat that puts them at risk of being like and with the people. The notion of accessibility reminds them that ideas are not the possession of the higher class; rather, they are gifts that can be shared with everyone.

Philosophy also prides itself on clarity. Philosophers, however, have a hard time understanding each other's work. If philosophers are to come out of the shade, they must endeavor to make their work comprehensible not just to the public but also to those other philosophers who are not in their particular subfield. Let us be honest, there are several sessions we attend at philosophy conferences in which we have no idea what is being talked about. This has nothing to do with technical language specific to a topic. It has everything to do with clarity. If philosophers cannot understand each other's work, what makes them think others outside of philosophy can understand it? Sadly, graduate school has trained students to write in an inaccessible way. The greatest challenge for those wanting to come out of the shade is unlearning this bad habit—a task that, although necessary, is not easy.

Just creating work that can be read and understood means nothing if that work never has the chance to be read. The profession of philosophy must figure out a way to make philosophical research more available to colleagues, academics in other disciplines, and the public. Although I do not have the space to discuss the obstacles to doing so, I think social psychology and science journals offer a best practice for making research easily available.

One way of making research easily available is by not charging to read journal articles. This is not to say that printed journals should be free, which would drive them out of business. But the cost of journal articles should not be a barrier to gaining access to them. "For free" is one of the best vehicles of accessibility. It removes the obstacles to reading the work. I find it easier to discover and read new science and social science research from journals such as Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS) and on sites such as Research Gate. This is because once I google search the content, I am able to read the articles for free. When the articles do charge, they have brief free windows. Philosophy articles, however, are often locked behind paywalls, with some articles costing the price of books. These articles are not easily accessible to philosophers let alone to the public. Some philosophers have found a way to get around this by creating Facebook groups where they share articles with each other that some cannot afford, or articles their institutions' libraries do not provide. But such groups for philosophers are rarely open to non-philosophers.

Cost is not the only barrier to accessibility. Simply not knowing the work exists is also a barrier. When a science or social science article is published, universities' public relations and communications departments inform the press of this exciting research by issuing special-direct-to-media press releases about professors' research. It is not surprising that I am first made aware of science and social science articles via NPR, CNN, or by perusing popular science magazines and blogs. When philosophical work is published in journals, it is not well publicized like in other disciplines. As a result, the work tends to remain hidden

from the world. I am surprised when popular media outlets reference new research by philosophers. When David Brooks, columnist for the *New York Times*, referenced philosopher Laurie Paul's work on transformative experience in his August 2015 article "The Big Decisions," I was so proud and surprised. How often does that happen? Not very much. Paul claims that sales of her book increased as a result. The mention of her research made others outside of the discipline much more aware and interested in her work. How awesome is that! I am not suggesting that all published work will be viewed as interesting, but no one will consider its value if we are not first made aware of it.

Making people aware of philosophy research should not be the responsibility of universities alone but also of journals and philosophers themselves. For all the time it takes to accept and publish work, just as much time should be put into publicizing the work to those in and outside of the philosophy profession. But the responsibility should not end with journals. I know marketing is not in a philosopher's job description or a skill that philosophers pick up in graduate school. Nevertheless, philosophers should be open to sharing their research with those beyond their small subfield. Academics have the freedom to post their journal articles and book chapters on their private websites. (This will require that they first come out of the shade and create an online presence.) If journal articles on websites are only linked to PhilPapers.org for citation purposes but the actual articles themselves are not linked, then that is a clear sign that the philosopher is still comfortable with being in the shade. Philosophers can also take advantage of Twitter, along with sites like Academia.edu, as a vehicle for sharing research.

Writing academic research in a clear way and making it available to others is not the only way to make philosophy accessible. Philosophers can also present their findings in popular mediums like blogs and newspapers, and participate in radio and television debates and conversations. The profession calls this "public philosophy," to which we will now turn.

### **A Note on "Public" Philosophy**

Some philosophers, like myself, have taken advantage of blogs, podcasts, book series, newspapers, and magazines such as *The New York Times*' "The Stone" column, *The Philosophers' Magazine*, Open Court's Popular Culture Series, Philosophy Bites, The UnMute Podcast, Philosophy Talk, Daily Nous blog, *The Guardian*'s philosophy section, and The Partially Examined Life podcast, to name a few, as a way to share their philosophical ideas in an accessible way with the world. On this definition, public philosophy is not about content but rather about style. One does not have to talk about public issues to do public philosophy. A philosopher can write about the mind or about math but the way

in which she writes and the medium she uses to disseminate this content will determine if it's "public" philosophy.

While I have used the term to describe some of the work I do, I find the term odd. There is no such thing as "public English," "public math," or "public psychology." Mathematicians do math and share their findings with the world. Psychologists do psychological research and share it with the world. Why can't we just do philosophy and share it with the world without some special name for it? Perhaps the very term "public" philosophy reveals what some really think about philosophy; that it is about exchanging and debating ideas rigorously and *only* with other professional philosophers. Anything beyond this requires a special name to ensure that this accessible stuff is not confused with "real" philosophy. While philosophers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries spoke to the public, philosophers today speak only to each other. It is understandable why some view philosophy as lacking social importance.

Some who see no harm in writing accessible philosophy may nonetheless argue that philosophers should not do too much "public" philosophy. On this view, what is more serious, intellectual, and important is strict academic writing. I do not want to dismiss this worry. Tenure is based on articles and book publications, not "public" philosophy. If philosophers want to be promoted and advance in the field, they are obliged to focus on these kinds of publications. However, while this is the institutional expectation, it may also be the problem. Our own individual advancement may be contributing to the irrelevance and eradication of the philosophy field.

This attitude to "public" philosophy has ghettoized accessible philosophy so severely that tenured and famous philosophers are urged not to dabble in it too much. This urging is a retreat into the elitist domain. Consider Cornel West. In the early 2000s while at Harvard University, then Harvard president, Larry Summers, criticized West for spending too much time doing public philosophy. Years later West was similarly criticized by Michael Eric Dyson in a *New Republic* article. Dyson (2014) argues that

...the last several years revealed West's paucity of serious and fresh intellectual work, a trend far longer in the making. West is still a Man of Ideas, but those ideas today are a vain and unimaginative repackaging of his earlier hits. He hasn't published without aid of a co-writer a single scholarly book since *Keeping Faith*, which appeared in 1993, the same year as *Race Matters*.

Without commenting on the soundness of Summers' and Dyson's criticisms, it's interesting to hear them make the distinction between, *and* make claims regarding, the comparative value of "serious" scholarly work and public work. For them, the public work West has done does not count as something "a

juggernaut of the academy and an intellectual icon among the black masses” should focus on too much (Dyson 2014). While we may criticize West and other “public philosophers” for taking time to do public philosophy—time some claim could be dedicated to more serious academic work—let us not forget that some of the most brilliant philosophers of the past and present have come out of the shade in a similar manner to West. They include Bertrand Russell, Karl Marx, Jürgen Habermas, Ayn Rand, William James, Michael Sandel, Martha Nussbaum, and many more. Their public engagement did not take, and has not taken, away from their brilliance. I would argue that it added to it.

These and other thinkers remind us that new ideas are worth spreading. A wider audience would love to learn what philosophers have to say, if only they could hear and understand it. Philosophical engagement is enriched when it engages with the public and with other thinkers outside of philosophy.

### **Engaging with Other Disciplines**

Philosophers tend to focus on questions that cannot be settled empirically and I think this is what makes philosophy unique. Philosophers focus on the questions for which humans cannot find the answers from empirical research. Nonetheless, there has been openness to empirical study in philosophy although it differs in kind and degree from engagement with work in the humanities and sciences. In what follows I will explain how engagement with work outside of philosophy is not only a way to come out of the shade, but is a great resource for philosophical research.

Philosophy is improved when it engages with other thinkers outside of philosophy. Immanuel Kant notes that “ought implies can” but if we do not know what we *can* do (an empirical question), we cannot know what we *ought to do* (a normative question). This requires engagement with disciplines beyond our own canon. Neglecting this engagement can leave philosophers misinformed and out of touch. If philosophers make claims such as “we are all responsible for our actions” and ignore or are ignorant of scientific work on psychopaths or social science work on environmental nurture, they will end up making claims that are uninformed and mistaken.

To claim in classrooms that becoming virtuous is rare, and yet fail to explain how social structures can modify our ethical behavior, doesn’t make just for an out-of-touch philosophy course, but for a normative ethical claim that loses its persuasive force. Ethics can benefit from psychology and neuroscience. Social and political philosophy can benefit from social psychology and economics. Philosophy of mind can benefit from cognitive science. But in order for this to happen, philosophers must engage with these thinkers. I am not arguing that these other fields are superior. I am claiming, instead, that coming out of the shade and engaging with other thinkers can strengthen philosophical claims and also make

our work much more accessible. The days of doing philosophy while relying only on philosophy have to be done away with. “Interdisciplinary” is not a dirty word! Philosophers can remain true to traditional modes of questioning as well as to their particular traditions and still engage seriously with other thinkers.

As we talk about engaging with other thinkers, it is usually the scientists or the social scientists who get the most attention. I think that philosophers should also engage with work in the humanities, particularly history and literature. These disciplines are just as valuable as the sciences. History is a discipline that studies past events and human affairs. It too is rich with valuable content. When David Hume criticizes religion he doesn’t just rely on moral psychology but draws on historical atrocities to strengthen his argument. When ethicist Macalester Bell or political philosophers Bernard Boxill and Tommie Shelby analyze self-respect, they don’t just appeal to psychological notions but borrow the historical account of Frederick Douglass fighting against his slave master, Covey, to illustrate their points. These philosophers bring true experiences and thereby life into their examples, providing a persuasiveness that their arguments would lack if they only relied on a fictitious “Sally and Bill” example constructed in their philosophical shade.

Literature is usually about imaginary events and people, but while the stories might not be true, they are representative of the human condition. Amir Jaima argues in *Questionable Form: An Inquiry into the Relationship Between Philosophy and Literature* that fiction provides aesthetic knowledge, which consists of knowledge of sensations, embodied experiences, and emotions. Jaima notes that fiction, like philosophy, does not aspire to be true. It aspires to be persuasive. It is the persuasive accounts of aesthetic experiences that enthrall and convince the reader. Speaking of philosophy and literature, Jaima notes, “the primary goal is insight... a compelling and edifying picture of the world, or a call to arms” (Jaima 2014, 148). Jaima recommends that we widen what we consider the philosophical *canon*. Even if we are hesitant about accepting Jaima’s claim here, we should at least widen our notion of whom we should engage with. How powerful would it have been for John Rawls to come out of the shade and use James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It On the Mountain* or Richard Wright’s *Native Son* as a resource? How enriched would Robert Nozick’s later work have been if he had used Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*?

Philosophers can also make use of the tools of these thinkers. In the first few chapters of her *Upheaval of Thought* (2003), Martha Nussbaum spends time explaining the nature of emotions by analyzing grief. Instead of sticking to the universal she draws from her own experience of her mother’s sickness and eventual death. It reads like compelling, creative non-fiction. I cried while reading the chapter because her narrative provided the ultimate example, the ultimate proof, to her argument. I could relate to her grief. As I read her account, I could recall my own mother’s death. As Aristotle points out, such examples become a



source of something universal. I was reading a philosophical text that showed me my own experience. The narrative elicited my emotions while I was learning about the nature of an emotion. That text was brought to life for me that day because it was full of life. Her argument was more accessible because of her use of narrative: a tool mastered by novelists and non-fiction writers.

Philosophy can come out of the shade through its engagement with scientific, historical and literary thinkers and even through the use of their tools. In doing so, philosophers not only leave their isolated comfort zones as they engage with thinkers outside of philosophy but they bring life into their work; making it all the more compelling. Not all engagement is as harmless and simple as consulting with other academics and intellectual thinkers. Coming out of the shade may require engagement that is risky and scary.

### **Suspicion and Fear of the Public**

I have talked with several philosophers who have received invitations to offer their philosophical perspective on national television. Some have been very suspicious of the invitations. Their reasons to decline have ranged from the questionable views and history of the host to the views of the person they would be debating. These philosophers were concerned that they were being set up, and they worried about the outcomes of their participation. I am sympathetic to this concern. The worse thing you want to happen on national television is to be set up to fail. It is already a scary and nerve racking thing to share your thoughts on live television. You want it to end well and for it to be productive. No one wants to be a laughing stock or be used as a tool to perpetuate a hidden agenda. We should be careful about the public decisions we make regarding our participation on news networks.

Although I am sympathetic, I am also concerned that this suspicion is becoming an all-too-common first response to such invitations. It immediately prevents philosophers from this kind of engagement, keeping them in the shade for another day. While it may be easy to go on NPR as a liberal or Fox News as a conservative, I do not think we should be afraid to engage with others who not only think differently from us but also are not afraid to express it and challenge us passionately for the entire world to see. I do not know if this lack of trust would exist if the debater or host were another philosopher. If so, our suspicion of non-philosophers—no matter their position—is unfair. But it is hard, if not impossible, to predict what we would do or how we would feel if the facts were different. The question is how to deal with this suspicion and fear?

Coming out the shade is not easy. It will require courage—the courage to speak our truth and spread our ideas for the public to hear despite not being in control of how others will spin it. Some of us are comfortable speaking to small groups. If someone disagrees with us at a conference talk, even in a rude manner, we have

learned ways to work around it. What philosophers may not be used to is this occurring on the national stage: a place where not everyone is playing according to the rules of the academy or within the terms of civility. The fight may not seem fair. I'm sure all academics have had this concern but it has not deterred every academic from participating in televised conversations. Perhaps they have taken the position that if they don't speak, who will?

We need to hear from philosophers not because philosophers are special but because they have a different perspective. It's not important if philosophers agree with the hosts, panelists, or the network. What is important is providing insight. How the media interprets it and uses it, is not under one's control. However, let us not think that this occurs only with news networks. This lack of control of people's response occurs with academic writing too. If philosophers can handle graduate school, dissertation defenses, journal debates, conference questions, argumentative writing, author-meets-critics sessions, and the constant criticism that is endemic in philosophy; I believe philosophers have the chops to chat it up with figures like Fox News' Bill O'Reilly or CNN's Don Lemon.

Let us now talk about issues of safety and fear. Another thing that steers philosophers away from coming out of the shade is the rude, aggressive, and unpoliced responses that can come from the public. One philosopher explained to me that, after doing a public lecture, she received a death threat. For her family's protection, she decided that this kind of public work was not worth the risk to her safety. Several philosophers I know, particularly minorities, have reported name-calling I cannot repeat here as well as death threats, in response to what they have written. These attacks are a tool of silencing. The anonymous comment sections of websites are different from the civility philosophers *may* encounter in the profession.

So I am in no way advocating that one should sacrifice one's own peace of mind and even one's own safety in order to advance one's philosophical ideas. We do not need twenty-first-century Socratic martyrdom. For philosophers who want to opt out of this kind of engagement, staying in the shade is not the only option. Philosophers can still come out of the shade by writing in an accessible way, by spreading their research, and by engaging with thinkers outside of philosophy. But for those who want to write and speak in more public venues, please know that it requires the strength to ignore negativity, the power to focus on the many your work has helped and not the few your work has angered, and the will to "write on" despite incivility.

Philosophers, make your work accessible, engage with other thinkers, and perhaps even write for public venues like blogs or offer your insight to TV viewers. It's time you come out of the shade no matter how cool and comfortable you think it is. The sun is brighter on the other side!

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