

What to Do About Wicked Problems?

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[Intro music]

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[Theme music]

Dr. Weber: Welcome, everyone to special short edition of *Philosophy Bakes Bread*, which we call a breadcrumb.

Dr. Cashio: Crumble, crumble. *Philosophy Bakes Bread* is a production of the Society of Philosophers in America, also known as SOPHIA. In our breadcrumb episodes, we are either going to include snippets from past episodes that got cut off of our loaf, or sometimes we will have phone calls of people who called in, like this episode.

Dr. Weber: We may, as Anthony was just saying, include responses to your feedback that we have received, either on Twitter @PhilosophyBB, on Facebook at Philosophy Bakes Bread, or by email at philosophybakesbread@gmail.com. Another option is for people to give us a phone call and leave a voicemail and record that. That's what we've got for today. That number to call, in case you want to give us a call, is 859-257-1849. That number is 859-257-1849.

Dr. Cashio: On this special breadcrumb, we are privileged to be welcoming Danielle Lake, assistant professor of liberal studies department at Grand Valley State University back on the show. Welcome back Danielle.

Dr. Lake: Thank you so much. I'm great. Glad to be here.

Dr. Cashio: Regular listeners to the program will remember Danielle's awesome episode, I think it was episode 12. We called it *That's a Wicked Problem You've Got There*. Got to say it with the right accent. We were talking about wicked problems. We had an awesome phone call. Someone called in, left a great message, and we thought we would have Danielle back and give

her a chance to respond and talk about the information and question in the phone call. Welcome back!

Dr. Weber: Thanks for joining us, Danielle. What might make the most sense is to invite Danielle to talk about what her episode was about and to let the listeners know about that and remind people about what your episode was about in the big picture.

Dr. Lake: Our episode was just about the kinds of challenges that we're confronting today, that they are beyond complex and require more than technological innovation or expert intervention. Problems like global climate change, like the food system, like our healthcare problems, like poverty, terrorism. These kind of issues are intractable, they are ongoing. They are interconnected, and instead of getting better they tend to get worse. What could we do differently and why have I decided to do more publicly-engaged work. This was my research for my scholarship in my PHD program, and that led me to really want to commit to a philosophy that was engaged, that was on the ground, as a mechanism for helping us wrestle with these problems collectively across our differences. My call to action at the end of that episode was like, "What can we do in our own lives? How can we leverage anything over the past hour of this conversation into stepping into some of these issues? What might that look like?" Phil gave us that great voicemail.

Dr. Cashio: Learning to disagree well and listen to others and create the physical spaces in which we can sit down with each other and disagree with people we disrespect. To me that's always the challenge. I don't just disagree with you. I think that what you say is morally abhorrent. That is where it is really hard to have a conversation.

Dr. Lake: I absolutely agree. I was just in a workshop training on some of these issues, and one of the ground rules we wanted to lay was that we were going to respect anything anyone said. I had to honestly say that I don't think I can consent to that. I cannot respect some ideas. That doesn't mean that I can't respect the person or care for the person, but I'm not sure that I can genuinely consent to respecting some of the views that might come out in the next couple days, or that we should have to. That's the really rough challenge. To step into that vulnerable space and share in such a way.

My other concern though, or critique, of dialogue is that... what is the next step? If all we do is endlessly talk in that space and walk away from one another, what is next? I have been looking at how others have imagined these spaces, have conducted these workshops to leverage the insights we're gaining into something that has a ripple effect. It could be as simple as just asking us before we walk out of that space, "How might you use any of this? What should you do next if you were going to advocate for change? How have you been touched and who would you share this idea with? One of the processes recommended is strategic doing. It asks us to consider, and imagine what should be, collectively. What are our stories? What could be? The other problem is that we often complain about the past and the present, but we never imagine a better future. It is easier to deconstruct than it is to build something better. What could be? Let's imagine something else. What can be? What can we do?" as we walk out of the space, to take one step towards that goal. That's leadership. Moving towards advocacy, but advocacy that is more empathetic, that is more connected, that realizes that in advocating we might be still partially wrong. We still need to listen deeply.

Dr. Weber: We got a phone call from Phil. Phil let me know that he drives a taxi in Lexington, Kentucky, and he was listening as the show aired and he called and left us this message. He is a

very philosophical guy. I'm going to play his message. It's a little longer than the usual messages that we play on the show in general, but this is a special breadcrumb episode and it was a particularly great message, so we're going to play you the whole thing. Then we'll invite Danielle to let us know what she thinks about Phil's message. Here we go:

Phil: Hello. This is Phil. I just caught the episode of *Philosophy Bakes Bread* with Dr. Lake, and she raised a question at the end: "What can we do to solve really sticky wicked problems?" I think one of the things that we can all do is encourage one another. Even people that we disagree with, to encourage dialogue, to encourage thought, to encourage our best efforts That is important to the world that we live in, and it makes a big difference to people, to find that they are encouraged by someone else. Two other thoughts that I had. One was that in dealing with wicked problems, they often have long histories. We as Americans have very short memories. We know dates. We know facts, perhaps. But a lived reality of history is not that is part of our DNA, and we really have the attention span of a gnat.

Sometimes with these big issues, we need to go back hundreds of years to find out what it is that led us to where we are today. The last thought that I had on the show was that the importance of being willing to listen to other people, especially people that we disagree with, or that hold a different point of view than we have. Not only to ask people what they think or what they feel, but also to ask, "Why do you think that? Why do you feel that?" If we can understand what motivates a person, what their logic was to reach certain conclusions, then we understand them better and then we can really address issues if we just take positions and defend them regardless of what the other person thinks, we get nowhere. Those were the thoughts I had on the show, and I do appreciate it, and thank you very much.

Dr. Cashio: Thank you Phil. That was an awesome message. A lot to think about, and some really good insights in there. What do you guys think?

Dr. Lake: Incredible. I was honored that he called in and I completely agree with everything he said. I can expand on that.

Dr. Weber: Phil, that's terrific. For three philosophers to say that they agree with you, just seems like it's impossible in the universe. But it seems to have happened. I think you had terrific points to raise, and I want to join everybody here saying thank you, because that was an awesome message and set of thoughts in response to Danielle's great question from her episode. So tell us, Danielle, what is it you heard in this message and what do you want to emphasize and tell us?

Dr. Lake: I want to run through his three points. He talked about the need to encourage others, to dig into the history of these issues, that we tend to have what he called 'the attention span of a gnat'. He was talking about U.S. citizens, but in the world today. Then we need to listen more deeply and more consistently and we need to dig in. Incredibly compelling insights across all three points he had to make. Starting with this encourage piece. One of the things that struck me is that he's right and that is one of the reasons I want to do publicly-engaged teaching. I really want to encourage students to see their capacity to step into these issues. We also need to encourage ourselves.

Then I started looking at the root of that, the need to have courage. We have to find it within ourselves, but bring it out in others, to dig into these messy problems instead of giving in

to the temptation to overly simplifying them and demonizing those from which we disagree. In addressing these problems it's very convenient to focus on the need for individual change or even institutional change without focusing on what needs to happen inside of us in order to make that. The idea, if we look at someone like Grace Lee Boggs, "Change must be two-sided. To change others we must be willing to change ourselves. To push for institutional change as well, we have to expect that that is going to have an impact on who we are.

Thus far, we are often focusing on that external piece and not enough on the internal, which again goes back to Phil's recommendation that we need to listen. We need to listen to ourselves and others. We need to value human relationships here. That is why they say one of the reasons these problems are wicked, is because they are social problems. They are not just technological, they are not just scientific. They are social, they are ethical. We need to dig into ourselves, really, and there is a resistance to doing that and that is one of the reasons why they are so problematic. I really loved his point about history, and I'm still struggling with that. These problems have a long history and they evolve over time. These are incredibly big issues. I'm challenged by that because we can never know enough. The kinds of uncertainties involved in these issues are almost endless, and acting and not acting on these problems carries a lot of consequences. If we wanted to wait until we know enough information, I think that's problematic. The methods we have designed to intervene in these problems are often very short-sighted. Sue has got an incredibly powerful point about the need to dig into our histories. If we link that point back to the need to encourage and to listen deeply, I wonder if oral histories might be a way of narrative and story-telling might be a way to help us uncover and empathize with those from which we disagree, and then act from that.

Going back to his point about listening and listening more deeply, this brings me back to why I started to study democratic deliberation. I went through facilitation training and I actually just went through intergroup dialogue training that the University of Michigan is offering, designed to bring us together across our differences and dig into why we feel as we do, and what the connections are across those differences, and the need to move beyond disagreement, beyond debate, and beyond discussion. Two learning together. I think that's incredibly important because the research on dialogue is often that we do use the power in the room to suppress differences. Very easily these democratic deliberations that we have as a society, as a set of citizens, can lead to cascades where we ignore certain kinds of information. We have to think carefully about how power plays in the room. We need to ensure that socially disadvantaged groups are silences in those spaces, and that these deliberations are used as a cover of legitimacy. Or we don't, we forsaken them and then what are we left with? If we are going to engage each other across our differences then I think we need to, if we are going to address these problems more justly, then we need to figure out how to do that better, and we need to figure out how to listen better and how to facilitate those conversations. That's definitely where my research has been going, in my own practices.

Dr. Weber: I like how you pointed out something that a lot of people don't attend to enough, which is that the word 'encourage,' people often miss what is involved in that notion, and you kind of teased it out nicely, which was to encourage is to help someone to be more courageous. I always love what Plato had to say about courage, which is not the absence of fear, but fearing the right things and not the wrong things. It's really a point about knowledge and having wisdom guide our emotions, especially fear. That's a way of thinking about what you had to say about how opening our eyes to what other people had to say, let's say with oral histories and so forth. We may gain the knowledge we need in order to fear the right things and not the wrong things,

which then gives us courage. What would be a group you could see needing encouragement, Danielle?

Dr. Lake: It looks like activism and engagement in the student population across most universities is fairly low. It is low at our institution as well. Sometimes I see this in philosophers as well. It is just easier to opt out. Across our country, I would say, we keep isolating and fragmenting from one another. We keep surrounding ourselves with those that we agree with, and other-izing those that we don't. Across the board, I see a need to come together, and we have to figure out what that looks like. How do I engage those from which I don't just disagree, I completely disrespect. I think they are unethical. I think they lead to suffering. How do I sit in a room with others and engage in conversations across that kind of a difference? Why would I? The tension that is likely to arise, the conflict. How can I step into those spaces? How might we as instructors to encourage students to find the courage, the bravery to take the risks of mutual vulnerability in sharing those stories?

We all have to assume that we have something to learn from one another. We also have to assume that we have something to give. That I have something to offer other, something to teach them that my experiences matter, but that theirs do as well. That within the exchange of that, there might be some shared insights and that we can be better from that experience. Research has shown that when we do come together, we do learn from one another. It's not that we flip our positions, but there is some transformation in our thinking, slightly. On either end of the spectrum. There is hope here. Again, we have to go back digging into our own assumptions, and not just others'. How do we create spaces to do this? That is physical spaces, virtual spaces, but also wherever we are at in our lives. How do we create these spaces with our family and our friends? How do we invite others into those spaces under the assumption that we have something to learn from them?

Dr. Cashio: Some of you said, and this has always been of concern to me. You said something about using deliberation as a cover to legitimacy. You said that very quickly, but this has always been a concern of mine. You have these town halls that are going on. Politicians are showing up, they say, "Look at me. I'm listening to my constituents" and then they go back to Washington, and they haven't listened at all. Is that what you are thinking about? Yes, I think it's democratic but not really.

Dr. Anderson: Absolutely. Often the public conversation happens too far downstream. The decision has already been made. There is no mechanism for ensuring the recommendations will be enacted. There is no power given. Sherry Arnstein, article from the 1960's on laddering citizen participation. How do we move from placation and covers for legitimacy towards genuine citizen power? What does that look like? What are the alternative mechanisms for ensuring that happens? That is a concern. How do we work with other we disagree with, how do we ensure our voices are heard? That's definitely something I'm still trying to figure out. The visual she creates in her article might be helpful to assessing whether these spaces are legitimate or not. Part of it is also about what happens in the room. Whose voice dominates and whose doesn't? Who is summarizing the findings? Who is disseminating the findings and to whom?

Dr. Cashio: Being a good secretary. It's the end of the semester here at UVA Wise, and I usually end all my philosophy classes by encouraging my students to, when they think, think courageously, and to think boldly and to go out there and act, whether it's logic or philosophy of religion. I think anyone can do this. It's a challenge for our listeners. Go out and be bold.

Dr. Weber: This is terrific. Thank you so much for joining us, Danielle.

Dr. Lake: Thank you. This is amazing and it's such a joy. I really look forward to the next episode.

Dr. Cashio: Awesome. We're going to have you back again. Very soon, hopefully. I hope everyone has enjoyed our little breadcrumb. I think it has been a n extra special evening...morsel for me. A nice surprise in my afternoon. Thank you, Danielle, for joining us.

Dr. Weber: Remember everyone, you can call us and leave a short, recorded message with a question or a comment that we may be able to play on the show, just like Phil's, at 859-257-1849. That's 859-257-1849. You can also reach us on Facebook, Twitter or email. For any of that info again, please visit philosophybakesbread.com

Dr. Cashio: This has been Dr. Anthony Cashio, Dr. Eric Weber and Dr. Danielle Lake with *Philosophy Bakes Bread: food for thought about life and leadership.*

[outro music]