

Philosophy Bakes Bread, Episode Fifty-One, with Zach Biondi

What Philosophers Owe Society

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Weber: Hey everybody. You're listening to WRFL Lexington, 88.1 FM, all the way to the left on your radio dial. This is Eric Weber, here with you for another episode of Philosophy Bakes Bread. It is Monday at just about almost three minutes after two o'clock, and Philosophy Bakes Bread is a show which airs every Monday at two, so if you enjoy today's show, tune in again.

Also, head over to PhilosophyBakesBread.com, where you can listen to past episodes You can learn how to subscribe to our podcast, and you can also see some cool swag. We have things like T-shirts and mouse pads and hats and coffee mugs and whatever. Check those things out. Be in touch with us. We love hearing from you, and buckle up for Episode #51 of Philosophy Bakes Bread with Zach Biondi. I hope you enjoy and please do reach out to us. Thanks for listening to WRFL.

Cashio: Hello, and welcome to Philosophy Bakes Bread, food for thought about life and leadership.

Weber: Philosophy Bakes Bread is a production of the Society of Philosophers in America, aka SOPHIA. I'm Dr. Eric Thomas Weber.

Cashio: And I'm Dr. Anthony Cashio. A famous phrase says that philosophy bakes no bread, that it's not practical, but we at SOPHIA, and on this show, aim to correct that misperception.

Weber: Philosophy Bakes Bread airs on WRFL Lexington, 88.1 FM, and is distributed as a podcast next. Listeners can find us online at PhilosophyBakesBread.com, and we hope you'll reach out to us on Twitter at Philosophy BB, on Facebook at Philosophy Bakes Bread, or by email at philosophybakesbread@gmail.com.

Cashio: Last but not least, you can leave us a short recorded message with a question or comment, or that bountiful praise that we like. You can reach us at (859) 257-1849. That's (859)



257-1849. On today's show, we're excited, I would even say very excited, to be talking with Zach Biondi. How are you doing today, Zach?

Biondi: I'm really great. I'm excited to be here.

Cashio: I also think you're-

Biondi: I think you guys have made some kind of mistake by letting me on this show, but ...

Cashio: No, no.

Weber: I don't think we've made a mistake. I'm pretty sure this is what we meant to do.

Biondi: I'm saying based on the previous guests, like Martha Nussbaum. She's a hero. Matthew Yglesias is someone I respect a lot. It feels odd to be sitting in the same cyber-seat as they are.

Weber: We feel that way too though. That's the thing.

Cashio: All the time, quite nervous.

Biondi: All right, there's a camaraderie around that, maybe.

Weber: Exactly, exactly.

Cashio: All the time. Today we're going to talk about what philosophy owes society, and this is a conversation based loosely around a recent set of essays that Zach wrote and published on The Vim Blog.

Weber: That's right. According to their website, The Vim Blog is a collection of philosophers who write and podcast about issues in politics. It is a rethinking of the piece. The goal is not to write the news, but instead to discuss broader trends and the philosophical ideas that are pertinent in the current political climate. The Vim This is still their website. The Vim is not embedded in the news cycle. Each article is written to be relevant for a longer term. And quote

Cashio: That sounds fun.

Weber: Yeah.

Cashio: I like that. And so The Vim Blog does not limit itself to writings furthermore, and calls itself a political action group, so I have to ask Zach all about that. They advocate for direct action at all levels of government, so yes, definitely want to hear about that. Zach is a contributor to The Vim Blog, and has called himself the anti-academic academic. Does that sound correct, Zach?

Biondi: Yeah, I think that's my Twitter bio. I'm not sure how happy I would be importing that to my normal day-to-day life. That's ...

Weber: Well, well-

Cashio: We'll ask you about that.

Weber: It's part of your public face, right?

Biondi: On the platform of Twitter, that's how I depict myself.

Weber: Very nice. Definitely. Zach studies ethics, issues in technology, especially machine intelligence, and early modern philosophy. Check out The Vim Blog, V-I-M, TheVimBlog.com, and also you can find Zach on Twitter @zach with an H, @zachbiondi.

Cashio: Right on.

Biondi: It's not Vim.com. I found out that the hard way.

Cashio: Right, it's The Vim Blog.

Weber: I'm afraid to find out.

Biondi: It's, it was a clothing [inaudible 00:05:04]? Upscale clothing, not upscale philosophy.

Weber: Okay, there's, worse things that you can land on when you happen on a website, so I guess clothes isn't so bad.

Cashio: This is true. All right Zach, if you've listened to the show before, you know we like to start the show off with a segment we call Know Thyself, so we want to invite you to tell us about yourself and see how well you know thyself. A nice little pop quiz to start off the interview. Can you tell us about yourself, about your background, maybe about where you grew up, and about how your background shaped who you are and your own philosophical thinking? We'll toss it over to you.

Biondi: Yeah, sure. I like how you guys ask, Do you know thyself, because really it's impossible to say no.

Weber: Plenty of people do though. That's the thing.

Cashio: But that requires knowing thyself. You need to know that you don't know yourself.

Weber: Ooh [crosstalk 00:05:58].

Biondi: Myself, I went to a pretty unknown school called Missouri State in Springfield, Missouri, and I studied religion, specifically biblical studies. Philosophy was secondary. It entered my life through the philosophy of religion, questions about miracles, the problem of evil, religious experience, and that's because I grew up as a pretty conservative Christian. For a long time, religion was a major priority in my life, but I've always been a bit of a contrarian. If I'm surrounded by people who all believe a certain thing, I'm inclined to think that they're all wrong about it.

It's this deep instinctual urge that unfortunately has plenty of anti-social consequences, but previously, that has pushed me into some strange places within conservative Christianity,

but as I studied philosophy, I came to question many of my foundational beliefs, which is a no for a Christian. By the time I graduated, I was a very different person. I remember talking to one of my professors at Missouri State. She said that philosophy has a way of screwing up your life, and that is a sanitized version of what was said.

Cashio: Yeah, that's not incorrect.

Biondi: I think she's right about that, screwing up your life in a good way. I had several professors who were incredibly influential for me. I was questioning a lot of stuff that was close to my identity and self-understanding, and they were generous with their time, with their care, their sympathy, and they did an exceptional job of helping me ask the right questions, and not giving me their answers to those questions. They helped me, I think, become a much better person.

Basically, I wanted to have that role in other people's lives. I thought that would be a worthwhile career, so I pursued that. And those professors had cautioned me about the problems of professional philosophy, the politics of the profession, the power relations, the hierarchy of prestige. One professor in particular had instilled in me the importance of what you might call institutional critique, as something that should be a part of whatever you do. For better or worse, I guess I set their admonitions aside and I got into professional philosophy.

Weber: Interesting. For our listeners of the show, Zach, who may be unfamiliar, I want to ask you about a term, because you mentioned the problem of evil, and your average listener won't know quite what you mean by that. Isn't the problem of evil that it's evil? But I think we have something particular in mind among philosophers, and so if you could in, I don't know, a minute, what's the problem of evil?

Biondi: In one minute. Sure. I would say, for critics of religion, the problem is evil is usually taken to be one of the strongest forms of objection to the existence of a certain type of God, a God that has a certain kind of personality, and if a God is thought to be all-knowing and all-loving and all-powerful, it's difficult to square a God of that type of nature with the existence of evil in the world, and a lot of evil, right?

There's an incredible amount of suffering in the world. If there is an incredible amount of suffering in the world, which we assume to be the case, then if God is all-knowing, then God would know that there is evil. If God is all-powerful, God could do something about it. And if God is all-loving, then God would want to do something about it, but the evil persists every day. Therefore, God can't have all those characteristics. So God is either not all-knowing, not all-loving, not all-powerful, or we have a giant problem on our hands.

Cashio: Well said [crosstalk 00:09:45].

Weber: Very nicely explained. I do want to ask one follow-up though, which is that you mentioned that this would be maybe critics of religion who might ask this question. When you say that, do you mean people who are non-religious?

Biondi: I guess I would say that. I imagine there are people within religion who think that it's a real problem. I think when you talk to a lot of philosophers of religion who would count themselves as religious or would count themselves as Christians. This isn't limited to Christianity, but that's the context I'm most familiar with. I think a lot of those people who

would still count themselves as religious would admit this is a problem, and they have their ways of solving it, but the people who don't think there's a solution either aren't religious, they're not theists, or they think God has some different kind of nature, He's not an all-perfect entity.

Weber: Very nice.

Cashio: Awesome. So this is the kind of things you were learning about, and your religion classes, and it kind of lead, you to philosophy So why didn't you continue your studies in religion What made you make the jump to philosophy users? It was there a certain like, you kind of mentioned that, they challenge, your core beliefs and I think any good Professor does exactly that is trying to help you question your core beliefs at some level, but there's plenty of ways of studying theology that also kind of address these questions. So, was there something about maybe your background is the way that you ain't asking the questions that kind of lead to that contrary and tendency that can lead you to do philosophy?

Biondi: I mean, I did actually strongly consider going into Biblical Studies. I was not so interested in theology. If I was going to take that route, I would have gone for philosophy, philosophy of religion, but I was very interested in biblical studies and I still am really, I still remember sitting in the office of my advisor and asking questions about biblical studies and, and considering going into it was really interested in the gospels in the original languages of the Bible, the history of the construction of the Canon Bible we have now and it still is a kind of side hobby of mine.

Biondi: It's definitely not as important to me now that I just, that kind of world is not such a priority in my life right now that I'm still fascinated by that and occasionally will, throw my hand back into biblical studies and see what's going on in the field. And so I am interested in that and that's what I consider doing partially because there aren't whole, lot of non Christian In Biblical Studies, I mean, there are a few. And for instance, there's a guy who is maybe one of the more visible biblical scholars in the world is kind of important airman was really fascinating guy and he's not a Christian.

But for the most part, the field is dominated by people who count themselves as Christians have some variety. So I thought that maybe could be used for someone who's more skeptical. But ultimately, as the kind of the importance of those issues started to kind of lower in my life, I kind of sorted out my views on a lot of these issues. Philosophy seemed to me to really get to the core of what it means to be a good person. And that's what I wanted to do. And the professors that I had in philosophy I thought served very important role in just civic society.

I thought in terms of a career in terms of what would be meaningful in my life and most helpful and not someone who would be a good teacher philosophy is what I aspire to be that would be more useful in the world. So that's part of what brought me over.

Weber: It was the usefulness of philosophy that attracted you I Like that, that's an unusual answer. I like it well, so as someone who's interested in, and studying in a future in teaching philosophy and so forth, we've got to ask you the question, Zach, what's philosophy?

Biondi: Oh, geez, I always hate answering this question because I never have much in insightful. I don't have many insightful things to say. Guess I would. There's one way of answering the question. What is philosophy of saying that? Well, it's what the philosophers do. And so the question is what makes someone a philosopher.

Weber: right?

Biondi: And my answer to this is that a philosopher is characterized by a particular attitude that they take anyone intellectual orientation, and it's something that I like to call the Socratic Spirit because I think is exemplified in Socrates, the inventor of Western philosophy. At least. That's the honorific usually given to him. And I will call the Socratic spirit the kind of radical willingness to change one's mind about absolutely anything if given good reason to do it. In other words, like there's no restricted section of ideas in the mind. You don't have kind of locked away in a safe in your mind. Some ideas that can't be touched, those are basic. I'm not going to question those, the philosophers the person says, No, I am willing to question anything.

And it takes a kind of courage and like a radical honesty to do that. I think the philosopher's the person who, embodies that kind of attitude that might not be enough. I mean, there are certain questions, that we characterize philosophy by questions about like, well, what is a good life? What exists in what is a human being, should a government exist and if so, what should it look like? And so basically, sometimes I think a philosophy is the study of things that everyone has an opinion on.

Weber: That sounds like a teacher.

Biondi: More stuff than that probably stuff that gets people animated and perplex, that's philosophy.

Weber: Very nice. Very nice. Well, we want to know, we got about a minute and a half left. And we've got to ask you what, is the Vim blog? What is vim? And what's the blog? And what's this all about?

Biondi: Yeah, I had gotten into politics A while ago. But I would say that, how Donald Trump continue to exist as a viable presidential Candidate. Despite just countless incidents of, shocking absurdity. I struggled to grasp how giant of a problem I think we face as a country. And I think it's probably important for me to say at the outset, for the rest of this conversation, and I think this is all a disaster, I describe it as a crisis of critical thinking.

And so during and after the 2016 election, I talked regularly with a few close friends, people I'd studied philosophy with and together we thought would be worthwhile to write and talk about politics, from a philosophical perspective, and so, although we didn't really know what we were doing. We started up this group called the ViM, and we had a blog and podcast where we would talk specifically about the broader issues in politics kind of step outside the news cycle, some of the general issues that we thought were incredibly important. And I guess the key This is that we wanted to work on media literacy in ourselves and attempt to project a concern for media literacy basically wanted to respond to the crisis of critical thinking.

And I guess the articles that we're going to talk about today are meant to express why they exist, and why I write the way that I do and why I think it's important for more philosophers to re examine their careers and for us to think more about the place philosophy occupies in the political world which I simply call you the world

Cashio: Very good. Quick follow before we end Why did you choose the name Vim?

Biondi: Oh, man, it's very disappointing answer but there's not isn't isn't really no profound answer to it. I had a list of names, the Vim I like because, you know, it means energy and excitement. There's a phrase of vim and vigor right it's kind of an archaic saying but then you know it's an English word that has a definition but it comes from a Latin root meaning force or willingness and I like to that kind of attitude and plus it's short and if you remember

Weber: That's, not disappointing at all. That's a great answer. I think.

Biondi: No, you can have a follow a project called the Vigger.

Weber: I was gonna I was gonna ask, I mean, are you without Vigger though, right? I mean,

Biondi: well, I think that's fantastic. I like that answer to indeed.

Weber: Well, thanks, everybody for listening to this first segment of philosophy bakes bread, talking today with Zach Biondi, this is me, Eric Weber with my co host, Anthony Cashio. We're gonna come back after a short break. Thanks for listening.

Cashio: Welcome back everyone to philosophy bakes bread. This is Anthony cashio and Eric Weber, here, talking today with Zach Biondi and we're discussing what philosophy Oh, society. So in the second segment, we're going to focus on sort of the big picture of this topic, which, again was the subject of Zacks essays on the ViM blog which we talked about in the last segment. And in the next segment, we'll talk more about what Zack proposes for the future of public philosophy.

Weber: That's right. So, Zach wrote three essays. And the first one is basically will focus on now and those ideas about the future of public philosophy came in the third of his essays. And so we'll be focusing on one and three if you go and read those essays on the ViM blog that, ties that in. So the obvious question for us to ask you, Zach is okay, let's start with the obvious what does philosophy Oh society.

Biondi: Yeah, I mean, the first article in the series has been to answer that question and the first article is basically an argument that philosophers have special obligations to become politically active right now. And I don't say in that article, what form of activity that will be, you guys have mentioned public philosophy. And we'll get to that in a moment. I think that's one form of activity. But it's important that we at least acknowledge the political context. And I wrote this article in response to this crisis, this disaster, at least in my view, and so we might have to step back even further. "If" someone took issue with my arguments. We have to step back even further to assess whether we actually are facing a disaster right now. But at least in my view, that was the occasion for this article.

Weber: Let's go. Let's go ahead and step back as you say, you mentioned that in the land of the last segment, and we didn't really get, we were out of time, as far as asking you about that. What, what crisis Do you see right now about critical thinking. Tell us about this.

Biondi: Well I think, to respond, what I'm thinking about is the continued existence of someone like Trump has veibor presidential candidate where we're a lot of people would think that he was the answer to certain problems, the kinds of arguments that Donald Trump would make, if we could characterize those as arguments were persuasive to people. And I think what we're seeing is, this is something I think I described in the articles that there's a critical mass of

people and it's become quite evident now that are unable or unwilling to consume media responsibly. Here, I'm thinking about the phenomenon of fake news that was incredibly influential.

Biondi: There are people who, and a lot of people who kind of unable or unwilling to recognize in competence or poor argument, but even more fundamental than that, to reflect honesty, honestly on their biases and their moral commitments, and to have just a serious rational conversation with each other about public issues. And all of that, I think was brought into very clear relief in November 2016, that perhaps we were deluding ourselves by thinking that the public in general was vetting. Candidates are vetting political issues and we're informed on topics I think we got, we were shown and quite clearly that there's an issue of civic discourse or public discourse when a president becomes elected who really does not care whatsoever about truth or reality and we need to encounter that.

Weber: Tell us about, where you see the lack of care about truth and reality?

Biondi: I guess, I would suggest that previously we had had candidates we'd have people running for the presidency the most powerful most important position political position in the world who for the most part were constrained and what they said on the basis of facts on reality on evidence we have now someone who doesn't seem to care about those issues

Cashio: Those dyeing facts.

Biondi: And it seems to respect that doesn't really matter you would think like okay well, someone ran for president and did not care about truth and would lie with such velocity and impunity that people would see this and identify this person is clearly not competent and not able to be the president united states and seemingly, obviously a lot of people weren't convinced by that. And so, perhaps I'm alone, this is a strange position to take. But I think that's a massive, massive problem And as we'll see, as we'll get into the argument, I think a lot of this falls right into the core of what philosophy is supposed to be concerned with, if philosophy is concerned with the truth and good argument to see someone ascend to the presidency without care for the truth or without care for good argument. This is a kind of call to action for philosophy.

Weber: Interesting well wouldn't wouldn't you say that, It's so commonly thought that it's cliché to call politicians liars, that kind of everybody says the politicians they don't like is untruthful.

Biondi: Yes, that is, kind part of just like an axiom of people discuss in politics. I think that is something that itself needs to be subject to criticism. I think all the ways that we talk about politicians generally are usually quite lacking in nuance that it's not conducive to quality public discourse. And plus, yes, maybe there are politicians who lie, I'm sure that's true, but not all lie to the same degree. That's, I think, quite evident. And also, what we're seeing now, I think is something that should embody or engender a bit of appreciation for a standard type of politician who might stretch the truth a bit, but in general, responsive to basic facts about reality.

Cashio: Right, right. Well, so then, so we have the problem kind of laid out. What can a philosopher do? What is, does a philosopher have an obligation to do anything in this situation? Seems like that's your argument that we absolutely do have an obligation to society as a whole,

Biondi: I think,

Cashio: what is it the shape of the obligation, I guess is my question.?

Biondi: Okay yes. Maybe it will distinguished two things. One is to, we have an obligation at all right? Yes, we do. And then the next question is, okay, well, what are we supposed to do I have less the same topic. And maybe we'll get to that in the third part of it, where I actually do venture out and say, Okay, let's think about what we should be doing. I think it's actually a problem in and of itself for us to figure out what it is we should be doing. But I still have made, I think, a pretty strong philosophical claim to say that, no, we do have special obligations, philosophers. As a philosophers in society should be doing something.

Biondi: And so maybe I can sketch that argument briefly, I think there are basically two, two steps to it. And the first one goes like this, that philosophy requires a stable society. There are reasons why philosophy departments in universities only exists in certain types of places in the world requires a lot of affluence, really, there's a certain amount of privilege that comes along with having philosophy departments in the first place and the collapse of the economy, a nuclear war. Those sorts of things threaten the existence of philosophy departments. The open practice of philosophy as a discipline as a career.

And so if the stability of a society is questioned, it's threatened. I think philosophers have an interest in getting involved simply out of the preservation of their own careers because they require stability of a society alright so that is step one, which is that you acknowledge the political reality that is required that kind of political world that's necessary for philosophy departments to exist in the first place and a lot of that has to do with political facts just basic economic, political stability and if those sorts of things are threatened then philosophy just out of pure self interest would want to get involved to simply maintain that stability enough to where they can continue their careers. So the question then as well is stability threatened that much I mean I that's a whole separate debate. I think it is and for that reason just based on purely, self interested motivations, philosophers should be more concerned.

That's step one. That is probably not enough. I mean, it's not enough to get us anything like a special obligation for philosophers. And I think right into a bit about what I would say here when we're talking about what sort of problems America is facing right now. But I would say that the stability of American society is threatened because of stuff that falls squarely within the domain of philosophy. I talked about responsible media consumption, the recognition of poor arguments, the recognition of seeing a demagogue and the reflections, self examination that's required to see that you're being manipulated the ability to reflect on one's biases and to engage with your fellow citizens and rational conversation with a willingness to change one's mind I think all those were put on display is something that we need more of in our society, and those are the things that directly in the wheelhouse of philosophy.

And so, this is basically the argument in a nutshell that if society is being threatened philosophy should get involved because philosophy needs a stable society. But if we actually look at the specific ways in which a society is being threatened if those things are specific to the domain of a particular discipline or field than that discipline or field, I think needs to rise to the occasion. And what we're seeing right now is a lack of the very qualities and skills that philosophy takes themselves takes itself to be championing and so get off the bench.

Weber: So Zach, in universities will hear all kinds of fields talk about the ways in which they contribute to the development of critical thinking. And so my question is, is this argument you're

making truly somehow very, unique to philosophers or are you especially calling philosophers and Kind of everybody from every field, ought to be weighing in and contributing as well.?

Biondi: Yes, I think this is a crucial question. I was actually talking to a bunch of English students, people studying English and graduate level. They said that the problem is that people cannot identify and critique narratives and the domain of English and, in that case, I would run the very same argument to them. Right? If what we discover is that the problems facing society or something that fall within the domain of some academic discipline, I would run the same argument and just retitle the essay what English Oh, society or something like that my argument can be applicable to different places. Basically, I would say as a general point, like, if the problems plaguing society, or the expertise of your discipline then you should get involved.

And in fact, I think we have examples of this. I think climate scientists are maybe an example of this where we're seeing more involvement in politics. Now, I happen to think perhaps I'm biased here that Philosophy deals and issues that really sit at the root of the problems that we're seeing. And I think critical thinking can be understood as a just a master value of healthy civic life. I think and self knowledge is the core of philosophy. I think a lot of philosophers are prone to this view that if you dig down into any discipline, you're going to find philosophical issues.

And I think, just as for one example, here, I think we should look at the psychological manipulation and that we all endured in 2016, the Russia adds on Facebook bots, manipulating trends on Twitter, and we all want to think of ourselves as, as these radical free thinkers sitting above all the bubble of bubbles, observing people, you know, in their bubbles. But if that's what we think of ourselves, then I think we're wrong, and what does it take for us to realize this and then want to improve? I think it has to do with honest, courageous self examination right? It requires an ability to recognize bad arguments and that stuff is the core of philosophy does sit at the core of a lot of these issues. The issues that plague our society then philosophy specially I think has those obligations but by no means am I gonna let other disciplines off the hook if they think, their topics are significant to the issues too

Weber: Nice

Cashio: Very good. So we need to be asking everyone how well they know themselves that seems me.

Biondi: Yes.

Cashio: ladies and gentlemen, so part of the problem seems to be the sort of this general sort of public anti intellectualism couldn't raise this issue at least in your essay or philosophers somehow responsible or they partly responsible for the rise of this any intellectualism and if so how like or right maybe not?

Biondi: Second, the second article the second essay in the series is called anti intellectualism, and I wouldn't necessarily grant that there is anti intellectualism in society or at least I think that axiom kind of goes unquestioned that easily. And when we actually examine what we mean by anti intellectualism, we don't really find much precision. We have any kind of general ideas about what it is. But it gets projected out onto society without a whole lot of, I think, thought that goes into it. It's just something that I think academics or the elites, the anti intellectuals, like to say about their culture as a way of elevating themselves above others.

I think that's something that we at least need to recognize. I mean, keep in mind that the entire context of this is political and the anti intellectualism itself is a political term, and it functions to inherently stratify our culture and elevate ourselves among others. And I really think, there's the evidence question of whether we can somehow quantify how anti intellectual a culture is the society is not particularly interested in that. What I'm interested in is using this idea of anti intellectualism as an occasion for self criticism among the so called intellectuals and basically my claim, you know what I tried to say in that second piece, the one on anti intellectualism is that if, that's a big if, if anti intellectualism, some does exist in culture it is chiefly because of the failure of intellectuals like their inability to actually make their topics engaging to speak in a way that people would be interested in.

And if the intellectuals, My idea is that they shouldn't take pride in sitting above their fellow citizens but should actually take pride in improving their society and bringing their ideas to more and more people and being more persuasive being more interesting to show people why the stuff that intellectuals are interested in, It's actually interesting. But when it comes to just people making arguments, people assessing evidence, this is something that everyone does. We just seem to think that, the according to the intellectuals, people aren't doing it about the right stuff and Well, what's the right stuff? Well, it's my book about the exemplary theory of concept creation or something like that.

And I just want to say intellectuals can do better. And that's an important link in my argument that leads to the issue of, of public philosophy. But I mean, there's so much more to say about that some provocative stuff, I probably should.

Weber: So, we may not really be facing the level of problem that we sometimes think we are. But if we were, it'd be our fault.

Biondi: I like making big radical statements. And so I'll say yes.

Weber: All right. Good. Good. All right.

Cashio: Yes, okay.

Weber: Thanks everybody, for listening to another segment of philosophy, bakes bread. We're talking with Zach Biondi. This is Eric Weber and my co host is Anthony Castro will be back after a short break.

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Cashio: Welcome back everyone to philosophy bakes bread. This is Anthony, cashew, and Eric, whoever. And it is our pleasure this afternoon to be talking with Zach Biondi about the relationship between philosophy and society and this future of public philosophy. And so in the last segment we discussed in detail about what philosophy and maybe other academic disciplines might owe society whether not There're problems with critical thought in general that we need to address and this segment we want to talk about what Zach is calling a new public philosophy.

Weber: That's right, so zach in your third piece for the vim blog, the blog dot com, you argue.

Cashio: Nice, nice plug.

Weber: Little plug. There you are, you argued that we need a new public philosophy. What's wrong with the old way of doing philosophy? And what's what do you mean by public philosophy?

Biondi: Yeah. Or we at least need to expand how we think of public philosophy. And in that article, I discuss what you might call just the standard model of public philosophy, which I call the translation model that we think of public philosophers, at least the people who are sanctioned to do public philosophy that people don't, we are okay with doing public philosophy. What they do is they take the real philosophy, the private philosophy, the stuff that happens in the academy and then they translate it into accessible terms for other people. The people who aren't in professional philosophy. And my idea is that we need to expand our conception of public philosophy. And I call this the philosophical problem of public philosophy. Basically how can we do public philosophy that is accessible real philosophy that attempts to pose and solve problems, but that isn't mainly or predominantly translation.

Now, I have a few suggestions for this and I have my arguments about why I think we need that. But it is a pretty open ended essay. I mean, I am essentially posing a problem and the solutions are hopefully forthcoming, but

Weber: Well, let's give you some example. Let's give some examples. So there was there's a very popular book by Michael Sandel, and it's called justice and in it you get a chapter where you're dealing with the question that's fairly famous about if there's a trolley that's out of control and you're on it come down a hill and it's gonna it's aimed at hitting five people, but you could flip this lever and turn the trolley to go down another path. Where it's actually going to hit another person, like one person will, should you flip the switch? And so he presents that very famous philosophical idea that philosophers talk a lot about. He puts it very plainly and easily for people to access and enjoy and think about. And so is that an example of what you're talking about, about this sort of translation about putting these things simply?

Biondi: I mean, that's an interesting case. It depends on how its presented really, I think we could draw a distinction between like, explicit translation and then maybe implicit translation. I mean, this is something little bit strange that I'd like to do. Like sometimes if I'm talking to my parents and there's a low in the conversation or from having dinner with them. I have adopted this habit that's probably not a good one, but I'll try to convince them of like radical philosophical positions in our conversations,

Cashio: Did you I really have a mark sister?

Biondi: But I will. Anarchism, my mother was the last one though but I won't present it as like, Hey, here's a philosophical idea. These are Some philosophers who thought this and what do you think about their arguments, I'll just say, Hey, here's an idea to think about, I would maybe be more of an advocate for that approach to those ideas. A lot of these ideas are stuff that philosophers talking about in the ivory towers, but, I would advocate for is not presenting it in a way that reinforces the dynamic that we in the academy, we have the knowledge we know this stuff and what I'm doing is trying to bring you into the world but at the same time reminding

you through my presentation of these problems that we are the people in the, like what, we have the stuff here and if you really want to know more than read the real philosophy here.

I'm translating it to you in terms that you'll understand which I think enforces some I think questionable problematic dynamics but I have you know, I have no problem and I think all public philosophy is going to include some of this of introducing them to ideas that exists within the world of philosophy but just talk about the ideas and right people to be more likely to engage with now without the constant reminder that, all this is derived from stuff that they don't know that they haven't read.

Weber: That's interesting. I bring up that example because arguably, and maybe listeners want to tell me I'm wrong about this. But arguably, the Justice book that he published is kind of more introducing people to philosophical ideas about justice, right? And that might have a translational function. And in his, next or more recent popular book called, I think, it's called the moral limits of markets. He seems to really make a strong argument about kind of the fact that some things shouldn't be treated by market norms. Like the notion if you think you can buy friendship is misunderstanding, friendship, that kind of thing, right? And so he's making very interesting arguments for how we have to understand the limits of moral markets, whereas in justice, it's more sort of giving people the tools and arguably more translation, but what I heard from you then is that even if there might be something that's proximal or similar to translation, it can never, Let's be done in such a way that's inviting and treat people with respect and encourages them to sort of engage in the discussion. Is that one way to understand your point?

Biondi: Yeah. I mean, the Sandel cases are interesting. I think he occupies a really important place in the link between philosophy and society. I mean, the Justice book, it's kind of like an introduction to ethics book. And I mean, that's at least how the class works at Harvard. I mean, I think you could probably find the lectures of those online pretty easily. Yeah, it's like an introduction to ethics. And there's probably a difference between introducing someone to an explicitly philosophical set of books and, terms and then a more popular just, hey, here are some ideas. Here's some philosophy for you, that isn't concerned with introducing you to a bunch of like waiting names in the history of philosophers.

But one thing I would say is part of the reason why I'm critical of this translation model of philosophy is because what it does is it. builds into how public philosophy works, kind of system where the philosophers the real philosophers allow or certain people to do public philosophy and yet disdain others. And usually how that functions is in the act of translation giving enough deference to the quote, unquote real philosophy the professional philosophy the private philosophy and the translation functions as that difference mechanism if you will.

It's like what we, you need to at least acknowledge and your public philosophy that we're over here in the academy doing the real work you can borrow our insights you can translate our insights but in doing that, at least recognize that we are the people doing the real work and so the people who don't do that the people who just say hey, here's a book of my ideas and maybe don't reference the right people, or at least aren't deferential in the right way. Usually get a lot of disdain and the academics are perfectly happy and take a weird little joy in ripping on those characters.

Weber: So this is interesting this helps me understand a frustration I have, because in particular, Bertrand Russell is a person for whom I have a lot of respect for engaging the public and writing for the public. And yet when you talk to philosophers, and even in his own

expressions when he would differentiate, well, this is the real philosophy over here, I'm just writing popular stuff. Right, whereas the Principia. This is a very famous book, he wrote this very technical right that's philosophy and this other stuff is as popular stuff that's that's not really philosophy.

And he fed into that as did as do all kinds of philosophers. I think that's part of what the problem you're getting it and some of his public books are terrific works of philosophy, I think in particular a book he wrote on science and religion for example, and yet he's part of the problem at least he had the same time it seems to me did good public philosophy in the public and the disdained, what was disdainful of. Well, at least presented this distinction. Right. Exactly.

Biondi: Yeah, so what I say in the articles that, the philosophers, appreciate the work of people who write for the public as long as they also have respected ivory tower projects. Like, well, let someone go out in public as long as they're really one of us. We can kind of trust them to do it. And people who don't have that respect we look askance at.

Cashio: So we got this problem with the translation version of public philosophy be used to testing a new kind of approach. So can you give us maybe a rundown of what this what makes it new was new about what you're suggesting.

Biondi: Nothing really, I think. I'm not really claiming much novelty here. And I also am not sure how concrete of a suggestion I'm making I think, it is possible to trace a lot of my claims to the claims of others. I don't think that's a particularly helpful exercise right now. I mean, that we could build a bibliography and other time if we want and sometimes that exercise is important. Oh, you know, of tracing out the ideas to others or picking out examples that people who are doing what I'm doing, especially when someone in dominant group in philosophy is borrowing the insights of someone in a marginalized group. I think, that's an important instance of that.

But I would say that by pointing out examples, or building that bibliography, I know where these ideas come from, we're effectively changing the subject. And it's, no longer about the ideas but about, a competition or about originality or a display of one's knowledge of other thinkers. And that shifts us back into this conversation where people start to recognize where I know I haven't read all the literature here. So I don't really have an answer to the question of like, well, what is this new public philosophy supposed to be about? What I'm suggesting is that we at least need to confront this philosophical problem of public philosophy, which is how can we do public philosophy that's real philosophy that's not mainly are predominantly translation that engages other people and I don't know I think it's a problem we need to solve.

And one of it one way to solve it, is to at least acknowledge the political dynamic. That exists between private philosophy and public philosophy and the disdain that is usually heaped on people who do public philosophy without the requisite deference to the real philosophers and say that these people usually have large audiences. There are lot of people clamor to hear what they have to say. And if these private philosophers think that their work is so crappy, just do it better yourself. And that's what I would say,

Weber: So, some of what we're, hearing about is a little bit of inside baseball for few people in the academy. But at the same time, I think this notion of a bibliography and set of examples that are out there is a good and important notion. In fact, I think if one word of, do such a project, you would find actually that the movement of public philosophy has is growing pretty huge right now. And it was very tiny and in some places, it is still tiny within particular departments where,

kind of nobody, nobody sort of appreciates that. But then there's this whole crowd first of all in the public.

And then secondly at a lot of other universities and so on who are paying attention. So, in the American Philosophical Association, there's a Committee on Public philosophy. Now, the Society for the advancement of American philosophy has a Committee on Public philosophy. There's the public philosophy network. There's a public philosophy journal. This radio show is a production of the Society of philosophers in America, which is a public philosophy, appreciating organization and advancing organization, the radio show that the stone for the New York Times and then and then there's more and more examples, and there's a books out there to look at.

So one of the questions instead of thinking about the particular examples, though, is what is it these things have in common? And, and among other things, one possible answer could be something about the language issue, just avoiding jargon makes a huge difference, right? And then another dimension would be talking about things of public concern, rather than just this curiosity I have individually on my own that stems from a text from the 1200s, right. So, those would be a couple of the suggestions. One question I have for you, Zach is about sort of the gatekeeper function.

So you're talking about sort of real philosophy. Well, the tradition and the prop. Part of the problem it sounds like from your mind is this is the gatekeepers, but how do we sort of make sure we've got good public philosophy going on, rather than just people being fools? If we got, we have a problem of fake news, the ideas that we get, we need gatekeepers to not have to not be, giving us fake news, or we need some sort of help with that kind of gate keeping function. So how do you think about that with public philosophy?

Cashio: Avoid fake a philosophy?

Weber: Yeah, exactly.

Cashio: Is there any question?

Biondi: I mean, I can really offer some initial thoughts on it. I think that would be a nice problem to have, like when we progress to that point. I mean, and I think that's already kind of existing. Now, I do kind of want to go back to something you said a bit earlier,

Weber: okay.

Biondi: Which I think is an important issue which is like yeah, there is public philosophy now what is it really knew that I'm calling for it should we just have more of the public philosophy and we'll sort through this stuff? I think there's definitely that prevailing opinion in, in public philosophy about public philosophy that public philosophy is not really a challenge to the real philosophy. And, the world of professional philosophy is more or less fine the way that it is. And it's acceptable to have the philosopher digging into details of questions that no one except 30 people really care about. We just shouldn't forget about public philosophy that should maybe be a more important part of our field.

Cashio: Right.

Weber: Nice.

Biondi: I think I want to make it stronger. Claiming that I think at best that thinking doesn't really get us very far doesn't really inspire us to change much as long as we're condoning the how, real philosophy tends to work people will find ways of justifying their own, careers you know, their own research but I think at worst that approach to this is actually quite damaging because we should recognize that on this gatekeeper model on this translation model, public philosophy. Our public philosophy fee will reflect the private philosophy. Public philosophers are usually trained in philosophy, right? They come from a certain culture.

So philosophy is not fine the way that it is. And I think that there are a lot of very strong arguments think that the problems will likely bleed over into our public philosophy. And so I guess what I'm advocating for is a more global, more general institutional critique, just saying that, we shouldn't just let you know the normal professional philosophy off the hook and just emphasize public philosophy more those two things are going to be linked conceptually and politically in a lot of important ways. And then, our problems in private philosophy will bleed over into the public sphere. So basically what I'm trying to do with reach into the went into private philosophy and say the implications of that in public philosophy.

Weber: Well, thanks everybody for listening to another segment of philosophy, bakes bread. This is Eric Weber and Anthony, Cashio, talking with Zach Biondi about public philosophy and the vim blog which he created with some others. We're gonna come back after a short break with some final big picture. Questions for Zach, thanks for listening.

Cashio: Welcome back everyone to philosophy bakes bread. This is Anthony, cashio and Eric, where we're talking today with Zach Biondi about the relationship between philosophy and society. And I guess philosophy and other philosophers in academia and thinking about sort of the future of public philosophy and where we're going to go with it. In this final segment, we're going to wrap up with some big picture questions light hearted joke or two in theory should be it should be funny and a question or Sergio. So for us all to ponder. So, Zach in the last segment we really enjoyed our conversation. I was just wondering if we're talking about the problems, sort of professional respect for public engagement in Philosophy and sort of a big institutional issue.

And I'm wondering if this isn't a problem, this specific to philosophy or if it's something a problem with sort of the research, a polished and parish model of academia in general. So, for instance, I have a historian, colleagues when they in history, they're having very similar discussions about public history, right? whether or not public history is real history. And then you have people who are not trained his story as we publish books and the historians all kind of cringe because the books not very good was full of misleading information. And, so there's this debate about gate keeping and this debate about, who should be doing history and who's reading public history and it seems a lot like what we're talking about today. So, is this really a problem with philosophy or is this a problem with just academia in general?

Biondi: I think they're giant sets of problems that have to do with academia in general, and they all have their bearing on the specific disciplines within academia. I do think that there are also problem that are specific to philosophy. And I think part of it has to do with philosophies, own kind of self understanding as a field, it's not so concerned with authority, like, we're just concerned with cogency, good argumentation and anyone can show up and be persuasive and have good ideas. And our credentials are usually meant to reflect one's ability to make good arguments. It's not the credentials themselves that are significant.

And so, I think there are versions of these problems that are specific to philosophy. And I don't know if it's worth going into that. But you know, I agree. Yes, there are other versions of the problem that are global when it comes to the Academy.

Weber: All right, Zach. Well, a further question for you is, is this the case that you're essentially saying that all philosophers should be engaging in public philosophy? Or should we just sort of appreciate value it more when people do it?

Biondi: Well, I think I would say both, I mean, to a certain degree and that first statement is the big one like you know, should everyone be doing public for us, right? If First, I would return to the argument from part one, which is really meant to be the answer to this. The, question of whether more people need to do public philosophy is relative to the needs of the discipline and broader society. And I think that we're living through this crisis. And so the so called, you know, the experts in critical thinking if we're living through a crisis of critical thinking need to step up I think, reasonable conclusion to draw from that is that we need more and better public philosophy.

I think it's something I say in the article that the question is like, how many philosopher's society needs out there in the, in the streets in the headphones? And the answer has to do with how serious and multifaceted the problems are broken societies need more from philosophers than utopias do, I mean, philosophers after all, our citizens, right, and their citizens who happened to receive a great deal from their society. And so I think it's reasonable to say the philosophers, as philosophers have those civic obligations and how they meet them is going to be a response to how serious the problems of society faces are, and the specific nature of those problems. So, in a sense to answer the question, should all philosophers do public philosophy? I shift us back to the part one, which has meant to say that relative to how many problems we have, we need a commensurate response among philosophers. And if we have a serious issue, we need to have more philosophers out there.

Weber: Interesting. So whether, or not we would say all should at the very least, we have a great deal of need for many to do so. And, maybe it should be all depending on the scope of the problem. But that's, an interesting take on it. Like.

Biondi: yeah, I mean, we distinguish three subtly distinct claims. One is everyone should do philosophy and public philosophy. And then there's another claim, which is like professional philosophy is largely fine the way it is, and then there's maybe another claim about like, not all philosophy needs to have direct practical importance or something like that. I think those are all kind of subtly distinct issues, and they all relate to each other and interesting ways, but I think it's at least important to distinguish them.

Weber: All right.

Cashio: Does society or anything to philosophers?

Biondi: The society, oh, philosophers, maybe, if, the philosophers are actually improving the society? I think in terms of a lot of philosophers being able to live fairly comfortable lives in universities getting funds from the state. I think maybe the more interesting question is, is the balance, even our philosophers giving back enough for what they receive, you can maybe make the argument that they are or the philosophers have given back more than they receive. I'm not, I don't find that particularly persuasive.

Weber: You sound like you think the opposite. Am I wrong about that?

Biondi: Yes, definitely.

Cashio: Yes. You agree, or Yes, I'm wrong.

Biondi: No, I think philosophy owes more to society,

Cashio: There you go, alright?

Biondi: Yes.

Cashio: Good. All right. Well, Zach, one of our final questions and we just, you just touched on it. This is good to bring it up right now comes from the inspiration for our show. Would you say that philosophy bakes no bread? Is the famous saying goes or that it does. And you know why? And how show your work.

Biondi: Okay, show my work? Well, I think I might pull like a standard philosopher and response and say, I'm not sure if that's the right question to ask. Maybe the question should be whether people are eating the bread that we're baking. It could bake all the bread at once, right? Like, but if, if it goes on eaten, right? And we're just like collecting mold in the corner. All that we're really doing is wasting resources. So maybe we should do maybe we shouldn't be concerned with whether philosophers are baking bread, but we should be finding people who are hungry and then giving them what they need. And as the saying goes, Man does not live by bread alone. So we also need to recognize that.

Weber: nice that's a clever response. I never heard that one before. Oh, man. Well, as you know, Zach, we want to make sure people see both the serious side of philosophy as well as the lighter side. So in our last segment we always have a bit we call philosophunnies.

Pre-recorded Weber: Say philosophy.

Sam: ...Losofunnies

[laughter]

Weber: Say... philosophunnies.

Sam: ... Losophunnies.

[laughter]

Weber: We'd love to hear your favorite joke, or funniest fact or a story about philosophy. Anything ever about what we've been talking about, society and philosophers and so forth. What's something funny, or a story or a joke or something in your experience that you can tell us for our listeners?

Biondi: Okay. I think one of my favorite like philosophy anecdotes is from Voltaire who I think is maybe a nice example of someone to talk about. As a public philosopher Voltaire had a lot of

influence in like you know pre revolution France and there's a story that he was at his home and a visitor showed up someone claime to talk about philosophy with Voltaire and Voltaire sees a visitor and asks and where you'd come from before and the visitor says, Oh, I was just a Mr. healers. And Voltaire says, Oh, he's a great man. He's a great poet, a wonderful philosopher, almost a universal genius and the guest's response like, Oh, that's an admirable thing for you to say Voltaire because Mr. hailer does not say the same about you. Perhaps we are both mistaken then

Weber: oh that's a good line

Biondi: I know it's really a good line

Weber: perhaps were both mistaken them. Oh, I like that. I kind of reminds me of the old joke that you can go either way that if someone moves from Mississippi, Alabama or Alabama, Mississippi, the IQ of both states goes up

Biondi: Your right .

Cashio: Only people from Mississippi. It goes both ways.

Weber: We're, are tired Is that what you're saying?

Cashio: Not Sure.

Weber: Oh, boy. We always gather a few jokes also, Zach, so if you'll bear with us if they failed, and people can laugh at us, we like to say, right,

Cashio: so what do we got? We got a general philosophy thing this time around.

Weber: That's right.

Cashio: A boy was feeling very nervous about his first date. So we went to his father for advice. My son, said his father, there are three subjects that always work with women, food, family, and philosophy. Sure to work every time so the boy picks up his date and they stare at each other for a long time, the boys nervousness builds and then he remembers his father's advice. So we asked the girl do you like potato pancakes? No, comes the answer in the silence returns like a suffocating blanket.

Cashio: Do you have a brother? No. After giving us some thought the boy places last card Well, if you had a brother would he like potato pancakes.

Weber: Actually really like, all right, this one's an oldie but a goodie. There are three kinds of people in the world those who are good at math and those who aren't.

Biondi: Yeah.

Weber: Crickets

Cashio: If it wasn't for nihilism, I'd have nothing to believe in.

Weber: All right. This one's a good Marxist joke for you Your mother so classless she could be a Marxist utopia little game jokes.

Biondi: Any Marxist joke I'm a sucker four

Weber: All right.

Cashio: That's what I said.

Weber: Same way.

Cashio: Last but not least, we do want to take advantage of the fact that we have powerful social media. You have to say like that then allow for two way communications even for programs like radio show. So we want to invite our listeners to send us their thoughts about big questions that we raised on the show.

Weber: That's right, Zach. So given that we want to know whether you've got a question to ask our listeners, we often have a little segment that we call you tell me and we'll sometimes record an extra breadcrumb short breadcrumb episode we call them and, so we love it when we get feedback from people voicemail emails and so on. So folks send us that and so this is the questions Zack do you have a question to ask our listeners for the, you tell me segment?

Biondi: Yeah, I guess I would recall I would point people back to this idea about the Socratic spirit and I was talking about before you know this openness to changing one's mind about absolutely anything if given good reason to and I would just encourage all listeners to question whether they adopt that kind of attitude and whether they think that they should I mean, in Socrates view that that unless you adopt that attitude, then there's something to be missing in your life.

There's something not worth living about the life that doesn't embody that kind of attitude. And there's a lot to gain to. There's a lot to be gained from that type of attitude. So I guess I would just encourage some self-reflection, some self-criticism in listeners, what about that kind of attitude, and especially within the political context, people who are willing to change their minds about their views and reflect honestly and courageously about those views. I think it's something we need more of. And so I guess I would encourage in, kind of philosophical question, what do we think about the Socratic spirit? Is it something that you should be adopting, everyone should be adopting and what sort of political consequences would that kind of attitude have very nice,

Weber: Very good, set of questions? That's good.

Cashio: Alright. Well, thanks for joining us. Zach. It was a really fun conversation and I learned a lot I think it was pretty fantastic.

Weber: Yeah, thank you.

Cashio: Yeah, thanks everyone. For listening to philosophy, bakes bread, food for thought about life and leadership. Your host Anthony, cashio and Eric whoever are really grateful today to have been joined by Zach Biondi and we hope you listeners will join us again. So consider sending us your thoughts about anything you've heard today the like to hear about in the future

or about that specific question or really set of questions we just got from Zach really fantastic about the Socratic spirit. So, let us what you think.

Weber: That's right. Remember everyone you can catch us on Twitter, Facebook, and on our website at philosophy baked bread calm and there you'll find transcripts for our many episodes. Thanks to Drake bowling, an undergraduate philosophy student at the University of Kentucky. Thank, you Drake.

Cashio: Thanks Drake. Drake is killing it guys these these transcripts are really fantastic and they're great way to engage with the show. So I think drinks doing an awesome job. Thank you again, Drake.

Weber: That's right. And one more thing, folks, if you want to support the show, and to be more involved in the work of the Society of philosophers in America, Sofia, the easiest thing to do is to go learn about us and join as a member at philosophers in america dot com .

Cashio: If you're enjoying the show, and we hope that you are. Maybe take a second to rate us on iTunes or the podcast app or Google Play or wherever you're getting your podcast positive reviews help the algorithm help us help others public philosophy. So, we'd like we'd like it we'd appreciate it you can of course always email us at philosophy bakes bread at Gmail dot com. And you can also call us and leave a short recorded message where the question or comment that we may be able to play on the show you can reach us at 859-257-1849. That's 859-257-1849. Join us again next time on philosophy big spread food for thought about life and leadership.

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