Bieberians at the Gate?
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One of the oldest questions of philosophy is, “Who guards the guardians?” When Plato posed this question – if not quite succinctly – his concern was with how a community can keep its leaders focused on the good of the whole. Plato’s answer was that guardians should govern themselves – philosophy would train their souls so that they would choose wisely rather than unjustly. Kings would become philosophers, and philosophers kings.

This is not how we do things today. In representative forms of government the people rule, at least intermittently, through processes such as voting, recalls, and referenda. Particularly within the American experiment everybody guards everyone else – through a system of “checks and nondemocratic: the academy.

We academics have long argued that we have a special justification for self-rule. We claim that our activities – which consist of the production of knowledge, and its dissemination via presentations, publications, and teaching – are so specialized and so important that ordinary people cannot properly judge our work. Instead, we have devised a way to evaluate ourselves, through a process known as peer review.

Whether it is a matter of articles or books, grant applications, or tenure and promotion, review by one’s academic peers has long been the standard. And who are one’s peers? The academy gives a disciplinary answer to this question. Biologists are the ones competent to judge work in biology, and only chemists can judge the research of other chemists. Nonexperts – whether within or outside the academy – will only disrupt the process, leading to misguided or even disastrous results. Best to leave such questions to the experts.

But what of philosophy? Across the 20th century and now into the 21st, philosophers have been evaluated in the same way. Even while claiming that philosophy has a special relevance to everyday life, philosophers have mostly written for and been evaluated by their disciplinary peers. Philosophy became more and more professionalized in the 20th century, with nonexperts increasingly unable to comprehend, much less judge, the work of philosophers. A philosopher
today is not considered successful unless he or she contributes to professional, peer-reviewed publications in the field.

But should philosophy really act like the other disciplines in this regard? Should philosophy be considered a “discipline” at all? And if not, what are the consequences for the governance of philosophy?

One of the oddities of present-day philosophy is how rarely this question is asked. Go to a philosophy department with a graduate program, and sign up for a course in ancient philosophy: the professor will be expected to know ancient Greek, and to be well-read in the scholarly literature in the area. The irony is that there was no secondary literature for the Greeks – no scholarship at all, in fact, in the sense that we mean it today. Philosophers were thinkers, not scholars. Socrates would never get tenure: what did he write?

This situation was partly a matter of technology; paper was expensive and reproduction of a manuscript laborious. But it is still odd to assume that Plato and Aristotle would have been good scholars if only they’d had access to the *Philosopher’s Index* and an Internet connection. Nor were the Greeks good disciplinarians. Socrates was notorious for speaking with people from all walks of life; and when he came to be evaluated it was by a jury of his peers consisting of 500 Athenians. He may not have liked the verdict, but he did not dispute the jury’s right to pass judgment.

Across the long sweep of Western history we find the point repeated: Bacon, Machiavelli, Descartes, Leibniz, Lock, Marx and Nietzsche all wrote for and sought the judgment of peers across society. One wonders what they would think of what counts as philosophy across the 20th century – a highly technical, inward-looking field that values intellectual rigor over other values such as relevance or timeliness.

Questions about who should count as a philosopher’s peers are timely today, for our standard notions of academic peer review are now under assault. Publicly funded science is being held more socially accountable. ([http://rev.oxfordjournals.org/content/20/3/239.short](http://rev.oxfordjournals.org/content/20/3/239.short)). At the National Science Foundation, grant proposals are now judged by both disciplinary and transdisciplinary ([http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs11024-012-9192-8](http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs11024-012-9192-8)) criteria – what are called, respectively, “intellectual merit” and “broader impacts.” Universities are also being held responsible for outcomes, with state funding increasingly being tied to graduation rates and other achievement measures. Philosophers, too, have begun to feel the pinch of accountability, especially in Britain, where the so-called “impact agenda” ([http://rev.oxfordjournals.org/content/20/3/247.abstract](http://rev.oxfordjournals.org/content/20/3/247.abstract)) has advanced more rapidly than in the United States.

We view this situation as more of an opportunity than as a problem. Philosophers should get creative and treat the question of who counts as our peers as itself a philosophic question. There are a variety of ethical, epistemological, and political issues surrounding peer review
worthy of philosophic reflection. But perhaps the most pressing is the question of whether we should extend the notion of peer beyond disciplinary bounds.

This could occur in a number of different ways. Not only could we draw nonphilosophers or nonacademics into the peer review process. We could also consider a variety of other criteria, such as the number of publications in popular magazines or newspaper articles; number of hits on philosophic blogs; number of quotes in the media; or the number of grants awarded by public agencies to conduct dedisciplined philosophic work.

Now, some will claim that extending the idea of our philosophical peers to include nonphilosophers will expose philosophy to the corruptions of the demos. Is philosophizing to become a sheer popularity contest, where philosophers are promoted based on their Klout score, or the number of Facebook likes their blog posts games? Aren’t we proposing that the Quineans be replaced by the Bieberians?

Such objections stem, in part at least, from what we could call a Cartesian ethos – the idea that philosophers should strive above all to avoid error. We should withhold our assent to any claim that we do not clearly and distinctly perceive to be true. This Cartesian ethos dominates philosophy today, and nowhere is this clearer than in regard to peer review. Our peers are our fellow philosophers, experts whose rigor stands in for Descartes’ clear and distinct ideas.

For a counterethos we could call upon William James’s “The Will to Believe.” James argues that the pursuit of truth, even under conditions where we cannot be certain of our conclusions, is more important than the strict avoidance of error. Those who object that this will open philosophy up to all sorts of errors that would otherwise have been caught by expert peer review are exhibiting excessive Cartesianism. In fact, those who insist on the value of expertise in philosophy are reversing the Socratic approach. Whereas Socrates always asked others to contribute their opinions in pursuit of truth, Descartes trusted no one not to lead him into error. A Jamesian approach to peer review, on the other hand, would be generous in its definition of who ought to count as a peer, since avoiding error at all costs is not the main goal of philosophy. On a Jamesian approach, we would make use of peers in much the way that Socrates did – in an effort to pursue wisdom.

It is true that when philosophers broaden their peer group, they lose some control over the measures used to define philosophic excellence. This raises another risk – that philosophy will be merely an instrument for an exterior set of ends. The fear here is not that abandoning disciplinary peer review will lead us into error. Instead, it is that the only alternative to value as judged by disciplinary peers as a crass utilitarianism, where philosophic value is judged by how well it advances a paymaster’s outcome. One philosopher may be labeled a success for helping a racist political candidate hone his message, while another may be labeled a failure for not sufficiently fattening a corporation’s bottom line. Isn’t a dedisciplined philosophy actually a return to sophistry rather than to Socrates? Won’t it sell its services to whoever is buying, adjusting its message to satisfy another’s agenda and criteria for success? In order to survive
until the turn of the 22nd century, must we sell the soul of philosophy at the beginning of the 21st?

We have two replies to such concerns. First, philosophy existed long before the 20th-century model of academic disciplinarity came to define its soul. The struggle between philosophy and sophistry is a perennial one, and one does not necessarily sell out by writing for a larger audience – or remain pure by staying within disciplinary boundaries.

Second, disciplinary and dedisciplinary approaches to philosophy should be seen as complementary rather than antagonistic to one another. Rigor should be seen as pluralistic: the rigor of disciplinary work is different from, but neither better nor worse, than the philosophic rigor required to adjust one’s thinking to real world exigencies. This is a point that bioethicists have long understood. In his seminal 1973 “Bioethics as a Discipline,” Daniel Callahan already saw that doing philosophical thinking with physicians, scientists, and other stakeholders demands “rigor... of a different sort than that normally required for the traditional philosophical or scientific disciplines.” Bioethics exists in disciplinary and in nondisciplinary forms — in ways that synergize. It shows that we need not be forced, as a matter of general principle, to choose one set of peers over another.

 Practically speaking, examining the question of who should count as a peer means that philosophers will need to revisit some of the core elements of our field. For one, our criteria for tenure and promotion would need to be reviewed. The current strict hierarchy surrounding where we publish – say, in “The Stone” (the New York Times philosophy blog) or in Mind – would need to be re-evaluated. And really, what is the argument for claiming that the latter sort of publication is of higher value? If you reply that the latter is peer-reviewed, excuse us for pointing out that your answer begs the question.

And what about the question of multiple authorship? Should this article count for less because three of us wrote it? How much less? Why? Co-authoring is actually just as challenging as producing single-authored works, as we can attest, so the justification cannot be that it is less work. Should we value independent scholarship over collaboration? Why? This is the Cartesian ethos coming back to haunt philosophy: I think; I exist; I write; I am a scholar. We doubt it.

As universities face growing demands for academic accountability, philosophers ought to take the lead in exploring what accountability means. Otherwise we may be stuck with Dicken’s Mr. Gradgrind. (“Now, what I want is Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life.”) But a philosophical account of accountability will also require redefining the boundaries of what counts as philosophy. We ought to engage those making accountability demands from the outside in just the way that Socrates engaged Euthyphro in piety. If there are indeed Bieberians at the gate, we say let them in — as long as they are willing to engage in dialogue, we philosophers should do all right. Unless it is we philosophers who refuse to engage.
Bio

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