

Say What? Talking Philosophy with the Public

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Although I've been invited to write a how-to of public speaking for professional philosophers, I am at best a fair to middling public speaker. This is not false modesty; we all know a great public speaker when we hear one, and sadly I'm not one of them.

But, fortunately, being run-of-the-mill puts me in a good place to reflect usefully on the large gap that exists between giving a philosophy talk to professional philosophers and giving one to a more general audience. Experience helps, too. Repeated episodes of doing philosophy with diverse and sometimes very large public audiences, followed by the conviction that I didn't do it right, has put me in a good position to have thoughts about what does and does not work, and to point out some surprisingly common pitfalls we face in massaging our rather specific and methodologically narrow philosophical training into a digestible talk for the layperson. Also, as someone who has shared the stage with some truly exceptional public speakers, I can report on some of the tidbits I have picked up from observing the masters and mistresses in action. However, no one should take what I say here as more than one philosopher's musings about speaking philosophy with the public.

There are three main types of "public lecture" that a professional philosopher might be asked to give. The most common is the Faux Public Lecture, a public lecture typically at a university, where the vast majority of the audience consists of other philosophers, with a sprinkling of academics from other disciplines. I think most professional philosophers already know how to do these. No technical detail. Underscore the most arresting ideas. Add a piquant quote or story here and there. Talk, don't read, if you can help it, unless you are one of those people who talk-reads brilliantly, in which case doing so will allow you not only to get through more material but also to be more precise and eloquent.

My primary interest is in two other types of public lectures that are, in my experience, much more difficult to pull off. First, there's the Specialist Public Lecture, in which your audience consists of a bunch of well-educated folks from a particular non-philosophical sphere – for example, scientists from a pharmaceutical firm, economists from the World Bank, or financiers from the banking industry. Many philosophers are completely unaware of the world of executive education and business retreats, and Specialist Public Lectures often arise from these occasions. They range from informal retreats, usually held in some tawny spot of nature for the purpose of team-building among the employees of a firm, to exclusive, luxury junkets for C-suite executives and VIPs at a spa or golfing resort for the purpose of networking and "upping one's game." Speakers are hired at exorbitant rates to inspire, amuse, and – as the promo material goes – "open eyes to new ways of thinking." I've done quite a number of these, and they are fun to do, in part because the people you meet are so unlike professional philosophers, although you should be ready for the occasional surprise. I spoke at one finance retreat at which a high-level partner, having partaken of quite a lot of cocaine, crashed a wedding at the retreat while wielding a samurai sword he had decided to bring along to impress his peers. It's never a good idea to end a company retreat with an arrest. Quite apart from the excitement, it would be a good thing for philosophers to break into these speaking circles because we have things to say that could be of great use to the people who grease the

wheels of the world. We have a perspective – not to mention a depth and rigor – that many of the speakers at such events tend to lack. More on depth and rigor later.

There's also what might be called the Generalist Public Lecture, in which the audience before you is made up of people without a college or university degree: that is, 66% of the US population or 70% of the UK population. These are, by my lights, the hardest to pull off. You need to communicate a take-home message in ways that are interesting and varied while not saying anything too misleading. This is surprisingly difficult to do. I remember one early public talk I gave in which I found myself struggling over how to finesse a point about values so that it was both digestible and not obviously false. People tend to think they understand a distinction between facts and values because they assume that values can't be factive. So you have to talk about values in a way that does not buy into their false assumption without having to go into a digression about how there can be evaluative facts. Threading the needle is taxing work.

In this chapter, I offer some musings and advice about the last two types of public lectures that you, as a professional philosopher, might be asked to give. To repeat, I'm just one philosopher with one set of opinions and experiences, so what I say here may be not work for you. Caveat emptor.

1 Getting Started

The first thing you should do before sitting down to write a public talk is have a meeting – I sometimes have two – with your host, which is usually a committee of several people, to find out more about:

- The kind of event at which you'll be speaking. Is it a boozy dust-up or a serious educational endeavor? How many people will be there, and what will they be expecting? Gender balance? Other demographics? Is it over a meal? Who else is on the program, and what will they be talking about?
- What the hosts ideally want you to achieve with the audience. Is the event supposed to be inspirational? Educational? Entertaining? Team building?
- The background of the audience. What kind of education do they have? What problems will be foremost on their minds? What will they want from the event and your talk?

Two key things you'll want to extract from this meeting are a smattering of examples that will be familiar to and "speak to" the audience, which you can then work into your presentation, and some local lingo you can use to present those examples. While philosophical jargon is, of course, verboten, if you can (correctly) use some of their local jargon, doing so is a quick way to get your audience to perk up and listen to you as well as have them warm to you as an authority. When I talked to the US Navy, for example, I found out some of the topical issues that were swirling around and worked them into my talk; these were very different from the examples I used to speak to scientists at Big Pharma and different again from those suitable at the CIA. Usually there will be some kind of cocktail gathering, swank dinner, or other opportunities to get to know the crowd to whom you will be speaking in advance of your talk. That's a great chance for you to try to slip something into your talk that shows that you understand them. "I was talking to VP Karen Smith over margaritas last night, and she told me that one of the big issues in the firm is X. That reminds me of a story ..."

The next step is to start thinking about your lecture. I highly recommend starting in your head with an elevator pitch. You have 20 seconds to summarize your take-home message: what do you want your audience to hear? Then whittle this down to a punchy 10

seconds. Maybe your message is that things pertaining to topic X are more complicated than one might have thought. Maybe it's a message about how X isn't what they thought it was, or that there is a surprising connection between X and a seemingly distant topic Y. Whatever message you wish to send, you should have this uppermost in your mind, and that should shape the rest of your talk. It's best if the message is somewhat surprising while credible.

For myself, I would not start my actual talk with the elevator pitch. I think this is almost always a bad idea. As philosophers, we are often taught to frontload our message: "In section 1, I will examine the history of attempts to square the circle; in section 2, I will square the circle; in section 3, I will consider three objections to my squaring the circle, etc." A public talk is more like a screenplay; you want to create some dramatic tension by, for example, laying out a problem, preferably by way of some arresting example, showing how difficult it is to solve, and then solving it. Most movies start with a car chase or murder or something to draw you in. Public lectures should be the same. There is no need to reenact a murder, but you should find a story or example that illustrates the point or problem that you plan to solve or elucidate in the course of your talk. The example can be from your own life or adapted from literature or the headlines. Seasoned speakers like Malcolm Gladwell sometimes open their talks with what looks to be an airtight case for X, only to announce a few minutes later that they are going to show you why X is wrong.

Another trick is to engage with your audience at the outset by asking for a show of hands about something. I once asked an audience of high-level bankers to raise their hands if they were in a relationship and then to keep their hands raised if they were committed to that relationship. That allowed for some knowing looks among friends who knew the spouses of their compatriots. Yet another trick is to invite your audience to shape the content of the talk. When I gave talks at Google, I invited members of the audience to give me an example of something concrete in their lives and used that example throughout the talk to illustrate my points. In short, you need to reel them in with something arresting that is apropos of your take-home message.

2 Writing Up Your Talk

There are three observations I would make about the content of public lectures. First, a problem. One thing I've noticed when philosophers attempt to engage with non-academic audiences in speech or in writing is that they sometimes *come off as condescending*. Of course, no decent human being intends to come off as superior, but there is a funny connection between trying to be clear and methodical, on the one hand, and appearing pompous and supercilious, on the other. I would diagnose the problem as follows. When we try to break down an idea or argument into steps, we are doing philosophy according to our familiar professional tropes. When speaking to a general audience, you want to do philosophy in a nonprofessional register. This usually means not going step-by-step through an argument but giving the gist of an argument with, say, a bunch of memorable examples or by leading your audience to a conclusion through a series of compelling short stories. Doing philosophy with the public requires a different form of argumentative progression from what we're used to. My worst public lectures were ones in which I was too lazy to rework my philosophical ideas in this way. You might think that you can get away with doing philosophy in the usual way as long as you speak slowly, use a lot of examples, and repeat yourself a lot. Not so. There's no avoiding the hard work of *translation*, which is a matter of stepping back from your content and figuring out how to present it so that *it lands with your audience*. Non-academic family and friends

in your life are there to help. Practice makes passable, if not perfect. What you're trying to elicit from your audience is an "aha" moment when they think to themselves, "Oh, wow, that is neat; I never thought about that in that way before." Not easy. And it won't happen if you come across as too teachy. Or corny. Or cliché.

The second observation I would make is that we philosophers are undeniably *special* as public speakers; that is, our training allows us to offer quite distinctive public lectures that don't fit the usual mode. Most public lectures, in my experience, involve a sharing of information – arresting facts or gasp-inducing statistics – interwoven with a large interpretive claim, usually left quite vague. We philosophers are in a prime position to do something different. We can *do philosophy* with our audiences. That is, we can lead them on an argumentative journey to an eye-opening conclusion by means of philosophical argument. I realize that what I'm trying to convey here is itself rather vague, but trust me when I say that public speakers tend not to do arguments with their audiences. We are well-placed to offer something different and valuable, and I believe that that is what we should do. I've had audience members come up to me after talks to say that they found my talk different and refreshing because it required them to *work*. In a talk I gave to the World Bank, for example, I made the audience go through the equivalent of a natural deduction but used pictures and no symbols to make the point. They got it! The lesson here is not to twist yourself into a fount of fun facts but to seize the opportunity to show your audience what philosophy is all about. Having said that, to repeat: you don't want to give your talk in standard philosophy tropes. You want to do the hard work of translating philosophical argument into digestible tidbits manifested by stories or examples that don't exactly map onto premises and conclusion but instead connect with the way your non-academic family member or friend thinks most naturally about the points you want to make. So instead of saying "Some normative reasons are metaphysically grounded in volitional activity, but not in a Kantian or neo-Kantian way," you might say, "You should spend your weekends repainting the garage because you've made a commitment to getting the house looking swell." Translation, in my view, is the most important thing we must do well if we want to speak successfully to the public.

Finally, a word about how to produce this content that is at once philosophical and argumentative, yet not dependent on the usual philosophical tropes of premise and conclusion. What I have observed when I write public lectures is that the editorial voice in my head is entirely different from the taskmaster present while I'm writing philosophical papers. Instead of asking myself, "Is this ambiguous?" "How could someone misunderstand this?" "Is there a distinction I'm missing?" "Have I gotten to the heart of the matter?" I notice myself instead asking, "Would this make sense to my 14-year-old niece?" "Is this the best example or story to make my point?" "What mood have I put my audience in, and do I want them to be in a different mood?" and, most importantly, "Is this boring?" But this *volk* editor should always be subservient to the philosophy. Your goal is to understand the philosophical point you want to make as deeply and rigorously as possible and then to translate it into an interesting journey replete with fun and appealing stops that play proxy for rigorous argumentation. The destination, of course, should be persuasive while also delightfully eye-opening.

3 Delivering Your Talk

What I've learned most from my public lectures is that there is a vast array of styles of good speakers. This makes sense. You shouldn't try to fake it; you want your audience to trust you, and psychologists tell us that a key element of trusting someone is perceiving

them as authentic, as being themselves.² Anyone who knows me knows that I can't tell a joke to save my life, so I never tell jokes in talks but instead try to slip in a bit of humor in other ways. If you're naturally witty, you've got half the battle won in both content and delivery.

When I gave a TED talk some years ago, writing up the talk was a cinch. I was flabbergasted, however, when they told me I could have no notes, could not just "talk," but would have to memorize what I wrote *word for word*. I instantly developed a profound respect for Shakespearean actors. About the only longish thing I had ever stored in memory is a song about the "Fifty Nifty United States," which names all the states alphabetically, something I learned when I was about seven years old. I can still sing it. But I found the memorization of my TED talk to be extremely challenging, and I spent two miserable weeks going over it, again and again. It was a mere 15 minutes long. And yes, I even tried the memory palace, a tried-and-true technique to aid memorization, but I couldn't remember which room of the palace to go into next. In short, I don't recommend memorizing your public talks. It just isn't worth it. This might not be an issue for you. At the TED event, I shared the stage with Kwame Anthony Appiah and Naomi Oreskes, both of whom gave elegant, perfectly formed talks – *without* having to suffer the indignity of memorizing their talks word for word. I can only hope one day to achieve that kind of natural eloquence and fluency.

Most of the public lectures I have given have been part of an event with other speakers – usually more seasoned than I – so I've been able to enjoy four-star generals, business tycoons, TV personalities, and very distinguished academics who also happen to be great speakers. Bill Nye, The Science Guy, gave a talk with one simple – and pretty vague – point. He started off foreshadowing it and then took the audience on a Mr. Rogers-like tour of *varia* in his life to illustrate the point. Jane Goodall also talked engagingly and conversationally about her life. The gasp-inducing moments involved repeating things that her white male superiors had said denigrating her work. She showed vulnerability as a way to bring the audience to her side. A very skilled magician, David Kwong (from whom I subsequently succeeded in extracting one low-level magic trick secret as a *quid pro quo* for setting him up on a blind date with a friend), gave an extremely polished and fascinating talk about misdirection at the CIA. His style was relaxed while also being nerdy and focused. One of my favorite talks was by Geoffrey West of *Scale* fame, given at a festival in Italy to the general public. He gave what was essentially an academic talk to a general audience. But when you have such fascinating facts and a rich hypothesis to share, it doesn't matter that you're imposing slide after slide on unsuspecting Italian grandmothers.

All of the best speakers I've so far had the privilege of watching have two things in common: they were totally relaxed and in control of their material. It was evident that they had spent hours and hours honing their speaking craft. More importantly, they were *absent* during the talk – that is, there was no ego evident as they were speaking. This was true even of the speakers who used stories from their own lives to make a point or to entertain. The best analogy I can think of is with acting, whether onstage or onscreen. A bad actor breaks character by the slightest twitch of the face – you can just tell when an actor is aware of themselves acting: the spell is broken. If during your talk you "break character" by exclaiming, "Okay, now let's see, where am I?" you are being unprofessional, not charming. You are a conduit of profound philosophical ideas, and making the audience aware that you are communicating with them is a distraction.³ The best speakers I have

encountered are both perfectly natural and authentic but also “in the zone,” talking about their ideas so that they, as persons, disappear. There is no meta-script going on inside their heads when they are speaking. They are fully in the moment and “first-order” all the way.

4 Q & A

Once you’ve wrapped everything up with something memorable, there may be a question and answer period. Straightforward questions deserve straightforward answers. Many questions, however, will involve twists and turns and come from what we philosophers would think of as “left field.” If you’re really good, you’ll be able to mine the nugget of the question and actually answer it. I’ve seen philosophers do this at philosophy talks but have *never* witnessed the probing of a rambling question by a seasoned public speaker. What tends to happen instead is that the best public speakers pick up on one aspect of the question and use it as an occasion to say something interesting that they already have in their pocket. Many of the best speakers treat the Q & A as an extension of their talk. They are connecting with the audience and questioner, to be sure, but they aren’t trying to mine the question in the way philosophers do in a “normal” Q & A. It would be odd to ask the questioner, “Does that answer your question?” Sometimes your questioner is not really asking a question but thinking out loud about something your talk has twigged. Again, this is a perfect occasion for you to pick up on some aspect of what was said and say something further to drive your message home.

5 The Exit

Usually there is some kind of event after your talk that gives the audience a chance to mingle with you. I know which talks I’ve bombed when, at the post-talk event, people mill around me awkwardly, trying not to catch my eye, until someone feels sorry for me and comes up to talk about the weather. The ones that work are those in which groups of people surround you and start throwing objections and questions at you, and then the discussion balloons so that lots of people are engaged for a couple of hours after your talk. Some of this loquaciousness is lubricated by the presence of alcohol.

Concluding Thoughts

If public speaking has appeal, you might wonder how you can get on the public lecture circuit. The easiest way – and a *sine qua non* – is to become an expert in a topic that is of public interest. Write a crossover book, for example. Even then, it’s hit or miss as to whether you will be invited to give public talks. If you’re lucky, as I was, to be invited to give a talk on a big platform (thank you, Simon Marcus of TED), it is much easier to get on people’s radar. There are also speaker websites where you can flog your availability, but you usually have to be invited to join these. Businesses also talk to one another – “so-and-so gave us a great talk; you should have her at your retreat!” I turn down about 30% of the invitations I receive. That sounds boastful, but the point is that once you’re even marginally “on the circuit,” you will get a lot of dross invitations for events that will be unrewarding both intellectually and financially. After experimenting a bit, it’s important to choose events that are fun for you and will therefore be enjoyable for your audience. And of course doing freebies for nonprofits is always a good thing.

Is speaking philosophy with the public worth it? The answer is a resounding “yes.” Many philosophers, especially those working on issues of public moment, such as AI, criminal and police reform, healthcare, and the environment, are old hands at public outreach. Even those of us who work in more *recherché* areas of philosophy can bring something useful to the general public. Metaphysicians can illuminate ideas of gender;

epistemologists can weigh in on the epistemic authority afforded new technologies; philosophers of religion can reveal insights into character and secular civic education; legal philosophers can guide debates about regulation; philosophers of race and gender can share their insights about the systemic and structural injustice that most of the world seems blind to. It's actually true: our clear thinking, careful argumentation, critical acumen, and genuine philosophical expertise can inspire our fellow citizens to new and salutary ways of thinking.

Philosophers have things to say to the general public that can make the world go better. And there is a unique and deep satisfaction to be gained by doing so. I recommend that more of us try it.

Notes

1. Many thanks to the editors of this volume for very helpful comments.
2. [https://hbr.org/2020/05/begin-with-trust#:~:text=In%20our%20experience%2C%20trust%20has,care%20about%20them%20\(empathy\).](https://hbr.org/2020/05/begin-with-trust#:~:text=In%20our%20experience%2C%20trust%20has,care%20about%20them%20(empathy).)
3. Comedians often “go meta” either to buy themselves time to remember their next joke or because they traffic in the discomfort of their audience. But we are not hired as comedians.