

***Re-engineering Ethics: Pushing Philosophy Outside of its Comfort Zone at the APPE Annual Meeting***

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On the surface the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics (APPE) annual meeting, held February 28 to March 3 (2013) in San Antonio, Texas, appeared similar to any other philosophy conference. Conference rituals are familiar. Professionals roam from meeting room to meeting room at a metropolitan hotel and listen as other professionals gave careful expositions of their latest research. Between presentations, participants engage in the rite of networking. In an abysmal job climate, in-between moments are key for students and early career professionals seeking to put themselves on the radar of someone whose reputation could help boost their own.

The conference landmarks were made navigable by the extensive map detailing participants and their institutional affiliations, presentation topics, Association news, and advertisements — the APPE program. The program itself merits philosophical study; it both exemplifies and institutionalizes these practices into a succinct and informative navigation tool. Contrary to what one might expect, however, the list of participants includes not only philosophers and professional ethicists, but also academic scientists and engineers, industry members, medical doctors and other health practitioners, sociologists, educators, journalists, anthropologists, publishers, National Academy of Engineering members, communication professionals, and even museum curators. Such a group is remarkably and suggestively diverse.

**Philosophy Inside its Comfort Zone**

Academic philosophy exists in the modern academy as one discipline among many. In philosophy, ethics stands as a preeminent subfield, or subdiscipline. Subdisciplines, and recognized exemplary figures, help comprise a rich and detailed history and a distinct institutional context — philosophy departments in educational institutions. People active at philosophy's margins constantly vie with those at its core for professional recognition in the various academic venues (e.g., books or journals) for communicating philosophical knowledge that, in themselves, serve to demarcate both that core and those margins.

The practice of philosophy in today's colleges and universities, however, is not unproblematic. The noted physicist and mathematician Freeman Dyson caused a stir recently in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* with an essay in which he asks, "When and why did philosophy lose its bite? How did it become a toothless relic of past glories?" (Bartlett 2012). Frodeman (2012) also criticizes the form taken by contemporary philosophy as one of "intricate analyses that make incremental additions to the literature within one or another philosophical subfield, written in prose understandable only to disciplinary peers" (4). The implication: philosophy has lost touch with the world outside of its own academic silo.

Dyson (2012) answers that philosophy's teeth fell out when it became a distinct discipline differentiated from other classic liberal arts. In last year's 25-year anniversary special issue of *Social Epistemology*, Steve Fuller suggested philosophy's disciplinary character as warranting analysis. For Fuller, philosophy "lost its bite" upon renouncing its "original Kantian impulse, which was to have philosophy provide a sense of unity and purpose to what even in Kant's day (see his *Contest of Faculties*) was academia's increasingly fractious and fractionating disciplinary structure" (2012, 13).

For much of the 20th century, Frodeman (2012) notes, philosophers embraced Adam Smith's division of labor in their professional practice. Reacting to the dramatic post-Civil War increase in science, engineering, and agriculture education accompanying industrial growth, philosophers mirrored the specialist mentality of the sciences and other technical disciplines. In doing so, Frodeman argues, philosophers abandoned their "Socratic heritage," which placed emphasis on addressing perennial questions such as the nature and character of philosophy itself (2012, 5-6). That philosophy became a discipline at all is an aberration.

Fuller speculates that Brian Leiter's "Philosophical Gourmet" rankings of philosophy departments by 'quality'<sup>1</sup> deters philosophers and sociologists of knowledge from considering philosophy as an academic discipline as a topic warranting attention (Fuller 2012, 12-13). Leiter denies that profound differences exist in how philosophy is, or should be, practiced. He embraces contemporary philosophy's "naturalistic turn:" philosophy so defined functions as the disciplinary companion of, and underlaborer to, the sciences. Naturalism implies that philosophy is simply one discipline among many. The operative distinction, for Leiter, is not between "analytic" or "continental" types, but rather between "good" and "bad" philosophy, which is determined in and through peer judgments of philosophic excellence. In other words, there is only one "real" philosophy, and it is to be found in philosophy departments among expert philosophical peers (Leiter, 2004).

### **Philosophy Outside its Comfort Zone**

Having such a diversity of interests present at a meeting of the preeminent professional organization for the subdiscipline of ethics is significant. Heterogeneity to this degree is uncharacteristic of the specialist internal economy that dominates the current practice of philosophy. Academic scholarship constituted only a fraction of discussions. Participants also expressed interests in, and represented the interests of, industries and medical practices, education, sciences and engineering, economics and politics, culture and globalization, and communication between experts and the lay public. In other words, the

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<sup>1</sup> The scare quotes are purposeful here. There is a serious question to be asked, and has not be sufficiently answered by Leiter himself, regarding the degree to which his ranking criteria actually captures what is meant by the term 'quality' as it is used to describe something like a philosophy department. Leiter refuses to reveal his criteria beyond the vague description offered on the ranking's webpage.

meeting did not revolved around philosophers from philosophy departments reading disciplinary-style philosophy papers to other philosophers.

That so many non-philosophers attended what is, for all outward appearances, a philosophy conference has implications for the discipline itself, insofar as the participants' diverse interests challenge typical assumptions regarding what kinds of topics should fall under the purview of "philosophy." It certainly seems as though APPE would align itself with the disciplinary understanding of philosophy as a specialized field of academic inquiry or, to use Heidegger's terminology, a regional ontology. Yet, we experienced a hodgepodge of individuals who brought with them a melting pot of intellectual interests: philosophic and other academic theory was discussed in the context of practice, pedagogy, and public engagement. We think this crowd exemplifies a challenge to the predominant narrative of what is and is not recognized as valuable philosophic work.

To be more specific, we found that APPE participants have a varied and mutable interpretation of what ethics is, how it is practiced, who ought to participate in discussions of it, and for what reasons it is important to every human being. Ethics is where the philosophical rubber meets the non-academic road. Below, we analyze in greater detail several presentations exemplifying a heterodox approach to the practice of ethics, and we discuss how such practices contribute to destabilizing the disciplinary narrative defining what "philosophy" is.

### **Exemplars of Re-engineering Ethics at APPE**

#### *Bringing the Public into Ethics Education*

The session most exemplary of this challenge to disciplinary orthodoxy discussed three projects incorporating innovative approaches to ethics education in science and engineering. Its members included a program officer from the National Academy of Engineering, an STS researcher from Penn State, and program designer from the Museum of Science in Boston. Their collective approach to ethics education did not focus on the responsible conduct of research (RCR) or other topics long familiar to professional ethics, such as engineering ethics. Instead, the researchers concerned themselves with the broader socio-philosophical dimensions of scientific and engineering activities. Compared with traditional ethics education in science and engineering, the panelists presented innovative approaches to connecting scientists and engineers with social problems, such as energy research and development, climate change management, extreme temperatures and air quality in a changing urban environment, and the impacts of sea level rise in low-lying areas.

Frazier Benya, from National Academy of Engineering, introduced the Energy Ethics Video Challenge, which aims to engage engineering students to create 5-minute videos presenting a societal issue involving energy production, use, and conservation. Students were directed to explain the relevant scientific or technical knowledge required to understand the problem, but to do so within the framework of the ethical issues at stake –

for example, presenting the issue from the ethical standpoints of the different parties or stakeholders involved. The videos were uploaded to YouTube, and will be posted to the Academy's Facebook page to encourage ethical discussion and consideration of the issues by the general public.

The second panelist, Erich Schienke from Penn State, spoke about evaluating intrinsic ethics in integrated assessment models for climate management. He claims that the inclusion of intrinsic ethics within research ethics pedagogy is an essential component of any adequate approach to research ethics. Included in his presentation was an overview of his own work in drawing out the implicit ethical dimensions of economic models frequently used to inform climate mitigation plans, and also a description of his pedagogical success in raising the awareness of science and engineering students to this ethical dimension embedded in habitual research activities like quantitative analysis. But this work forms part of a larger argument advanced by Schienke et al. (2010): that research ethics is a three-sided figure for which intrinsic ethics is the *tertium quid* to procedural ethics (e.g., RCR) and extrinsic ethics (e.g., broader impacts).

Finally, David Sittenfeld from the Museum of Science discussed several informal science education approaches the Museum has pursued to engage the public in simulated scenarios that call for making decisions about issues at the intersection of science, technology, and society. He highlights these kinds of activities as representative of "public engagement with science" (PES), a type of programmatic approach among informal science educators, to draw out the ethical dimensions inherent in large-scale, complex issues such as mitigating for the effects of climate change in a low-lying urban environment like Boston. Sittenfeld's current work with the museum focuses upon efforts to create varied and effective tools for PES around number of societal issues, such as incorporating the language of "social values" into exhibits that invite participants to deliberate about scientific information in a social-political-cultural context. For example, when deciding whether or not sugary drinks should be taxed, participants are prompted to consider whether or not they agree that the following is a positive social value: all members of a community should participate in sharing community burdens.<sup>2</sup>

Each of the discussants contributed to extending the concept of ethics education, namely in the sense that the point is not only to transmit ethical knowledge or awareness from teachers to students, but also to engage students and the public to participate in creating that knowledge and awareness through both formal and informal pedagogical strategies. Sittenfeld was explicit that a guiding assumption of his work is that the presence of multiple "expert" perspectives, including the expertise of personal experience, is good when it comes to deliberating about socio-technical issues. Individually, the panelists' projects sought to expand participants' boundaries of ethical concern, and collectively, the innovative approaches that each put forward function to enhance communication between ethicists, scientists, students, and the public at large.

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<sup>2</sup> This statement is taken from notes recorded during the presentation, and may not exactly correspond to the statement presented in the exhibit itself.

From the panel we drew the general conclusion that ethics education should not be confined within, and to, universities and the participants in discussions of ethics should not only be professors, students, and experts. On the contrary, publicly engaged educational projects — whether they involve direct interactions with members of the public or address societal issues, such as climate change mitigation strategies — abide by a different ethic. In order to incorporate concerns of ethics and values into deliberations about possible responses to socio-technical problems, a more democratic approach is necessary. Further, such an approach is inherently pedagogical, whether it is practiced within an educational institution or not.

### *A Philosopher in the Henhouse*

While the above panel put forward a broadened account of the role of ethics in society, Paul Thompson's presentation raised questions about the role of a philosopher in society. Thompson, an ethicist from Michigan State University, sits on a scientific advisory council for an agricultural trade group, the United Egg Producers (UEP). In this role, Thompson habitually inhabits philosophically uncharted territory. As a kind of "embedded philosopher,"<sup>3</sup> he explores through practice the kinds of contributions philosophy can make outside of the scope of what is traditionally circumscribed as a philosophical problem in the first place; that is, outside the scope of what customarily merits professional philosophical attention.

A key component of Thompson's work is describing exactly what his role is on the scientific advisory council. The council does not directly propose standards or policy for ensuring the welfare of the egg-laying hens kept by UEP's member companies. Thompson's role, then, is not to design policy advancing the animals' welfare; rather, he explains his participation in the council as two-fold. In the first sense, he functions as an expert in animal ethics. He identifies and articulates key values-based aspects of animal welfare, and helps establish what considerations are or are not ethically legitimate when it comes to the animals' quality of life. For example, raising the price of eggs due to investing in better conditions for the birds has ethical implications for being able to provide cheap eggs to low-income populations. In the second sense, he also functions as a professional trained to speak comfortably about values, particularly regarding the interpenetration of science and values.

Two aspects of Thompson's work are notably heterodox: first, his activity with the council, in his view, is a kind of on-the-ground philosophy of science. He observes and reflects upon how scientific experts deliberate about scientific evidence in the face of both scientific uncertainty and the practical need to make concrete policy recommendations. Further, he introduces ethics and value concerns into the deliberative

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<sup>3</sup> A riff on Erik Fisher's term "embedded humanist," the coining of which was precursor to launching his Socio-Technical Integration Research (STIR) project. See especially Fisher, Erik & Roop L. Mahajan. 2010. "Embedding the Humanities in Engineering: Art, Dialogue, and a Laboratory." In Gorman, M.E. (Ed.), *Trading Zones and Interactional Expertise: Creating New Kinds of Collaboration*. Cambridge, MA and London, England: MIT Press. For a short summary of STIR, see the project homepage at [cns.asu.edu/stir/](http://cns.asu.edu/stir/).

mix, and in doing so participates in the creation of rich, contextually-dependent knowledge; that is, in the judgment of what information is relevant to and applicable for informing UEP policy. Second, he "gives [the council members] *permission* to move beyond the peer-reviewed literature"<sup>4</sup> when deliberating about the content of their recommendations, such as incorporating the experience knowledge of egg production workers. In other words, Thompson noted that the presence of a professional trained to use and comfortable with the vocabulary and terminology of ethics and values sanctions, for the scientists present, deliberation about values imbricated in and ethical implications of policy-making.

Thompson's work importantly demonstrates the unique contributions of philosophers as participants in policy-making processes — contexts that are manifestly outside the norm of philosophers' professional habitats. His work is also indicative of an alternative approach to the practice of philosophy. Not only is the UEP's scientific advisory council a novel context in which to philosophize, but also offers a markedly different kind of philosophical subject matter — the judgments and decision-making processes through which scientific, ethical, economic, agricultural, experiential, and other kinds of knowledge are distilled into a particular policy or policy recommendation. UEP's member companies were at almost full compliance less than five years after UEP adopted the voluntary standards for animal welfare devised by Thompson and the council. This result supports the conclusion that alternative practices of philosophy can contribute positively to effecting practical changes in the world.

### *Philosophizing Out of Society*

We contributed an alternative account of philosophical practice in our own panel, which was shared with two colleagues from Center for the Study of Interdisciplinarity at the University of North Texas. As a whole, the panel focused on the place of ethics in science, technology, and engineering in terms of the habit, habitats, and inhabitants of society. Rather than merely talking about ethics in science, technology, and engineering, we sought to stress the real and intrinsic internal relationship between ethics and society from different perspectives.

Our colleagues, J. Britt Holbrook and Adam Briggie, discussed two opposite ethical principles — the precautionary and proactionary principles. The precautionary principle has been incorporated into science policy documents — most notably, perhaps, in the European Union — as a measure to reduce uncertainty to risk before an action is pursued. However, the proactionary principle, which suggests that uncertainty is reduced to risk *by acting*, is just beginning to be discussed in the scholarly literature. Both Holbrook and Briggie argue that it is necessary to investigate the influence of proactionary principles in science and technology policy contexts because they are indicative of ethical attitudes that arise from specific values held by both individuals and society. Only when considered within specific societal contexts do they meaningfully indicate the underlying values that actually shape our opinions and inform our decisions. Additionally, Briggie

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<sup>4</sup> Thompson's words as recorded in notes by Kelli Barr during his presentation; emphasis added.

argues that while precautionary approaches in policy are generally result in non-action, proactionary approaches are easily corruptible. This possibility raises questions concerning what kind of evidence is necessary to decide when to correct for the consequences of proactionary efforts, or who is in control of both that evidence and the decisions made on the basis of it.

Kelli Barr addressed the ethical implications entailed in research evaluation. Barr argued that the rationale for impact is political, not simply empirical, because measures such as the Journal Impact Factor or the H-index incorporate value judgments. She concluded that the heavy emphasis on citations in measuring the impacts of academic work demonstrates tacit philosophical commitments to, for example, the proper balance between academic impact and social impact, or between technical (quantitative) and non-technical (qualitative) approaches. As a result, academic impact is considered more valuable than impact beyond the academy. Scholars get rewarded for pursuing academic goals even as funding agencies are calling for them to pursue societal outcomes.

Finally, Wenlong Lu presented an explanation of the value conflicts between engineers' professional ethical thinking and their managers' lack of ethical consideration within organizational hierarchies. Lu examined the case of a preventable bullet train crash in China in 2011. He argued that shifting the traditional hierarchical structure of engineering industries to a network-centered organization may be enough to support engineers in acting on their ethical intuitions about doing good work without any pressures or threats to hinder them from voicing ethical concerns.

The significance of this collection of work, we think, is that it does not try to overlay a disciplinary interpretation of ethics onto diverse social contexts, or to construct a highly abstract theory concerning how our society needs ethics. Rather, we intended to reveal society's intrinsic ethical and philosophical dimensions by analyzing existing societal issues and concerns.

### **Conclusions: A Snapshot of a Moving Target**

In sum, we interpret this Association for Practical and Professional Ethics (APPE) meeting as an experiment in the dynamics of academic disciplines. Ethicists are venturing out of the hallowed halls of philosophy departments, and we have attempted to outline above how this is changing (and may further change) the discipline of philosophy. These reflections also raise the broader question, how do disciplines in general change over time? Is it market forces, as Turner (2000) suggests, that lead to disruptions in disciplinary status quos, or are major epistemic breakthroughs — Kuhn's paradigm shifts — necessary to disrupt and alter the character of a field of study?

This meeting suggested, to us, that small changes to who participates in the conversation are enough to spur dramatically different kinds of conversations. The topic of APPE — practical and professional ethics — has not changed since its inception. But if the particular interests brought to bear on the subject by those who choose to engage with it are determinative of the kind of conversations that ensue, then perhaps fostering

heterodox approaches to ethics, and to philosophical practice in general, is more straightforward than is commonly thought.

From our perspective as early-career researchers, APPE strikes us as a promising place for experimenting with a more outwardly oriented practice of philosophy. This is not to say that there are no barriers preventing such experimentation. Heterodox approaches to ethics and philosophy are afforded limited institutional support within philosophy departments, and professional organizations can only do so much to provide alternative backing. Ethics is merely one subdiscipline among many, and the landscape of philosophical organizations catering to each one is fragmented. Applied ethics, additionally, is derided by many philosophers as "selling out" or a form of washed-up, watered-down scholarship.

Early-career researchers are particularly dependent upon institutional support. Though many may be passionate about heterodox approaches to philosophical practice, they are often compelled to capitulate to disciplinary orthodoxy, perhaps because of peer pressures to maintain the status quo, or the abysmal job market; or, perhaps because they want to be taken seriously by esteemed philosophers and colleagues.

These considerations would seem to lead immediately to the question, how can alternative practices of philosophy, then, be advanced among disciplinary practitioners such that these researchers may find a 'home' doing socially-relevant work? This is an important question. But it is equally important to note here that our intent is not for these alternative practices to become disciplines themselves. Rather, we wish identify existing spaces that allow for experimentation, such as APPE, and to open up new ones.

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