

A cartography of philosophy's engagement with society

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Introduction

Should philosophy help address the problems of non-philosophers or should it be something isolated both from other disciplines and from the lay public? This question became more than academic for philosophers working in UK universities with the introduction of societal impact assessment in the national research evaluation exercise, the REF. Every university department put together a submission describing its broader impact in case narratives, and these were graded. Philosophers were required to participate. The resulting narratives are publicly available and provide a unique resource permitting a more comprehensive, empirically based consideration of philosophy's influence outside the academy than has hitherto been possible. This paper takes advantage of this data to develop a cartography of the ways in which philosophers engage society in their work.

Method

Our analysis is based on a reading of the philosophy cases submitted to the REF. In our first reading we looked for common themes in similarities between cases. We set up a preliminary list of categories in mind mapping software to help organize the cases under headings that captured our sense of similarities in approach as well as differences between groups of cases. After this we iterated between the mind map and the cases to refine the categories seeking to condense them into a small number while devising labels that accurately captured the essence of similarities within groups and differences between groups. The result is a grouping of cases into what we identified as the most natural types, identifying five main strategies each with at least two or three cases.

Theoretical Framework

Robert Frodeman and Adam Briggie in *Socrates Tenured* (2016) delineated the characteristics of a field philosopher, or one who is engaged with societal concerns. We interrogated the REF cases looking for evidence of activity along five of the six dimensions of field philosophy put forth by Frodeman and Briggie: goal, approach, audience, institutional placement and method. The sixth dimension, evaluation, we exclude because each case was put forward for evaluation by non-scholarly criteria in the REF. Therefore, every case meets this criterion of field philosophy by definition.

Results

Philosophy's engagement with society is interesting because it is a "hard case" in the sense used in sociology of science of a setting in which it is particularly difficult to envisage academics complying with increasing pressure for societal engagement. Nevertheless, our analysis identified five approaches philosophers can use to engage society: dissemination, engagement, provocations, living philosophy, and philosophy of X. We compare these along the six dimensions proposed by Frodeman and Briggie to characterize the ideal field philosopher. We conclude that there are multiple ways of being a field philosopher, which vary in their emphasis. This pluralism bodes well for the expansion of philosophy's societal influence, since there are routes available to suit different preferences.

Reference

Frodeman, Robert and Adam Briggie. 2016. *Socrates Tenured: The Institutions of 21st-Century Philosophy* (Collective Studies in Knowledge and Society) Rowman & Littlefield International.