Introduction

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Introduction to the Special Issue "Popularizing Philosophy"

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Philosophy is often expected and itself endeavors to be accessible to the public. In order to meet this expectation and make philosophy accessible to a wider audience without formal training, various authors have tried to translate opaque philosophical terminology into ordinary language, illustrate philosophical ideas with didactic poems and plays, written novels with philosophical narratives, and engaged in public discussions about moral problems of the day. Attempts to popularize philosophy have often been met with apprehension by academic scholars worrying that complex philosophical conceptions would be misconstrued when broken down into simpler ideas for a lay audience. Yet, there is clearly a public demand for philosophical input, and one can build a career on supplying this input. It seems that the more public commentators with a background of philosophical training cut ties with academic philosophy and specialize in presenting their take on current issues to the public, the more the profession tends to glance down at them. Then again, when philosophers engage in political, cultural and economic discourses they can also face reservations against their presumed privileged positions in public deliberation and decision-making. Given these difficulties, it is an interesting philosophical question in itself what can count as successful popularization of philosophy.

The four contributions in this special issue explore various aspects of the relationship between philosophy and the general public as well as specific forms of popularizing philosophical thinking, bringing together perspectives from normative ethics, philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, and philosophy of

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culture. They investigate different forms of philosophical popularization as well as their merits and problems.

Frauke Albersmeier's contribution is concerned with ethical aspects of popularizing moral philosophy. In particular, she addresses the question of whether ethicists engaged in public debates should restrict themselves to acting as impartial informants or moderators rather than advocates of their own moral opinions. She rejects the idea that being an impartial servant to moral debates is the default or even the only defensible way to publicly exercise ethical expertise and thus, to popularize moral philosophy. Using a case example from the public debate about the human use of nonhuman animals, she illustrates the benefits and risks of endorsing an advocate's and a teacher's or moderator's role, respectively. She argues for a general requirement of judgment transparency and concludes that exercising ethical expertise and engaging in advocacy, i.e., acting as if one were a moral expert, are nevertheless compatible modes of public engagement for the moral philosopher.

David Hommen explores the later Ludwig Wittgenstein's opposition against both the sublime terms of traditional philosophy and the formal frameworks of modern logic. His starting point is Wittgenstein's conviction that attempts of understanding that try to run up against the limits of language are futile and result in nothing but plain nonsense. Therefore, the task of philosophy cannot be to create an 'ideal' language. Philosophers are rather tasked with producing 'real' understanding in the first place; they must aim to remove particular misunderstandings based on misleading language by clarifying the use of our ordinary language. Hommen shows that Wittgenstein's adherence to a pointedly casual, colloquial style in his own philosophizing is at odds with the enigmatic nature of his ordinary language approach to philosophy, in which many terms appear to be highly technical. He argues that this might lead one to wonder whether Wittgenstein's verdicts on the limits of language and on philosophical jargons might not be turned against his own practice.

Alexander Christian explores the methodological characteristics and limits of contributions to the philosophical genre of popular culture and philosophy, which are a contemporary approach to the popularization of philosophical ideas. Contributions in this genre popularize philosophical ideas with the help of references to the products of popular (mass) culture with TV series like The Simpsons, Hollywood blockbusters like The Matrix and Jurassic Park, or popular music groups like Metallica. While being commercially successful, books in this comparatively new genre are often criticized for lacking scientific rigor, providing a shallow cultural commentary, and having little didactic value to foster philosophical understanding. Christian discusses some of these methodological and didactic objections and seeks to encourage a constructive discussion of concerns

with the genre. He shows how the genre is similar to previous attempts to foster public understanding of philosophy and that it is a methodologically viable approach to reach a broader range of readers with diverse informational preferences and educational backgrounds.

Maria Sekatskaya conducts an actual attempt at popularizing a classical debate in philosophy of mind – the debate on free will. In this debate, fatalists, determinists and hard incompatibilists argue that our belief in free will is mistaken, libertarians argue that we have free will, if the laws of nature are indeterministic, and compatibilitsts argue that no matter what the laws of nature are, we have as many reasons to believe that we have free will as to believe that we have thoughts, desires and intentions. Sekatskaya shows that the issue of free will is ubiquitously present in popular culture. Given the popularity of the questions around free will, she describes the main approach to the problem of compatibility in a manner accessible to laypersons without a deeper knowledge of the academic debate. Her contribution takes a stand in the pertinent debate, making a case for the position that free will is real.

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