

Faculty Scholarship

2019

The Space in a Life Beyond Skill

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Recommended Citation

Bendik-Keymer, Jeremy, "The Space in a Life Beyond Skill" (2019). *Faculty Scholarship*. 147.
<https://commons.case.edu/facultyworks/147>

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1. What is the relationship between the “distinctive skills” of “philosophers”¹ and living philosophically?² This matter must be considered to understand how people who practice philosophy³ should use their distinctive skills to grapple with the climate crisis. The reason why is that philosophy is a way of life in which wisdom – living well and the understanding of that living well – is tended as a friendship is sustained. According to this classical understanding of philosophy,⁴ to practice philosophy is to live philosophically. Any technique one might specifically develop – from *technē*, skill or tool – has its wider context in living philosophically, in what that adverb illuminates and involves concerning the ends, manner, habits, and sensibilities – to name a few elements – of the philosophical life.

2. Given the framing of philosophical skills in a philosophical life, we might also ask, “What is philosophical technique?” If we want to understand philosophical skills and their role in living philosophically, we should clarify what makes *technē* “philosophical.”

¹ Eugene Chislenko, “The Role of Philosophers in Climate Change,” draft paper, ISEE Annual Meeting, H.J. Andrews Forest Research Station, Blue River, Oregon, June, 2019

² Stephen Grimm, “What is “philosophy as a way of life? Why “philosophy as a way of life,”” plenary talk, Mellon Philosophy as a Way of Life annual workshop, University of Notre Dame, June, 2019

³ Chislenko (2019) expressly opens the scope of his argument to all those who practice philosophy, not just to those who hold philosophy professorships of some kind (i.e. to those who have “power” or “access,” p. 25).

⁴ Pierre Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, translated by Michael Chase, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002

3. Ordinarily, a technique is a “way of carrying out a particular task,” “skill or ability in a particular field,” or a “skillful or efficient way of doing something.”⁵ These meanings all place technique firmly in the domain of instrumental reasoning. The skill is a “way to” something. It is good or bad with reference to the end in question. Philosophical skill thereby implies the skill in the service of philosophical ends. And I have already assumed that the end of philosophy is wisdom.

4. Now philosophical technique might imply a way of qualifying any technique. It would then be akin to a destructive technique, for instance, or a luminous one. Still, if the adjective “philosophical” modified “technique” as a general qualification of most any technique, the point would still be, it seems, to place the skill in relation to wisdom.

5. Whether a philosophical technique is a means to wisdom or expresses the quality of tending wisdom in most every technique that one uses, the point is the same: the relation between the skill and wisdom is still the main qualifying relationship in so far as the skill is “philosophical.”

6. Living philosophically, however, is the wide context for any philosophical technique. Whatever the relation between the skill and wisdom is, in so far as it is

⁵ “Technique,” *Oxford American Dictionary*, Apple Inc., 2005-17

philosophical, its relation is organized within a philosophical life. The question, then, is just as much, or even more, about what living philosophically organizes of any philosophical skill. If the skill in question is to be used to face climate crisis, then its philosophical nature depends on how living philosophically relates to facing climate crisis.

7. What does living philosophically imply in relation to climate crisis?

8. For example: it is a staple of the ancient philosophical schools that living philosophically implies a relation to death of a specific sort. This practice historically is rooted in the foundational importance of Socrates's death and his manner of approaching it.⁶ To face the climate crisis according to this tradition would involve a philosophical relation to one's death, and such a relation is now common in the literature around our planetary situation.⁷ A philosophical *technique* in such a context would be one that develops a good capacity – however “good” is understood in this philosophy – for dying. It would be a good being unto death. Philosophical techniques depend on what living philosophically implies, which is to say demands, in a given philosophy.

⁶ See Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, edited by Arnold Davidson, New York: Blackwell, 1995

⁷ See Roy Scranton, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of Civilization*, San Francisco: City Lights, 2015

9. What is the name for this space in a life beyond skill that provides the context for the skill's point and manner? With reference to living philosophically, it is a philosophical space in which skills become philosophical. Given that living philosophically implies attending over a lifetime to wisdom as one would sustain a friendship, let's call this space in a life beyond skill "wisdom-seeking." On this understanding, philosophical skill is contextualized by wisdom-seeking across an entire life. The skills have a space of wisdom seeking beyond them in which they acquire their specific orientation, point, and meaning.

10. The question about the relation between "distinctive philosophical skills" and climate crisis must then pass through wisdom-seeking. The question of whether and in what way one should, or must, use philosophical skills to face climate crisis depends on what wisdom-seeking has to say about climate crisis, what it implies and demands, and about how one should live philosophically in the face of climate crisis. This is a more robust context for considering climate crisis than a pragmatic argument for using acquired, academic skills.

11. Eugene thinks that we who are trained in philosophy should use our distinctive skills to address the climate crisis. He includes theorizing, but he understands theorizing as merely one among many skills. As he writes, "Some of [the skills] are the skills of theory," and then goes on to emphasize skills in reading, understanding,

writing, speaking, teaching, organizing discussions, and administering or organizing educational and other institutional practices. Consider the benefits of speaking and writing clearly, thinking analytically, organizing meetings to be educational, and so on.⁸

These various capacities are common among many academic practices of philosophical training and work, but they are not exclusive to philosophy. They are found as well across the arts and sciences and are academic skills generally for the most part. Academic philosophical training and work have particular methods, traditions, and conventions of theorizing, reading, writing, teaching and so on. But Eugene's point would seem to apply broadly to academics from most any discipline. It is not clear what is distinctively philosophical about the skills in question unless the space in a life beyond skill is emphasized.

12. There is nothing wrong with demanding the academics generally use their distinctive skills and within their disciplines, their disciplinary capacities to face the climate crisis. Since it is morally required to face the climate crisis and since some of what one must face will undoubtedly involve the capacities found in a given discipline say, historical accounts, interpretation of literature, understanding of science, economic claims, engineering questions, health care debates, and so on it seems clear that some of our disciplinary know-how across the academy would also be

⁸ Chislenko, 2019, pp. 6-7

morally required in facing the climate crisis in given instances. The question I have is what would be distinctively *philosophical* in that moral demand for people trained or working in philosophy.

13. The space in a life beyond skill – wisdom-seeking for those who live philosophically – seems the place to go to answer this last question. How should wisdom-seeking absorb the moral demand to face the climate crisis, including when that demand involves specific obligations to use one’s academic training? Another way to ask this question is: how should wisdom-seeking modify or orient, if it should at all, our use of academic skills in the service of basic moral accountability regarding the climate crisis?

14. This last question, I think, starts to get at the *spirit* of the opening remarks in Eugene’s paper. If you remember, these discuss Naomi Klein’s idea that climate denial is not a matter of ignorance but of psychological resistance to the imminent loss of our world.⁹ A good name for what would be needed to deal morally with such denial both in oneself and with others who are in denial is *wisdom*. For finite beings such as ourselves who are vulnerable to shutting down or avoiding truth when the loss involved in what we must face is overwhelming, wisdom – not simply truth, explanation, clarity of meaning or communication, or good organization – seems

⁹ Chislenko, 2019, pp. 1-2

needed. Wisdom, not simply academic skill, seems needed. In this sense, philosophical life seems called for, beyond skill.

15. Here, though, is where things get critical. Academic philosophy is not organized by the space of life beyond skill. It is not wisdom-seeking in any obvious sense.

Rather, it is merely theoretical and very often careerist.¹⁰ As people become philosophy majors, then graduate students in philosophy, then newly minted PhDs working and on the market, then possibly professors climbing up the academic ladder, then speakers at conferences and leaders in the profession, it is not uncommon to find that the manifest concerns and practices are self-absorbed, sometimes asocial and even cruel, narrow-minded, petty, vain, focused on reputation, ridiculously technical, publication focused, relative status focused, title focused, and many other status markers focused. To think of the profession of philosophy as wisdom seeking is either tragic or absurd.

What would have to change for distinctively philosophical skills to contribute to facing the climate crisis? The discipline of philosophy would have to change. It would not simply have to become sustainability minded or environmentally just. It would have to stop being narrow, careerist, and near exclusively theoretical. There

¹⁰ I discuss some of these issues in *Solar Calendar, and Other Ways of Marking Time*, Brooklyn: punctum books, 2017, preface a & b; studies 2, 3, 4, and 6; and postscript a.

would have to be much more to living philosophically than doing research.¹¹ Wisdom-seeking would have to be the main orientation.

16. The point is, Eugene's argument is surely on a justifiable path. But it does not go far enough into what philosophy should distinctively contribute. In the process, it is not self-critical enough about the profession of academic philosophy, although I believe that the spirit in which Eugene's argument is given certainly points toward being accountable in such a basic way that no life could be called wise if it were not thus accountable. I would like to ask him and to ask us to go farther into what living philosophically demands and involves.

17. To look around at the civilization in, just to be local, the United States of America, is to see social organization that is so far from being wise and so far from being wisdom-seeking that it may make sense to say that it is rash, wanton, and corrupt.¹² Moreover, it is structured by a deep denial of its constitutive, ongoing colonial injustice.¹³ The problems here are not simply problems of casuistry of finding good means to fit good ends. They are problems so basic as to be *preconditions* to seeking wisdom. They are problems of character, moral clarity, and ends.

¹¹ Cf. Hadot, 2002

¹² I discuss some of these issues in "[This Conversation Never Happened](#)," *Tikkun*, March 26th, 2018

¹³ Kyle Powys Whyte, "Settler Colonialism, Ecology, & Environmental Injustice," *Environment & Society* 9, 2018a, pp. 129-144

That being so, it seems insufficient, even possibly misleading, to focus on skills without emphasizing the space in a life beyond skill. Not only is it this space, and not academic skills, that makes a skill, if the space is wisdom-seeking, distinctively philosophical. It is this space where the main work is in facing the climate crisis. To find anything so much as wisdom in a wanton society demands work on that society's character, moral obligations, and ends.

18. I would like to propose that we, and Eugene in particular, focus our work in philosophy neither on theory, nor on skills, but on creating the conditions for wisdom-seeking. What we need out of anyone living philosophically, it would seem, is integrity, the pursuit of moral clarity, and earnest, attempted discernment of the ends of life. We need what the skills are *for*. We need the space in a life *beyond* skill, involving what skills we have.

I therefore ask that everyone living philosophically — everyone who claims to be a philosopher and who carries the title or status of professing or studying philosophy — challenge the society in which they live to become sane and moral enough to seek wisdom. Do not be conventionally academic or conventionally philosophical, or you will simply reproduce wantonness. Stick your neck out and stand for wisdom-seeking, not wantonness, in all that we do. Do as the ancient philosophers did and as the concept of philosophy implies.