

# Committee on Public Philosophy

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## *2013-2014 Membership*

Eric Weber, chair (2014)

Lynne Tirrell, associate chair (2014)

Michael Cholbi (2014)

Erin McKenna (2016)

Darrel Moellendorf (2015)

Pablo Muchnik (2014)

Shane Ralston (2015)

Tom Rockmore (2016)

David Schwartz (2016)

James South (2015)

Rega Wood (2014)

# Committee on Public Philosophy, American Philosophical Association Chair's Report for 2013-2014

Dr. Eric Thomas Weber

October 15, 2014

The 2013-2014 academic year concluded my term as Chair of the APA's Committee on Public Philosophy. It has been an honor to serve the profession, to champion public philosophical engagement, and to work with great people on the committee. This report details 10 general categories of activity in which the CPP pursued initiatives over the past year. These efforts were made possible through the generous and thoughtful contributions of our committee members. I am especially pleased that Dr. Lynne Tirrell is taking over as Chair. I am also pleased to see the rise in nominations to serve on this committee, which accompanied an increase in the diversity of our committee members.

Again this year, we pursued our goals in part with the help of "Progress Reports," virtual minutes gathered from email exchanges, which we used in the place of physical or telephone meetings because of how busy committee members are. In these documents, we collected our ideas and initiatives, commented on them together via email and voting surveys. Our mission is listed on the APA's site as well as on our own (<http://www.publicphilosophy.org/mission.html>). Each of the following points relates to one element or several included in our committee's charge.

## **1. Web Site Maintained and Expanded, and Hosted an Experiment**

Over the course of the year, the Committee on Public Philosophy used our Web site, <http://www.publicphilosophy.org>, as one of several measures to spread the word about CPP activities. The future committee may choose to merge our pages with the APA's main Web site. Decisions on such matters are up to the next committee members. On our site, we posted information about op-ed essay contests and winners, about APA panels and book signings, and about our committee members and links to related organizations. The exciting development over the past year was prompted by the work of some of our committee members and from an APA member, who collaborated to organize a Central APA panel. The Web site aspect of their work involved efforts to open up discussion on the subject of the panel before the conference took place, and to maintain conversations on the topic for a period after the event. The panel was titled "Promoting Religious Tolerance in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," and was organized by Dr. Jeanine Diller, Dr. Rega Wood, and Dr. Pablo Muchnik. The special Web tool we experimented with was a kind of managed blog function inserted into our site here: <http://publicphilosophy.org/tolerance.html>.

## **2. Philosophy Op-Ed Contest**

In the 2013-2014 year, we organized an op-ed essay contest to recognize pieces published by the end of 2012. Our committee solicited nominations and received a strong pool of essays to choose from. Our aim was to recognize 5 standout op-ed essays. Since one of the pieces selected was co-authored, we ended up recognizing 6 authors of excellent op-eds, noted here:

<http://publicphilosophy.org/activities.html#2012oped>. Each essay was awarded a \$100 prize, split in the case of the coauthored piece. Dr. Kyle Powys Whyte, who rolled off the committee in July of 2013, generously continued to serve on the op-ed essay contest subcommittee as its Chair. His leadership was instrumental in completing the contest.

## **3. National Humanities Alliance and Advocacy Day**

CPP members and other APA members are encouraged to participate in the National Humanities Alliance's Annual Meeting and Advocacy day (<http://nhalliance.org/>). This past year the birth of my second child coincided with the annual event, otherwise I would have gone. Aside from this past year, the CPP has sent representatives to the NHA event and advocacy day every year. In past years, the APA

Executive Director has been able to attend. I suspect that Exec. Dir. Ferrer was there this year, but as I say, I was not this time around. I hope that the tradition of attending will continue. Representatives in Congress have told me and others that they depend on visits from constituents to determine how to set their priorities, such as for funding for organizations like the NEH.

#### **4. Support for the Public Philosophy Network**

The Public Philosophy Network is a fast-growing organization of philosophers who care about and practice publicly engaged philosophy. In the 2013-2014 academic year, the PPN did not host a conference, as they are on an 18 month cycle, roughly speaking. At the same time, committee members have encouraged and collaborated to varying degrees with the PPN. The organization is planning a major event for June of 2015. Numerous former CPP members are collaborating with the PPN on the event. Their Web site is here: <http://publicphilosophynetwork.ning.com/>. The Committee on Public Philosophy has made use of the PPN Web site as another excellent avenue for spreading the word about opportunities related to the committee and our mission, such as in announcing our op-ed essay contests. I and others would encourage continued support for the PPN. The call for papers for the 2015 event is here: <http://publicphilosophynetwork.ning.com/page/cfp-2015-conference-1>.

#### **5. APA Panels Organized Calling Attention to Public Philosophy**

Over the last year, we organized 3 panels for APA meetings, one at each divisional meeting. For information on our panels, visit <http://publicphilosophy.org/activities.html#events>. We discussed ways of soliciting future panel proposals for APA meetings, but have not yet formalized a particular process for this purpose.

#### **6. No 2013 Book Signing**

We had hoped to organize a book signing for an APA meeting, such as the Eastern, but this past year we were unable to complete plans in time. New ideas developed, however, for enabling such plans in the future. One innovative proposal suggested that we solicit interest from publishers who plan to attend APA meetings and who can themselves determine who among their authors would be a good choice for and interested in participating in a book signing relevant to public philosophy at an APA meeting.

#### **7. Recognition for Public Philosophers**

Our committee has discussed at a number of times what it would mean and take to recognize public philosophers, beyond our efforts on the op-ed essay contest. Debate on these topics made progress difficult to chart out. On the one hand, prominent and visible public philosophers generally do not need recognition for public philosophical work in the way that younger philosophers might, which was one concern. On the other hand, recognizing prominent figures can help to call attention to unconventional work that is of high quality, and which can serve as examples for future and younger philosophers, as well as for tenure and promotion committees, department chairs, deans, and provosts. A third consideration was that our sense of what is meant by “public philosopher” might itself need a sharper focus, in order to avoid reinforcing a narrow sense which is limited to “highly visible” philosophers. I hope that the committee in time will make use of each of these considerations in planning some form of process of recognition. One solution would be to have several forms of recognition, for different stages of careers and for different forms of public philosophical work. The APA has asked what form of support might help its committees in the future. One answer is to offer support that would enable expansive options for recognition – for noting several public philosophers each year.

## **8. Developments Suggesting an Addition to the CPP Mission**

In the 2012-2013 year, former leader of the Eastern APA Dr. Ed Casey informally began discussions with the CPP Chair about the need in the CPP mission for a charge that relates “Philosophy and Social Responsibility.” These discussions continued and resulted in solidified language for an official proposal for the committee. By the time the proposal was ready to go to the committee, there was time only to discuss the proposal with the committee only very initially. The new committee Chair, Dr. Lynne Tirrell, has said that she will discuss the proposal with the committee. At present, the proposal seeks to add a 10<sup>th</sup> charge to the committee’s mission, which would enable the creation of a subcommittee able to address the public on issues of social responsibility.

## **9. World Philosophy Day**

This past year, the committee formed a subcommittee whose goal is to organize information, ideas, and suggestions for the members of the profession to use with respect to World Philosophy Day, a United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) initiative. The day is set for some point in mid to late November each year – this year: November 20, 2014. UNESCO’s page is here: <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/philosophy/philosophy-day-at-unesco/>. The subcommittee’s work is in progress.

## **10. Statement from the APA’s Committee on Public Philosophy**

On a number of occasions, public philosophers have contacted the committee in hopes of having some help for tenure or promotion cases, such as in seeking professional support and clarification of the value of public philosophical work. Such requests ask for an address to department chairs, tenure and promotion committees, deans, provosts, and etc. One idea for the committee was to create a process by which the committee could somehow review public philosophical work and offer its professional assessment of this unusual form of academic contribution, to help in the evaluation of its scholarly worth and weight in professional matters. The committee seemed to agree that such a process would be too challenging a task for a committee of volunteers as busy as all of us are. At the same time, what might prove helpful and to be far less work would be a statement drafted and circulated by the APA Committee on Public Philosophy about public philosophical work. The committee could draft a letter intended to help tenure and promotion committees, department chairs, deans, and provosts to think about ways of assessing unconventional academic work that is engaged in via public philosophical engagement. Discussion about this idea was solidified and largely assented to late in the 2013-2014 year. We therefore left such suggestions and ideas to the new committee members starting their terms together in the 2014-2015 year. A statement of this kind could be posted on the APA site, the CPP’s site, and philosophy department Web sites where departments wish to note and encourage public philosophy. Such a letter could also be printed and included in philosophers’ tenure and promotion applications or in other relevant pursuits.

Through these various efforts, the Committee on Public Philosophy has endeavored to recognize and champion public philosophical engagement in its various forms. It truly has been an honor to serve the profession and with such wonderful colleagues on the committee.

Sincerely,



Dr. Eric Thomas Weber, Chair (July 2011-June 2014)

Committee on Public Philosophy

The American Philosophical Association

Web site: <http://www.publicphilosophy.org>