**Myopia and public philosophy**

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**Preliminaries**

‘Public philosophy’ as (a) systematic projects directed at specific long-term goals or as (b) more spontaneous, *ad hoc* interventions into particular debates.

In cases of (b), the unity, if any, to one’s ventures into public philosophising can come from certain metaphilosophical goals (rather than political/practical ones).

A metaphilosophical goal (inspired by [Midgley](https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/what-is-philosophy-for-9781350051102/)): **articulating complexity** – encouraging appreciation and understanding of the complexities of human life (or aspects thereof). This involves (a) challenging false/facile accounts of x or (b) calling attention to lost/neglected topics/figures/themes – cf. feminist historiography of philosophy (eg [Buxton and Whiting](https://www.unbound.com/books/philosopher-queens)).

Put negatively, public philosophy can oppose forms of **myopia**.

**Myopia**

Myopia as limited, constrained vision: a perception/understanding of x lacking salient sorts of complexity/subtlety/scope which feeds epistemic failings (cf. [vice epistemology](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwjQ3YHP-q73AhVaQEEAHXBYDFkQFnoECAgQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.routledge.com%2FVice-Epistemology%2FKidd-Battaly-Cassam%2Fp%2Fbook%2F9781138504431&usg=AOvVaw3fJftKpLiRS3fndnlVoI-V)).

Two dimensions of myopia:

1. **Shallowness**
2. **Narrowness**

The opposite epistemic values are **depth** and **broadmindedness**: enhancement of our abilities to experience and engage with an expanded range of epistemic possibilities.

Many symptoms of **myopic thinking**: tendencies to crude caricatures, obliviousness to actual epistemic possibilities, failures to perceive problems and recognise salient themes, tendencies to epistemic and practical overconfidence, superficiality, crudity, etc.

Example: my piece on [Covid passes](https://thecritic.co.uk/papers-please/) – provoked by failure of certain enthusiasts to see and take seriously a fuller range of concerns (expansion of state surveillance, impacts on public trust in healthcare systems, distrust of state institutions of oppressed groups, etc.) – cf. ESRC-funded focus group, myopically fixated on practical/technological issues.

Challenging myopic thinking is:

1. not the only task for public philosophy
2. not a task for philosophy alone
3. not a task only for academic disciplines (cf. risk of **academic myopia**).

But philosophers do sometimes have specific expertise – and we should work hard at the topical and methodological diversification of philosophy (see [this piece](https://philpapers.org/rec/KIDHPA) and [this warning](https://www.philosophersmag.com/essays/239-reloading-the-canon)).

Example: [Midgley’s anti-scientism](https://philpapers.org/rec/KIDDSA) – a corrective to the janky philosophy of science and crass epistemological and metaphysical claims of advocates of scientism (ditto [here](https://medium.com/@ian.kidd/following-the-science-some-feyerabendian-reflections-c85a4bab7c98)).

Consider some examples of shallowness and narrowness among some contemporary high-profile public intellectuals, where there are clear roles for philosophical expertise.

**Shallowness**

Many topics are ‘deep’ – their causes, effects, significance play out at many salient levels.

Of course, (a) mono-level explanations are sometimes acceptable and (b) the relevance of different levels can often be reasonably debated.

A failure to see or attend to relevant levels of explanation is (vicious) shallowness: some vices include superficiality, banality, triteness, obliviousness to certain levels of depth, etc.

1. Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, on 1960s ‘Rights Revolution’ – explainable, he says, in terms of advances in communications technologies.

This fails to acknowledge causes (the social movements) that are doubly deeper:

1. **explanatorily fundamental**
2. **products of sociohistorical processes**

Such failures to attend to salient levels of depth are diagnosable: Pinker’s technocratism; ideological conviction that the state is the main source of positive social change; disrespect for humanistic scholarly expertise (cf. Aronson, ‘[Pinker on Progress](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwjonZLZ_6T3AhVHecAKHcctDaIQFnoECAYQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.jstor.org%2Fstable%2F24542853&usg=AOvVaw0QQCnDl-xmzOwIyB37isct)’, or [this gem](https://www.currentaffairs.org/2019/05/the-worlds-most-annoying-man)).

Philosophers have relevant expertise – social & political philosophy, the history and the historiography of feminist philosophy, the epistemology of historical explanation.

**Narrowness**

Many topics are ‘broad’ – involving a wide range of issues/values that (a) concern different communities and (b) invoke different disciplines. Narrow foci can be fine, but not always.

A failure to acknowledge and incorporate salient wider dimensions is (vicious) narrow-mindedness. Such vices include closedmindedness and imaginative impoverishment.

1. Bregman, *Humankind*, presents an optimistic account of humanity’s moral potential rooted an account of human nature (*Homo puppies* are affable, trusting, sociable).

This is narrow-minded (so I [argue](https://philpapers.org/rec/KIDHHN)):

1. It is explanatorily narrow – explaining human conduct in reference to human nature, downplaying socio-structural factors (cf. Bregman on patriarchy).
2. It is empirically narrow – focusing on convenient evidence and avoids inconvenient evidence (cf. Bregman on the ‘abolition’ of slavery).
3. It engages with a narrow range of (all Western, all male) philosophers and fails to engage at all with the Indian and Chinese traditions.

Philosophers have relevant expertise – analysis of moral concepts (eg ‘progress’), the philosophy of the biological sciences, social epistemology and metaphysics etc.

Bregman pathologises those who threaten complexification: ‘cynicism, misanthropy, and pessimism’ are ‘clinical symptoms’ of ‘mean-world syndrome’.

Myopic thinkers often detect and attack sources of complexity and critique (eg scientistic [attacks on philosophy](https://www.academia.edu/9347539/Is_Scientism_Epistemically_Vicious); van Norden’s critiques of [philosophical Eurocentrism](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwiV_bL436f3AhX1lFwKHYR8C9cQFnoECAUQAQ&url=http%3A%2F%2Fcup.columbia.edu%2Fbook%2Ftaking-back-philosophy%2F9780231184373&usg=AOvVaw3QIW3SjHNeBf0LtOUUMqzX); contemporary attacks on critical race theory in the US) – cf. Midgley on 1980s [battles to save philosophy](https://www.womeninparenthesis.co.uk/midgley-on-the-1980s-battle-to-save-philosophy/).

**Concluding remarks**

I have argued one aim of public philosophy is **articulating complexity**, which, in practice, means resisting the forms of narrowness and shallowness that feed **myopia**.

Some closing comments on this conception of public philosophy:

1. Complexity adds detail/nuance/context/qualification – but these can conflict with other drives/desires (eg attractiveness of self-serving simplifications; diversity vs. nepotism; reluctance to ‘share the stage’ with other disciplinary and social communities).

A cynical conviction: many of us have only a conditional commitment to depth and broadmindedness – we embrace myopic thinking if it serves our ends and we judge we can get away with it (cf. Feyerabend’s motivation for [‘defending’ astrology](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02691728.2015.1031851)).

1. Articulating complexity involves exercises of procedural epistemic virtue (carefulness, fairmindedness, thoroughness – cf. Midgley’s “relentlessly sensible” style).

But those virtues (a) seem dull/unexciting and (b) require disciplined self-restraint and, worse, (c) modern cultures of public debate typically reward myopic thinking (cf. Thi Nguyen on [echo chambers and epistemic bubbles](https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/episteme/article/echo-chambers-and-epistemic-bubbles/5D4AC3A808C538E17C50A7C09EC706F0)).

1. Commitment to complexification can make it hard for others to ‘place’ us (“What side are you on?”, “Are you with us or against us?”)

eg Bertrand Russell’s “[life of disagreements](https://youtu.be/xL_sMXfzzyA?t=659)” in face of accusations of inconsistency, opportunism, hypocrisy (despite his clear set of consistently-held values).

**TL/DR**

A valuable task for public philosophy is articulating the complexity of human life. This often involves challenging kinds of narrowness and shallowness that feed myopic thinking – and this generates tensions with our other desires and goals.

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