ARTÍCULOS

Con-Textos Kantianos
ISSN-e: 2386-7655

https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/kant.88692

EDICIONES COMPLUTENSE

Should Kant Be Viewed as a Public Philosopher?

Zachary Vereb[1]

05 de diciembre de 2022 / 24 de abril 2023

Abstract. Immanuel Kant is rarely appreciated for his contributions to public philosophy. This is unsurprising, given his dry, technical style, criticism of the popular German philosophy movement, and prolonged silence on religious topics following censorship threats from Frederick William II. Yet Kant's underappreciation vis-à-vis public philosophy is curious: Not only was he a vocal supporter of the early French Revolution, but he also said much on the public and political value of enlightenment. These ideas come across indirectly in his systematic writings and explicitly in writings for the learned public. This paper focuses on the question as to whether Kant should be viewed as a public philosopher, drawing from recent contributions in Kant scholarship to argue for the affirmative, though in an admittedly qualified sense.
Keywords. Public philosophy; Kant; Enlightenment; Politics

Cómo citar: Vereb, Z. (2023). Should Kant Be Viewed as a Public Philosopher? *Con-Textos Kantianos*, 17, 3-15. https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/kant.88692

Although public philosophy is often thought as the oldest form of philosophy, having roots in ancient Athens and classical China, academics have been somewhat hesitant to consider it a legitimate field of inquiry in the discipline.[2] This is no doubt due to a lack of systematicity, without even a clear and agreed-upon definition of public philosophy, as well as common disdain of pop philosophy collections aiming to engage the public on philosophical topics.[3] Must public philosophy concern a specific audience, i.e. the receptive public, or does it have to do with the venue and style of delivery? Or is public philosophy just philosophical inquiry into problems that are materially relevant to citizens? Questions also fall on the individual level: What constitutes a public philosopher? There is no consensus here either. At most, revolutionary paragons like Socrates, Cicero, or Marx are mentioned.[4] Some consider themselves public philosophers in light of perceived public duties: See Martha Nussbaum, Cornel West, Jürgen Habermas, Richard Rorty, and Onora O'Neill.[5] Angie Hobbs, who views herself as a public philosopher, even argues in a *Daily Nous* piece that "each philosophy department should contain at least one member engaged in public interaction" (Hobbs 2020). Self-ascription aside, commentators have identified several canonical candidates: Josiah Royce, John Rawls, and John Dewey.[6]

By contrast with comparably influential thinkers like John Stuart Mill (Goodin 1995), Immanuel Kant is hardly mentioned in this newly constructed 'public philosophy' pantheon despite his writings and political commitments regarding the public, including those on enlightenment, pedagogy reform, secular religion, and anti-elitist ethics.[7] In Kant scholarship there has indeed been a revived interest in Kant's philosophy of

[1] Zachary Vereb is Assistant Professor of Public Policy Leadership at the University of Mississippi. He can be reached at ztvereb@olemiss.edu.

[2] This is changing. See the 2014 special issue of *Essays in Philosophy*. A more recent collection on the subject appears in *A Companion to Public Philosophy*, edited by McIntyre, McHugh, and Olasov (2022).

[3] See Weinstein 2014a for problems defining public philosophy. Irwin 2014 surveys dismissive views by professional philosophers. Even if pop philosophy constitutes public philosophy, it need not be the only variety.

[4] A common view sees the public philosopher as Socratic with community-oriented "inquiry into the common good […] to turn one's fellow citizens, including statesmen, toward the truth (Bishirjian 1978, pp. 18-9). See Jal and Bawane 2021 for a recent edited collection on public philosophy's social-critical role.

[5] Posner 2001 criticizes the role of the public philosopher as reformer and critic. His examples include Rorty and Nussbaum, but not, e.g., Rawls, since he takes the public philosopher to be concerned with *addressing* the public, not merely writing on topics of relevance to them (2001, p. 22). Yet he also notes the lack of consistent definitions of public philosophy (2001, p. 25). Floyd (2022) sees figures such as O'Neill, Nussbaum, Sandel, and Appiah as candidates to model *political* public philosophy methodology.

[6] See, e.g., Kegley 1997, Sandel 2005, and Weber 2021 respectively. The 'public philosopher' label is common in the traditions of pragmatism and Christian philosophy. Still, we may identify a number of influential philosophers who thought it important to address the public. These include J.P. Sartre (in *Existentialism is a Humanism*), Simone de Beauvoir (in her fiction), Bertrand Russell (in *Conquest of Happiness*), Karl Marx (in the *Communist Manifesto* as well as his journalistic writings and speeches), works by Alain de Botton, and social media savvy philosophers like Peter Singer.

[7] The exhaustive *A Companion to Public Philosophy* (2022)—which has over forty chapters—devotes virtually no space to Kant, except to suggest somewhat indirectly that he was one of public philosophy's modern obstacles. This is due to Kant's perceived role in the history of

education and politics, including their relevance for public issues today.[8] Still, little is said about Kant vis-à-vis public philosophy, nor on the role of the Kantian philosopher on these topics. While some commentators in Kant scholarship do address Kant as a public-oriented philosopher, they typically do so indirectly.[9] Consequently, there is a need to bring these discussions to bear on developments of this new (and yet oldest) field of philosophy, as Kant's omission can be seen as an oversight. This paper questions whether Kant should be viewed as a public philosopher in his own right, which may in turn motivate new research into Kant's philosophical views on popular philosophy during his lifetime. Although an answer depends on what is meant by public philosophy, I shall argue that Kant should be considered a public philosopher, and that his ideas on the public role of philosophy remain significant. In other words, I try to make a more direct case for viewing Kant as a public philosopher in a qualified sense, despite reasons to the contrary.[10] I also revisit the value of his views on the public role of philosophy, just as he thought them valuable in his lifetime.

I proceed in four parts. First, I review recent developments in public philosophy, as well as attempts at definition. I then consider why Kant—unlike philosophers later influenced by him—has a marginalized presence in this area, despite his interest in and continued importance for public affairs as noted in Kant scholarship (Part 1). To begin a reconsideration of Kant's role as public philosopher, I provide historical context surrounding his critical interaction with German popular philosophers, as well as his commitment to the value of philosophy for politics, ethics, and philosophical pedagogy (Part 2). Before concluding and addressing objections, I present several reasons why Kant should be viewed as a public philosopher when relying on definitions stipulated from Part 1, and draw from those reasons to showcase the value of his views on the public role of philosophy for today.

1. Kant and Public Philosophy Today

Although public philosophy is one of the oldest forms of philosophy, it has until only recently received focused attention in the academic literature. This is evident from the 2014 special issue on it in *Essays in Philosophy*. Weinstein notes the surprising fact that this collection is "the first extended effort to look at the theoretical structures of public philosophy" (Weinstein 2014a, p. 1).[11] Given the lack of attention by philosophers (due in part, no doubt, to the rise of anti-intellectualism, hyper-specialization, and epistemic arrogance),[12] it is unsurprising that the approaches—even definitions—of public philosophy remain varied and diverse. Accordingly,

> there are, in fact, no established standards for public philosophy. There is no community agreement as to what public philosophy should look like, let alone, what criteria it ought to privilege. There isn't a public philosophy canon either. Most agree that the historical Socrates was doing some form of public philosophy, but the Platonic version engages the Classical Greek equivalent of academics at least as often as he does general audiences. Aurelius, Machiavelli, Astor, Mandeville, Wollstonecraft, Dewey, Rand, and Russell are but a few other candidates for public philosophy canonization, but each of them had academic or professional motives as well […] (Weinstein 2014a, p. 2)

Besides widespread disagreement as to who should be included in a public philosophy canon—and notice that Kant's name would hardly be recommended and is indeed hardly referenced in the special issue, as well as any publications on public philosophy in the last decade—there is a difficulty defining the nature of public philosophy.

Some commentators claim that public philosophy is just philosophy *applied to public affairs*, or that public philosophy is a *way of teaching* citizens about the value of philosophical and critical thinking. Others believe it hinges on the rhetorical *mode of presentation*, such as writing for wide audiences on social media or through pop culture and philosophy books (Huss 2014).[13] Due to the widespread disagreement about the nature, purpose, and

---

philosophy for helping to 'professionalize' philosophy and so cut it off from its more public, Socratic roots. I address this concern in the paper's final section.

8 For recent Kantian works on applied topics like global politics, education, public affairs, climate change, and AI, see Rinne 2020, Wyrębska-Đermanović 2021, Hammer 2021, Vereb 2022, and Baiasu 2022.

9 E.g., Maliks 2014, Møller 2017, Fleischacker 2015, and Wyrębska-Đermanović 2021.

10 I say qualified since Kant never partook of anything resembling today's popular culture books (though his *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* and occasional essays on history and enlightenment are less abstruse, sometimes polemical or ironic, and directed towards a wider learned public), and he rarely appeared before the public outside the classroom.

11 There exist a few older studies on public philosophy inspired from the tradition from Plato to Dewey, but rigorous attention on public philosophy is scant in philosophical journals. Goodin 1995 and Sandel 2005 showcase how divergent these studies can be. Public philosophy is sometimes, surprisingly, more often discussed outside the discipline in, e.g., political science (Kim and Dator 1999).

12 For a related public philosophy piece on Leo Strauss against public philosophy, see Wurgaft 2021.

13 Glosses on the nature and role of public philosophy defended by contributors at the Irish Philosophical Society conference "Philosophy in the Public Space" in Dublin 2022 include: improvement of public discourse, philosophical modeling of moral practices and traits, philosophy explored

criteria for public philosophy, I stipulate that at least three separate but potentially overlapping common views suffice for our purpose in considering whether Kant should be viewed as a public philosopher.

A public philosopher need not necessarily fit all three definitions, but if they track at least two we should have good reason to include their consideration. First, public philosophy might be thought to consist primarily in the *style* of presentation, and so the public philosopher will sometimes mitigate the use of jargon, careful distinctions, and so on. Examples of this include publications aimed specifically to the learned public, such as philosophy magazines like *Philosophy Now*, pop culture press series such as Blackwell and Open Court, and blogs (Pigliucci and Finkelman 2014, p. 91). William Irwin is supportive of this view and claims that many philosophers should take time to engage non-specialists (2014).

Second, public philosophy might be thought to be a subset of applied philosophy that aims at *topics* of particular material or existential interest to laypersons. Accordingly, characteristic of the Enlightenment, the public philosopher should focus their reflections and prescriptions on topics surrounding education, public policy, social justice, and democracy. Kant already seems relevant on this view: "As Sweet (2011) points out, Kant saw it as the philosopher's duty to serve the ends of humanity through moral education and political critique. Holding Socrates up as his model, Kant explicitly recognized that all humans are in need of philosophy and that the public must be addressed in order to be enlightened" (Littmann 2014, p. 104).

Finally, public philosophy possibly hinges on the *venue* of presentation. Public philosophers on this view should focus on the accessibility of their ideas while interacting with non-specialists, often in a semi-pedagogical way. This might include the organization of reading groups, public debates, commentary on Twitter, meetings at a local farmer's market or café, or even instruction in the classroom. Weinstein is generally supportive of this view: " […] public philosophy denotes the act of professional philosophers engaging with non-professionals, in a non-academic setting, with the specific goals of exploring issues philosophically" (2014b, p. 38). Others, relatedly, synthesize these three understandings of public philosophy (Brister 2022, Floyd 2022). So, these criteria promise to be useful for answering the question as to whether Kant should be seen as a public philosopher. But first: why is Kant left out?

Why is Kant not seen as a Public Philosopher?

Kant is known for influential philosophical works but rarely appreciated for his contributions to public philosophy. When considering Kant's works and political (in)activity, this is unsurprising, given his dry and technical style, his attack on the popular German philosophy movement, and his prolonged silence on religious topics as a result of censorship threats from Frederick William II. When viewing interpretations of Kant outside Kant scholarship, his marginalization as a public philosopher makes sense: the familiar image of Kant as a stodgy, by-the-clock puritan popularized by early Kant biographers and subsequently perpetuated in the classroom today suggests that he had little concern for concrete matters, and certainly nothing pertaining to politics. This view, however, would be mistaken, as recent investigations by Manfred Kuehn (2001) have revealed. Indeed, Kuehn's exemplary biographical work explores political reasons that explain the caricatured "flat character" of Kant.[14] Kant was, after all, much more of a public figure in his time than is usually supposed. While few explicitly argue that Kant is *not* a public philosopher, his omission by comparison with other canonical figures in this exciting new field is odd. But still, let us briefly consider textual reasons that justify Kant's public marginalization, as well as reasons for his exclusion given the foregoing views of public philosophy.

First, consider what Kant has to say about public engagement in his important works.[15] Several times, he explicitly suggests that he has only specialists in mind.[16] In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant decides to treat his task "in a dry, merely scholastic manner […] thus I found it inadvisable to swell it further with examples

---

through venues such as op-eds and social media, attempts by to advise governmental officials, philosophy aimed to the public benefit, and finally the strategic use of stylistic embellishments (e.g. wit or irony). I am grateful for the helpful comments I had received when I presented an earlier version of this paper there.

14 Kant's earliest acquaintance-biographers were also theologians, and so unorthodox depictions of Kant were liabilities for their own occupations: "The three people who had known Kant well during different periods of his life, and who were to give accounts of Kant's life as they knew it, were Ludwig Ernst Borowski, Reinhold Bernhard Jachmann, and Ehregott Christian Wasianski […] These three theologians were expected to set the record straight. They were to tell the public who Kant really was, and they were to make sure that others who were dealing in mere anecdotes could not harm his reputation. The project was thus essentially an apologetic enterprise […] The apologetic nature of the project explains also the somewhat monochromatic picture of Kant we get from the three biographies. Its authors clearly felt that there were a number of things that were 'not appropriate for the public' […] Kant was made into a 'flat character' whose only surprising feature was the complete lack of any surprises" (Kuehn 2001, pp. 7-8).

15 Parenthetical references to Kant's writings give the volume and page number(s) of the Royal Prussian Academy edition (*Kants gesammelte Schriften*). Unless otherwise noted, translations are from the Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, with translation dates indicated in parentheses below. I use the following standard abbreviations: KrV = *Critique of Pure Reason* (1998), Prol = *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (1997), MS = *Metaphysics of Morals* (1996), SF = *Conflict of the Faculties* (1996), WA = "An answer to the question: What is enlightenment?" (1996), WDO = "What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking?" (1996), Anth = *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (2007), and KU = *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (2000).

16 Many of Kant's early works, such as *New Elucidation*, were even written in Latin for a scholastic audience.

and illustrations, which are necessary only for a **popular** aim, especially since this work could never be made suitable for popular use" (KrV, A xviii).[17] Further, the "critique of pure reason […] can never become popular, but also has no need of being so" (B xxxiv). Kant makes similar remarks in the *Prolegomena* (Prol, AA 4: 255), *Metaphysics of Morals* (MS, AA 6: 206), and *The Conflict of the Faculties* (SF, AA 7: 7-8).[18]

Besides Kant's own admission that these works are not for laypersons, consider Kant's standard mode of delivery: frequently dry, pedantic, and inaccessible. It is unsurprising that many consider that "Kant is a good example of the futility of much public-intellectual writings […] most of his writing is opaque" (Posner 2001, p. 110). Even during Kant's time, critics such as the conservative Johann Georg Hamann asserted that, "If Kant is lucky his work will be praised by some, known to all, and 'as a mark of the highest authorship understood by bloody few'" (Kuehn 2006, p. 633). Like Posner and Hamann, many undergraduate instructors affirm the frustration students experience when attempting to grasp sections of the *Groundwork*. And if philosophical instruction in the classroom is considered public philosophy, then even here Kant may be thought disqualified, as he generally read prepared lectures, as was common in academia during this time (though also due to his grueling teaching regimen).[19]

Finally, we might expect of public philosophers the duty to engage the public on topics at odds with the dominant culture, or even political power.[20] Consider, for example, how Cornel West, Chomsky, or Marx remain courageous in their public endeavors. Kant, by contrast, though a proponent of public enlightenment and among the first defenders of the modern idea of the rule of law, is known for his silence in the face of political controversy.[21]

Despite these appreciable reasons, Kant's marginalization as a public philosopher is curious: Not only was he a vocal supporter of the early French Revolution and associated anti-elitist, egalitarian values, but he also wrote much on the public and political role of enlightenment philosophy. Further, "Kant is the first modern philosopher to make his living teaching courses at a university and writing books and essays addressed to a public of both academic and nonacademic readers" (Avillez et al. 2015, p. 123). Civil dialogue mattered to him, and not just between academics but with the learned public.[22] These public-oriented ideas come across indirectly in his systematic writings and explicitly in his more popular writings. More recently, developments in Kant scholarship—though they rarely address the question of public philosophy in Kant directly[23]—help to illustrate ways in which Kant might be thought a public philosopher according to the second sense of the term discussed above. I touch on these below to showcase their value for the question of this paper, and then proceed in Part 2 to make a more direct case for Kant's inclusion in the public philosophy canon.

Some Lessons from Kant Scholarship

If the minimal definition of public philosopher is simply a philosopher who finds "in the political and legal controversies of our day an occasion for philosophy […] to bring moral and political philosophy to bear on contemporary public discourse" (Sandel 2005, p. 5), then Kant is indeed characterized as a public philosopher in Kant scholarship. This is borne out in recent literature.

---

17 By contrast, consider Kant's critique of elitist philosophical gatekeeping, with the unjustifiably "arrogant claims of the schools, which would gladly let themselves be taken for the sole experts and guardians of such truths […] sharing with the public only the use of such truths" (KrV, B xxxii).

18 Kant has good political reasons for making these statements in the last two works, given Prussian censorship and threats by his sovereign. Even though Kant claims that, e.g., his *Religion* "is not at all suitable for the public," he in the same passage refers to himself as both a "teacher of youth" and a "teacher of the people" (SF, AA 7: 7-8).

19 As Kuehn notes, however, this is only partially true. Kant reportedly deviated from this standard approach in lecturing: "Often he digressed and added observations, which, according to [early Kant biographer] Borowski, were 'always interesting'" (Kuehn 2001, p. 106). Kant was generally appreciated as an instructor, especially for his dry sense of humor and ability to engage students on complex topics, even seeking their input on future course topics. According to Kuehn, Kant was interested in showcasing *how* one philosophizes through example, rather than merely teaching the history of philosophy: "Kant eschewed 'followers,' saying: 'You will not learn from me philosophy but philosophizing, not thoughts merely for repetition but thinking' […] Kant was a popular lecturer from the beginning; his lecture halls were always full" (2001, p. 107). "He told prospective students that he was not going to teach philosophy ('which is impossible'), but rather how to philosophize" (2001, p. 160).

20 Kant's lamentable racism and sexism is well known (Lu-Adler 2022). This is another impediment to welcoming Kant to the public philosopher canon, unlike more progressive figures like Mill, Rawls, and Dewey. Still, Kant was progressive for his time in other ways (e.g. in respect of classist prejudices and nepotism). Though important, I cannot discuss this further.

21 I have in mind Kant's period of self-censoring following threats from Frederick William II. Kant's *positive* involvement in the public sphere might include his entry into the Spinoza controversy between Jacobi, Lessing, and Mendelssohn. On Kant's relationship to Spinoza and the *Spinozastreit*, see Allison 2018. For a thorough study on the political dimensions of Kant's Prussia, see Lestition 1993.

22 The younger Kant participated in a public literary society that discussed philosophy and literature. The older Kant was known for semi-private dinner gatherings with friends and public figures in Königsberg, with cultural and popular affairs as main discursive menu items (Kuehn 2001, 163, pp. 334-35). Kant's standards for effective public communication during dinner banquets are illuminating: Eating alone "is unhealthy for a scholar who philosophizes […] At a full table, […] the conversation usually goes through three stages: (1) narration, (2) arguing, and (3) jesting […] The first stages concern the news of the day, first domestic, then foreign" (Anth, AA 7: 280-81). Kant's prescriptions for productive public conversation continue: "The rules for a tasteful feast that *animates* the company are: (a) to choose topics for conversation that interest everyone and always provide someone with the opportunity to add something appropriate, […] (d) Not to let *dogmatism* arise or persist, either in oneself or in one's companions in the group […] (e) In a serious conflict that nevertheless cannot be avoided, carefully to maintain discipline over oneself and one's emotions, so that mutual respect and benevolence always shine forth" (Anth, AA 7: 281). This does not sound too dissimilar from norms of philosophy café meetings that focus on the civil exchange of ideas.

23 For an exception—though it may not fall into Kant scholarship given focus on Dewey—see Avillez et al. 2015.

Fleischacker 2015 situates Kant's writings on enlightenment in the context of ongoing public debates on religion and public policy, and draws lessons from that engagement in the form of duties of public reasonability and public expression. Maliks' *Kant's Politics in Context* (2014) contextualizes public debates Kant pursued following the French Revolution, and Møller, in "Rethinking Kant as a Public Intellectual" (2017) draws from that contribution to critically examine the extent to which "public debate informed Kant's political thought" (2015, p. 107). Payne and Thorpe's edited collection, "Kant and the Concept of Community" (2011) focuses on a key idea of public philosophy, namely community and its practical connections with the common good, citizenship, and public reason. Recall that the concept of community is commonly viewed as central to public philosophy (e.g. Bishirjian 1978, p. 18). In their introduction they note that "in addition to offering a theory of the state and of rights in texts such as 'What is Enlightenment?' Kant also develops a theory of the public sphere that has become increasingly influential in recent decades, especially in the work of Jürgen Habermas, John Rawls, and Onora O'Neill" (2011, p. 12). Recall also that these individuals are considered public philosophers by commentators. Finally, Wyrębska-Đermanović (2021), for instance, draws from recent developments on the public role of moral education in Kant for global issues, with her focus being climate change.

All of these issues—enlightenment, public policy, politics, citizenship, and education—were of clear importance to Kant, and they still remain key to our 21st century problematic. If a case could be made more strongly for Kant's reassessment as a public philosopher, then these contributions could be brought to bear on Kant's specific value in the continued development and application of public philosophy. These works, then, since they tend not to discuss Kant as a public philosopher, nonetheless invite reconsideration into the legitimacy of Kant's inclusion in the newly minted canon of public philosophy. However, before we turn to that question, it is worth contextualizing the nature of public philosophy during Kant's time.

2. Public Philosophy in Kant's Day

Kant lived during an epoch-changing time for philosophy. Ideas became as revolutionary in Prussia as politics in France. This Enlightenment-era context is helpful for situating Kant's own involvement with developments in public and popular philosophizing. With Kant's growing popularity in the late 1700s, journals like the *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung*—which had associations with figures like Fichte, Goethe, and A. von Humboldt—engaged Kantian ideas: "Among the public that read journals like the *Allgemeine Literatur Zeitung*, Kant began being discussed with the same intensity as novels and more popular literature" (Pinkard 2002, p. 89).

Part of the explanation for how this would be possible, namely the popularization of Kantian thought for the learned public (and increased reason for him to philosophize in the public sphere) had to do with the growing "popular philosophy" movement spearheaded by figures inspired by Scottish common-sense philosophy (especially Hume and Reid).[24] They were a "group of somewhat unsystematic intellectuals […] often opposed to learned discourse and technical arguments, they preferred to appeal instead to 'common sense' […] The men usually included under this heading were J.G.H. Feder, C. Meiners, C. Garve, J.J. Engel, C.F. Nicolai, and J.E. Biester" (Zweig 1999, p. 14). They "argued philosophical issues in a manner accessible to the general, educated public" (Pinkard 2002, 89). More importantly in making sense of Kant's popularization, "Kant's system" for many of the *Popularphilosophen* "came to be seen as an answer to Hume's otherwise corrosive skepticism" (p. 90).

Two figures who were helpful for popularizing philosophy during Kant's time and who interacted with him include Christian Garve and Moses Mendelssohn. The latter "was the most distinguished of the so-called Popular Philosophers of the German Enlightenment" and was, in addition, an exception to the *Popularphilosophen* in that he had an appreciation for nuance and argumentative complexity; accordingly he retained Kant's respect among a group he otherwise disdained (Zweig 1999, pp. 14-15). According to Kuehn, Mendelssohn "became famous as the 'Jewish Socrates' for his philosophical thought […] many Germans took Mendelssohn to be the very model of an enlightened person" (Kuehn 2001, p. 478). Mendelssohn "was perhaps the dominant force on the German philosophical scene between 1755-1785" and so was an important figure in the popularization of philosophy in 18th century Prussia (p. 230). Kant had looked up to and engaged with Mendelssohn for much of his early academic career, even grappling with his ideas in important works like the *Critique of Pure Reason* (KrV, B 413ff).

Garve, by contrast, is perhaps best remembered for his criticism of the first edition of the *Critique* and partial motivation for Kant to write the *Prolegomena* (Prol, AA 4: 372, 379-80*,* Zweig 1999, p. 14). For Williams, "Christian Garve is an important figure in understanding Kant's political writings, since Garve commanded the attention of the German thinking public" (2003, p. 45). In the context of popular philosophy, Garve was known for his translations and remarks on

[24] Kuehn 1987 presents an in-depth study on the Scottish-Enlightenment influences of the *Popularphilosophen*, as well as Kant's attraction to their "common-sense" philosophy relevant to the present discussion.

> British philosophers and social commentators in seeking to present to the German-speaking world the most significant philosophical and social currents of his time […] Garve appears to have seen his role as one of keeping the German public up to date with some of the leading intellectual, social and political trends of his time. (Williams 2003, p. 46)

Like public philosophers today, Garve

> wanted to demonstrate the relevance of philosophy, to take higher thought from the scholar's study to the people [and prided] himself on the accessibility of his work. Garve saw himself as engaged in an educational task of drawing the public into philosophy and literature and therefore took very seriously the goal of popular enlightenment. (Williams 2003, p. 46)

As we will see, Kant also had similar aims but never took the purpose of philosophy to be mere education of the masses. Kant took issue with the *Popularphilosophen* for trivializing important ideas for which the public would have little interest (i.e., speculative issues; he thought the public perfectly capable of making sense of practical ones), much like many academic philosophers who begrudge reductive pop philosophy writings. Indeed, "Kant shared with Garve the desire to inform the German public and to raise the level of cultural and philosophical debate but, above all, Kant prized excellence in pursuing this aim. Popularity should not be gained at the expense of philosophical rigour" (Williams 2003, p. 48).

But, by the same token, despite criticizing this popular approach to philosophy, Kant would go ahead to publish several occasional pieces for a wider, learned audience. "Perhaps his most ambitious point [in Kant's enlightenment essay] was that this new communicative and nonauthoritarian form of rationality among an academic-scientific elite could in fact understand and interact with the more restricted (and often only implicit) rationality of 'average people.'" (Lestition 1993, p. 87). Examples of this new approach include Kant's defense of the intrinsic importance of self-reflection in contrast to more instrumentalist accounts of public philosophy and a defense of the value of the philosophy for politics in *Perpetual Peace*. Kant would also publish review pieces of intellectuals who provided what he considered bad philosophy. These include essays critical of Garve and Mendelssohn—also "framed as a rejoinder to [contemporary conservatives of Kant, viz.] Gentz (and Burke)"—in his essay "Theory and Practice" published in the popular magazine *Berlinische Monatsschrift,* and reviews critical of Herder in the *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung* (Lestition 1993, p. 96).[25] I discuss some of these works in Part 3. In any case, if Kant is to be considered a public philosopher—and we at least have some prima facie reasons for thinking so given his critical engagement with the public philosophers of his day—the obvious question that follows has to do with Kant's view on the *role* of public philosophy.

What is Philosophy *For?* Aside on the Public Role of Philosophy in Kant

Though Kant believes in the intrinsic worth of philosophical investigations, he nonetheless sees in it a specific utility for the public.[26] Philosophy, "'if it shall have a use' at all, must 'give the principles' by which immaturity [among the public] can be ended everywhere" (from Fleischacker 2015, p. 181). We can get a handle of the possible instrumental public value of philosophy by taking look at his occasional publications on enlightenment. I have two specific pieces in mind, namely Kant's enlightenment essay and his essay on Mendelssohn and Jacobi,[27] "What Is Orientation in Thinking?" These pieces, I suggest, touch on the topic of public philosophy. At the same time, they might be seen as Kantian pieces of public philosophy in their own right which, moreover, operate against a backdrop of incredible public debate.[28] Making sense of some of Kant's aims in these texts is pivotal to seeing what public philosophy is for Kant.

Although Kant does not discuss philosophy directly in his first enlightenment essay, it is clear that he is pushing back against intellectuals who defend the instrumentalist view, especially regarding dangerous features of fundamentalist religion. He does so using an array of publicly oriented frames: "From its opening

---

[25] The conservative student of Kant, Friedrich Gentz, took issue with Kant's enlightenment popularization. Gentz illustrates the strong tendency of philosophers during Kant's time to reject the need for public philosophy. He believed public philosophizing to be a recipe for civil unrest: "Gentz's most polemical statement of that, suitably enough, came in his essay 'On the Declaration of Right' (i.e., of Man and Citizen): 'The principles in a declaration of rights may be stated as clearly and simply as it is ever possible to do; they remain abstract principles and the great mass of men do not grasp them […] The philosopher forms systems, the mob (*Pöbel*) forges weapons of murder out of them. No more fearful weapons can be placed in the hands of an uneducated man than a universal principle" (from Lestition 1993, p. 107 n145). I review Gentz in Part 3.

[26] "It is the response of a shallow mind, says Kant, to ask of this kind of knowledge, 'What is that good for?'" (from Fleischacker 2015, p. 184). Philosophy is intrinsically important, but this is not to say that Kant did not see in it political and pedagogical value in a republican age of information and commerce.

[27] As Allison notes (2018, p. 209), this public intellectual controversy resulted in Kant's student Herder publishing *Gott, einige Gespräche* (1787). An impassioned defense of Spinoza in that controversy (also influencing the subsequent romantic philosophy movement), Herder wrote in the Socratic dialogue-form. For more on this romantic wave of philosophy and its public literary tendencies, see Beiser 2003.

[28] I by no means wish to suggest that WA and WDO are the only relevant works Kant scholars may consider when assessing the extent of his public philosophy. SF, for example, might be another important resource here, though I lack the space to provide an adequate analysis of that text.

paragraphs, the essay used the language of recent religious, publicistic, and pedagogical debates to argue that the stakes were not simply narrow religious, political, or intellectual issues, but broad questions of the different levels of human freedom and rationality […]" (Lestition 1993, p. 77). Now some 18th century philosophers to whom Kant responds indirectly in the essay claim that enlightenment consists primarily in the dissemination of information to the learned public, or the mitigation of prejudices and human error (Fleischacker 2015, p. 180). Kant thinks that these views of enlightenment get something right, but that they are at the same time not only insufficient, but even misguided (WDO, AA 8: 146n); A public that is unable to think for itself, unable to "emerge from its self-incurred minority" (WA, AA 8: 35) will have little use for information. They may even make bad use of new information without the requisite ability to engage critically with it: "Precepts and formulas, those mechanical instruments of a rational use, or rather misuse, of his natural endowments, are the ball and chain of an everlasting minority" (WA, AA 8: 36). Still optimistic, Kant continues: "But that a public should enlighten itself is more possible; indeed this is almost inevitable, if only it is left its freedom." In "What is Orientation in Thinking" Kant doubles down: not only do individuals have a right to think for themselves (and thus governments have a duty uphold the freedom of the pen, freedom of thought, etc.), but they are morally obligated to do so (WDO, AA 8: 144-45; Wood 1996, p. xix).

In order to explain this possibility, Kant's make use of his well-known distinction between the public and private use of reason (with the former occupying the role of the thinker who addresses the public). The proper use of the public use of reason "calls for a realm of free public discussion in which everyone can criticize the [private, occupational, religious, and political] duties assigned to them […] In this public realm, Kant tells us, we write for 'a society of world citizens,' for human beings in general" (Fleischacker 2015, pp. 183-85). This public use of reason is key to making sense of Kant's public philosophy, as well as for appreciating the reason Kant *framed* his ideas in the way that he did: "Kant's own tactic was to apply […] the language of men of letters, who could help set the terms of public debate. What had previously seemed only 'private' or 'secret' could now be seen as the shared concern that continued to drive public controversies and actions" (Lestition 1993, p. 79). As Fleischacker nicely puts it, "More broadly, Kant thinks that the public or general point of view can serve as a test for the correctness of our beliefs even on ordinary empirical matters" (2015, p. 186). Kant suggests that the promotion of the public use of reason and the cultivation of enlightenment relate intimately to our duties toward posterity (WA, AA 8: 39). He also "ended the essay with a direct, impassioned appeal to the diverse groups of the German public to unite around his proposal that a core of the Aufklärung (which he now named for the first time) be preserved" (Lestition 1993, p. 85). Though Kant is rarely seen as a public philosopher today, his views on public philosophy have both an imminent and future-oriented dimension. It is to these that we now turn.

3. Kantian Lessons for Today

Before concluding, this section glosses three ways to see Kant as a public philosopher, and each of those ways, as I hope to indicate, showcases lessons for productive public philosophical interaction today. I first consider one way that Kant engaged in public philosophy, namely through less specialized articles and occasional publications on topics relevant to the public. Then, I examine Kant's view on the role of the philosopher as an exemplary corrective to enthusiastic thinking anathema to sustainable civil society. Third and in connection to this, I look at Kant's remarks and actions in the face of unproductive public philosophy, which entails as its obverse a commitment to the public philosopher as a future-oriented institutional critic, one who helps the public to understand how institutions facilitate or stand in the way of public enlightenment.

Occasional Pieces and Public Dialogue

As mentioned, Kant not only published systematic works, but more accessible occasional pieces. The analogy is not perfect, but many of these pieces are akin in intent to publications found today in venues such as *The Conversation*, where philosophers aim to reach a learned and receptive public of readers on important philosophical and political issues. Kant's occasional pieces include popular political pieces (e.g., "What is Enlightenment?", "What is Orientation in Thinking?", "Idea for a Universal History", "Conjectural Beginning of Human History", and *Perpetual Peace*), popular and public works on natural science (e.g., *Physical Geography*, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, essays on the earthquake of Lisbon), and polemical writings (e.g., *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, "Review of J.G. Herder's *Ideas*"). In many of these, Kant finds opportunity to criticize views of other popular philosophers, such as Mendelssohn and Garve, and to disseminate his own views in a more popular way: "It was in a combination of conceptual analysis, allusive description of existing social-cultural debates, and a new synthesis that the power of Kant's publicistic style resided" (Lestition 1993, p. 78). These publicistic works provide a good example for how philosophers today might draw from their work to do public philosophy, as Howard Williams puts nicely:

> Kant took very seriously his short popular essays that were published in journals such as *Berlinische Monatsschrift*. Several other of his well-known essays, such as 'What is Enlightenment?' and 'Idea for a Universal History with Cosmopolitan Purpose' had also appeared in the journal. These essays were important attempts to communicate with the public at large the implications of his critical philosophy. They may have been occasional pieces, but were systematically motivated. Kant believed that there was a significant role that publicity could play in the development of political life. By publicity Kant meant the dissemination of scholarly and scientific research to the educated public in such a way that individuals, social groups and political leaders could make informed choices about the policies they were to adopt. Kant thought that everyone could learn from his critical philosophy. He wanted to present its implications to the public in the most striking way possible. The article on 'Theory and Practice' was a part of that project. (Williams 2003, p. 5)

It is clear that these works not only help Kant develop his own systematic ideas, but they also contribute to dialogue on topics of clear public interest.[29] In a 1784 letter to Plessing, Kant even provides advice "on the style needed to hold modern audiences' attention: compact, richly allusive, and combined with a clear 'plan' or argumentation" (Lestition 1993, p. 78 n65; *Briefe*, AA 10: 218). Though the range of potentially receptive readers is higher today due to increased standards of literacy and education, Kant intentionally commits to the stylistic criterion of public philosophy.[30] I am not alone in seeing Kant's occasional pieces as a form of public philosophy. Consider Kuehn's historical perspective and Avillez's applied perspective: Kuehn sees in Kant's occasional pieces and their dialogue with other thinkers that "Kant was not just a dry metaphysician, whose ideas were of limited interest to some philosophers, but rather a public intellectual, who was able to talk about issues that concerned the average pastor and teacher and show to them that they have the deepest philosophical and historical significance" (Kuehn 2006, p. 653). Avillez et al. (2015), additionally, draw from Kant's public writings in order to showcase the value of his thought and influence for making sense of public philosophy today.

Modern examples of stylistically accessible public philosophy include venues aimed to the public, such as *Aeon*. It is not a stretch to appreciate public philosophers in these venues—in their contributions not to the mere dissemination of information, but in their capacity to help facilitate the public in thinking for themselves—as Kantian in spirit. Like these, Kant's occasional pieces function as an exemplary lesson of thinking for oneself.

Public Philosophy contra Enthusiasm

A second and related reason for seeing Kant as a public philosopher has to do with what he takes to be one of the most important benefits of public enlightenment, namely as a philosophical defense against irrational, superstitious, and polarizing tendencies among the masses and those dogmatic authorities who would mislead them (WDO, AA 8: 143; WA, AA 8: 39). As the German Enlightenment philosopher par excellence, Kant is well known for defending the critical thinking power of philosophizing. At the end of the first *Critique* Kant distinguishes philosophy education from learning to philosophize. The former is a static, stale memorization of information in the history of philosophy, whereas the latter relates to the critical integration of new information and experiences, always with an eye to their systematic interconnection:

> One can only learn to philosophize, i.e., to exercise the talent of reason in prosecuting its general principles in certain experiments that come to hand, but always with the reservation of the right of reason to investigate the sources of these principles themselves and to confirm or reject them. (KrV, A 838/B 866)[31]

Kant's account of philosophizing echoes the distinction between two competing purposes of public philosophy: applied or pedagogical (as discussed by Huss 2014). For Kant, one cannot teach philosophy, but one

---

[29] While Kant published in popular magazines, as mentioned above, i.e. writing on issues of interest to the public (of learned readers), he maintained fluid contact with that public. In doing so, he developed ideas on the relationship between philosophy and the public (of readers). For more on this, consider *The Conflict of Faculties*, especially the first part; Kant argues, among other things, that "the spirit of a *philosophy* faculty" has "the public presentation of truth as its function" (SF, AA 7: 33; see also SF, AA 7: 89 on the role of the philosopher vis-à-vis the public). Notably, SF was published in autumn of 1798, right after the death of Frederick Wilhelm II in November of 1797 (Wood 1996, p. xxii). This is significant given Frederick's severe constraints of Kant's ability to impact the public sphere with regard to religion. I am thankful to an anonymous referee for this helpful observation.

[30] It might be objected that, despite writing for a broader audience here, Kant nonetheless remains elitist by addressing a very narrow select public. After all, "Kant's [Enlightenment] essay was written for a Berlin journal read by as limited set of scholars, and he filled the piece with allusions to local concerns and events of which only that community was likely aware. Kant could also not have expected, at this point in his life, that any literal society of world citizens would read his work" (Fleischacker 2015, p. 185). Even so, it is important to contextualize this: literacy was lower in Kant's day, public outreach was difficult; by contrast, today's public is much more informed, and the internet makes philosophical interaction easier.

[31] Kant's remarks in a 1765-1766 course announcement are illuminating: "The true method of instruction in philosophy is *zetetic*, as it was called by some of the ancients (derived from *zetein*). It is searching, and it can become *dogmatic*, that is, *decided* through a more developed reason only in some parts" (from Kuehn 2001, p. 160).

can teach how to philosophize through the assessment and application of principles, judgments, and strategies relevant to public life. The Kantian sense is then both applied *and* pedagogical. Furthermore, philosophizing, as the self-critical exercise of reason and the sharpening of the individual's power of judgment, is key for Kant in combating irrational modes of thought, including enthusiasm and superstition.[32] In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant underscores the importance for cultivating a healthy "common human understanding" (KU, AA 5: 293). Kant's "three maxims of common human understanding" are obliquely related to philosophy in its anti-enthusiastic resistance, and they are defended in spirit by many public philosophers today:

> 1. To think for oneself; 2. To think in the position of everyone else; 3. Always to think in accord with oneself. The first is the maxim of the **unprejudiced** way of thinking, the second of the **broad-minded** way, the third that of the **consistent** way. The first is the maxim of a reason that is never **passive**. The tendency toward the latter, hence toward heteronomy of reason, is called **prejudice**; and the greatest prejudice of all is that of representing reason as if it were not subject to the rules of nature on which the understanding grounds it by means of its own essential law: i.e., **superstition**. Liberation from superstition is called **enlightenment** […] although this designation is also applied to liberation from prejudices in general […] (KU, AA 5: 294)

The ideal of public enlightenment—with the public teacher of philosophizing as its vanguard but which must only come about from the free, self-critical activity of the public—is important for combating such tendencies. Now Kant is writing at a time of great political conflict, following the religious and conservative backlash to the *Aufklärung* movement, especially in the wake of the religious edicts issued from the reactionary Frederick William II and his adviser Johann Christof von Wöllner. In the face of this polarization, "Kant sought to derive a new pluralistic model of the 'public sphere'" capable of intercepting thought-terminating movements (Lestition 1993, p. 102). Despite differences between Kant's time and our own, there are clear analogues: In the US, for example, fundamentalist and Qanon movements parallel anti-intellectualist fundamentalisms of Kant's day.[33] Like modern cults, they thrive in isolated thought-bubbles that disincentivize individuals to think for themselves.

These lessons from Kant find modern parallels in public philosophers such as Slavoj Žižek and Cornel West, who address broader publics by integration of popular culture issues and non-philosophical media, such as film and literature.[34] The 2019 Toronto debate between Žižek and Jordan Peterson—the latter whom might be seen as a good example of bad public philosophizing—exemplifies the Kantian spirit of enlightenment in action: Žižek does not aim to tell audiences what to think; instead, he hopes to demonstrate by example how to think for oneself while facing an interlocutor who commits epistemic trespass; in this case, Peterson presents philosophical ideas to the general public without philosophical rigor.[35] Kant was doing something akin to this 250 years ago with the progressive *Popularphilosophen* and conservative reactionaries.

Calling out Bad Public Philosophy

Not all public philosophy has to be positive: it can also and indeed must call out bad judgment. A variety of examples could be given to show Kant's public criticism of bad public philosophy, but here I focus on his parry with Friedrich Gentz.[36] Kant's engagement with Gentz was largely indirect though public in the sense that Kant would dispatch the latter's ideas in several of the occasional pieces mentioned above. Gentz, a former student of Kant and translator of conservative Edmund Burke, was a vocal opponent of the French Revolution and the Enlightenment. He argued that "the age was swamped by a 'one-sided, ruleless, inundating exercise of the understanding' (*Verstand*), emerging at all levels of society. Rather than the beneficial 'sphere of publicity' (which writers like Kant had evoked in 1784). The veritable flood of writings in France and everywhere in Europe testified to what Gentz labeled an 'excess of knowledge'" (Lestition 1993, p. 93). In short, Gentz was reacting skeptically to the spread of critical public philosophy in Prussia, instead suggesting that the more rhetorically-styled paternalistic approach of Burke was to be preferred.

---

[32] Consider Kant's 1756 earthquake essay, which references Benjamin Franklin as the "Prometheus of modern times" who stood against superstitious explanation of nature, but who equally well might exhibit undue arrogance. Philosophizing should, by contrast, teach the importance of epistemic humility for human beings (AA 1: 472).

[33] Kuehn notes that Pietism required "strict verbal adherence to their teaching. Anyone disagreeing […] was harassed and persecuted […] and it usually involved an insistence on a *personal* experience of radical conversion […] Pietism was a 'religion of the heart,' very much opposed to intellectualism and characterized by an emotionalism that bordered at times on mysticism" (2001, pp. 34-35).

[34] This is not to say that Žižek does not have his own problems, though he is clearly influenced by Kant in his way of philosophizing (and the number of references to Kant in his work attests to this).

[35] Peterson's mischaracterization of philosophers such as Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, charitably interpreted as the result of his attempt to make them accessible to the general public, were worries similar to those Kant feared of public philosophers like Garve in their dissemination of Hume, Hobbes, and the like.

[36] Other examples include the *Spinozastreit*, where Kant defends the *Popularphilosoph* Mendelssohn against Jacobi's assessment of Lessing's Spinozist atheism; or, the *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, where Kant attacks the pseudo-intellectual mystic Swedenborg. Though Kant does not call out Gentz directly, I focus on Gentz since Kant's writings relevant to Gentz occur at the height of his thought on enlightenment. Indeed, Gentz's reactionary position was becoming common, arguably setting the stage for the proto-fascistic elements of romantic German philosophy.

In Kant's essay "Theory and Practice" Gentz was a major target given his push for the impracticality of Kant's practical philosophy.[37] In opposition to the less unprincipled approach of Gentz (since it relied more on rhetoric than careful argumentation), Kant there and with his 1793 orientation essay "sought to defend his claim that a rigorous and comprehensive practical philosophy—taking seriously concepts like freedom, autonomy, and the construction of human rights through social interaction—could provide a 'general orientation' for thought and practice even in such turbulent times as the late 1780s and 1790s" (Lestition 1993, p. 96). Those supportive of Gentz's anti-enlightenment stance, including Gentz himself and A.W. von Rehberg, replied in response to Kant in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*—the same venue Kant had published several short occasional essays (Henrich 1967). This debate, as Lestition suggests, would motivate Kant in *The Conflict of the Faculties* and "An Old Question Raised Again: Is the Human Race Continually Progressing?" (1993, p. 97); the specter of Gentz helps explain Kant's focused defense of the French Revolution in the latter.

If the upshot of the Žižek-Peterson debate in the 21st century—paralleling those between Kant pace Gentz in the 18th—is the disclosure of incompetent and maladaptive social and political institutions, then we might consider one last lesson from Kant's public philosophy that has relevance for us today: Kant's constructive push for future-oriented institutional reform. Though I lack the space to pursue this fully, a modern example of the endurance of the Kantian public philosophy spirit includes attempts by philosophers to motivate improvement to public education, including pursuit of media- and ecological literacy, and by criticizing political entities that stand in the way of education's role for the improvement of the critical thinking and moral education of humanity (Wyrębska-Đermanović 2021).

4. Concluding Remarks

The central aim of this paper was modest: to give reasons in support of the reconsideration of Kant as a public philosopher in light of the revived interest in public philosophy today. Though we lack a unified definition of public philosophy and, by implication, the public philosopher, I hope to have shown that Kant's inclusion here in a qualified way makes sense. Kant not only engaged in public debates with intellectuals of his day,[38] publishing critical reviews of their works and developing his idea in dialogue with theirs, but he also wrote against newly developing threads of public philosophy *Popularphilosophen* and conservatives. Indeed, "the way Kant's thinking developed between 1781 and 1800 was significantly shaped by the reactions of his contemporaries" (Kuehn 2006, p. 630). Kant moreover published occasional pieces and popularized lectures in less-technical, less-systematic language to make them more accessible.

Public affairs, as well as topics of public interest—including the status and power of education, the ethical dimensions of politics, the importance of individual enlightenment, and the freedom of the press in the face of censorship—were important enough for Kant that he should dedicate hundreds of pages to their study. Besides these historical reasons, several of his ideas and strategies—such as the public critique of bad public philosophy and the constructive criticism of institutions—remain relevant today for the continued development of public philosophy, so much so that many of those writing public philosophy grant them as key to its future success. Thus, if the idea of a public philosophical canon is a useful one, Kant should be permitted entry into its halls,[39] alongside others influenced by him like Dewey, Habermas, Nussbaum, O'Neill, and Žižek. Doing so welcomes additional reconsideration of groundbreaking scholarship on Kant's political thought. This scholarship, as discussed in Part 1, tends to only touch on Kant's status as a public philosopher indirectly. If the case for Kant qua public philosopher is established more explicitly, then lessons as to the value and nature of *Kant's* public philosophy—especially for problems facing us today—become more readily apparent.

Yet some might object that Kant is in fact the villain of the story. As suggested by Frodeman and Briggle (2016), Kant stands at a crucial juncture in the history of philosophy, where philosophy takes a turn toward professionalization.[40] Philosophical professionalization, which evolved with the neo-Kantian tradition as

---

[37] Kant's explicit targets are, obviously, older figures: Hobbes, Garve, Mendelssohn. An appreciation for historical context, however, suggests several contemporary interlocutors, with Gentz among the most likely given his public attacks on Kant, especially in "On the Morality of Revolutions within States" where Gentz "inverted Kant's own famous image of the authoritative 'Tribunal' of 'critical rationality'" (Lestition 1993, p. 95).

[38] See, e.g., Fleischacker's discussion on public proponents of enlightenment, such as Mendelssohn, Reinhold, and Erhard, who see enlightenment as encompassing different aims and means than in Kant (2015, p. 180).

[39] This is not to say that the idea of a canon of philosophy is not itself unproblematic. There are good reasons to reconsider the utility of the canon for its exclusionary track record. Ironically, much of our modern understanding of the Western philosophy canon can be traced back to Kant's framing of his own project in the *Critique*.

[40] With the general rise of public philosophy and the reconsideration of canonical figures who might inform public philosophy practices, Kant, as I have tried to show, stands out as a figure that tends to be less represented here. To be clear, and to avoid charges of straw manning public philosophy proponents: most commentators in this exciting new field do not explicitly argue against Kant as a public philosopher (which would probably be implausible, especially given the foregoing discussions on Kant's engagement with the public sphere). Rather, what they do through comparison with other philosophers, such as Sartre or Socrates, is to omit him, suggestive of *relative* unimportance. One aim of this paper is to defuse common reasons why Kant may be seen to be unsuitable for this public philosophy canon revitalization, especially in light of Kant's personal prejudices (cf. to the lamentable personal views of others, e.g. Sartre, Marx, etc.). I am appreciative of an anonymous referee for raising this concern.

it came to America, is thought, moreover, antithetical to the aims of public philosophy. For philosophy's professionalization reinforces hyper-specialization and elitism, securing the alienation of the philosopher from the public in academia. It undoubtedly makes sense to see Kant as influential for the future professionalization of philosophy. At the same time, Kant was pivotal in making German—the vernacular of his time—into a philosophical language (much like Descartes was with French in his *Meditations*). More importantly, part of Kant's legacy was to push for the public importance of philosophy for politics, education, and science.

One key question for those who wish to engage in public philosophy today, and for which Kant himself was weary of, is how to on the one hand engage the public with ideas that are important to them, while on the other hand not do so at the expense of philosophical rigor. This explains why pop philosophy publications gather scorn, for they potentially dumb down ideas for accessibility. As discussed in this paper, Kant himself was worried about philosophy losing its philosophical edge as he witnessed in popular philosophers such as Garve. And yet he nonetheless attempted to write for a broader learned audience. So, far from Kant spelling the doom of public philosophy with its professionalization; rather, he shows us that philosophers must tread carefully, even taking important cues from rhetoric (as he was wont to do with his emulation of Hume, Diderot, and Cicero).

Second, part of the reason that commentators may be hesitant to see Kant as a *relevant* public philosopher (even if they grant he should be considered a public philosopher by the lights of his own time) has to do with the tendencies in his critical thought to reinforce oppositional and dualistic thinking. Public philosophers today have been careful to problematize the distinction between the public and private at the heart of Kant's famous work on enlightenment. Not only is oppositional thinking in Kant thought to be problematic for a host of issues for which public philosophers must engage, such as the environmental crisis or gender inequality, but it might be seen as a core element driving his regrettable views on sex and race. To be sure, as with any figure we wish to include in a canon of public philosophy, we have to deal with the question of the separability of the philosopher from their philosophy (bracketing, of course, the question of there existing a single overarching 'philosophy' of a particular thinker). Kant is no exception, and perhaps deserves extra scrutiny given his influence in the development of the modern 'scientific' notion of race. Still, there are resources to be found in his philosophy that are instructive for public philosophers today. His enlightenment ideals, for example, in principle push back against the very racist and sexist tendencies he was unable or unwilling to overcome in the first place.

Taking Kant's views seriously reminds us that even brilliant thinkers fall prey to unprincipled judgment and biases. This should give us pause, as a reminder for the need to assess our own deeply held principles and beliefs, just as Kant was able to do with the scholastic and dogmatic blind spots of his own contemporaries. Dualistic thinking is not necessarily a liability for the relevance of a public philosophy, but even if it is, there are resources in Kant's works to oppose it (consider Kant's less dualistic pre- and post-critical works).

Finally, it might be objected that my argument for Kant's inclusion in the public philosophy canon founders insofar as it relies on shaky definitions. If all public philosophy requires is, as Sandel puts it, to find "in the political and legal controversies of our day an occasion for philosophy […] to bring moral and political philosophy to bear on contemporary public discourse" (2005, p. 5), then many philosophers—even those who would not consider themselves so—are public philosophers. The term then becomes vacuous. This definition certainly touches on something important to public philosophy: practical public concerns should be a priority for anyone who would want to be considered public philosopher.[41] However, it is insufficient on its own. That Kant indeed took interest in a number of moral and political debates of both direct and indirect interest to those in Prussia—and that those in turn helped shape his own philosophical thought—is one thing, but I hope to have shown that this is not the only reason why he might be considered a public philosopher. As mentioned, he engaged non-specialists, though the range of those who would be able to appreciate his endeavors was small given standards of literacy and education at the time. Besides his students, he published quasi-popularized pieces on empirical topics (anthropology, physical geography, history) with a philosophical edge, criticized what he took to be bad public philosophy, and tested his own ideas against other intellectuals in the public sphere.

At the end of the day, then, Kant should be thought of as a public philosopher. In addition to the public-historical context explored in this paper, Kant's philosophical thought continues to provide inspiration for public-oriented philosophers and non-philosophers alike. As we enter a new epoch with the Anthropocene and its host of problems—such as the spread of misinformation, nationalist radicalization, and environmental degradation—humanity finds new occasion to pursue enlightenment, for individuals to learn to think for themselves. Kant's example might not tell us what specific course of action we ought to pursue. Still, it may nonetheless inspire us, as philosophers and citizens, to take hold of public philosophy in pursuit of the common good.

---

[41] Even so, we can imagine cases of theoretical philosophers who engage the public on issues of little practical significance who we might nonetheless want to consider as public philosophers. Although I do not necessarily see Neil deGrasse Tyson as a public *philosopher*, for instance, he still provokes the public on important technological and cosmological topics.

Bibliography

Allison, H. E. (2018), "Kant's Critique of Spinoza", in R. Kennington (ed.), *The Philosophy of Baruch Spinoza*, Catholic University of America Press, pp. 199–228.

Avillez, A.R. de, Fisher, M., Klotz, K., and Long, C. (2015), "Public Philosophy and Philosophical Publics: Performative Publishing and the Cultivation of Community", *The Good Society* 24, pp. 118-145.

Baiasu, S. (2022), "The Challenge of (Self-)Consciousness: Kant, Artificial Intelligence and Sense-making", in H. Kim and D. Schönecker (eds.), *Kant and Artificial Intelligence*, De Gruyter, pp. 105-127.

Beiser, F. C. (2003), *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism*, Harvard University Press.

Bishirjian, R. J. (1978), *A Public Philosophy Reader*, Arlington House Publishers, New Rochelle, New York, USA.

Brister, E. (2022), "The Value of Public Philosophy", in L. McIntyre, N. McHugh and I. Olasov (eds.), *A Companion to Public Philosophy*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Dewey, J., Weber, E. T. (2021), *America's Public Philosopher: Essays on Social Justice, Economics, Education, and the Future of Democracy*, Columbia University Press, New York, USA.

Fleischacker, S. (2015), "Kant's Enlightenment", *Con-Textos Kantianos*, no. 2, pp. 177-196.

Floyd, J. (2022), "Political Philosophy's Methodological Moment and the Rise of Public Political Philosophy", *Society* 59, no. 2, pp. 129-139.

Frodeman, R., Briggle, A. (2016), *Socrates Tenured: The Institutions of 21st-Century Philosophy*, Rowman & Littlefield International.

Goodin, R. E. (1995), *Utilitarianism as a Public Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, New York, USA.

Hammer, M. (2021), "Critique of the Public Sphere: A Kantian Measure of the Enlightenment of Societies" *Con-Textos Kantianos* 14, pp. 344-368.

Henrich, D. (1967), "Einleitung", in Dieter Henrich (ed.), *Kant—Gentz—Rehberg: Über Theorie und Praxis*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main.

Hobbs, A. "Public Philosophy and the Civic Duty of Universities", Daily Nous (2020), https://dailynous.com/2020/06/22/public-philosophy-civic-duty-universities-guest-post-angie-hobbs/, Accessed on November 29, 2022.

Huss, J. (2014), "Popular Culture and Philosophy: Rules of Engagement", *Essays in Philosophy* 15, pp. 19-32.

Irwin, W. (2014), "Writing for the Reader: A Defense of Popular Culture Books", *Essays in Philosophy* 15, pp. 77-85

Jal, M., Bawane, J. (2021), *The Imbecile's Guide to Public Philosophy*, Routledge India, London, UK.

Kant, I. (1996), "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?", *Practical Philosophy*, M. J. Gregor and A. Wood (trans., ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.

— (1996), "The conflict of the faculties (1798)", *Religion and Rational Theology*, M. J. Gregor and R. Anchor (trans.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.

— (1996), "What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking? (1786)", *Religion and Rational Theology*, A. Wood and G. di Giovanni (trans., ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.

— (1998), *Critique of Pure Reason*, P. Guyer and A. W. Wood (trans., ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.

— (2000), *Critique of the Power of Judgment*., P. Guyer and E. Matthews (trans.). Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.

— (2007), *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View (1798), Anthropology, History, and Education*, G. Zöller and R. B. Louden (trans., ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.

Kegley, J. A. K. (1997), *Genuine Individuals and Genuine Communities: A Roycean Public Philosophy*, Vanderbilt University Press, Nashville, TN, US.

Kim, T., Dator, J. A. (1999), *Co-creating a Public Philosophy for Future Generations*, Praeger Publishers, Westport, Connecticut, USA.

Kuehn, M. (1987), *Scottish Common Sense in Germany, 1768-1800*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Kingston and Montreal.

— (2001), *Kant: A Biography*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.

— (2006), "Kant's Critical Philosophy and its Reception – The First Five Years (1781-1786)", in P. Guyer (ed.), *Kant and Modern Philosophy,* Cambridge University Press.

Lestition, S. (1993), "Kant and the End of the Enlightenment in Prussia", *The Journal of Modern History* 65, pp. 57–112.

Littmann, G. (2014), "Writing Philosophy for the Public is a Moral Obligation", *Essays in Philosophy* 15, pp. 103-116.

Lu-Adler, H. (2022), "Kant on Lazy Savagery, Racialized", *Journal of History of Philosophy* 60, pp. 253-75.

Maliks, R. (2014), *Kant's Politics in Context*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK.

McIntyre, L., McHugh, N., and Olasov, I. (eds.) (2022), *A Companion to Public Philosophy*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Møller, S. (2017), "Rethinking Kant as a Public Intellectual", *European Journal of Political Theory* 16, pp. 100-108.

Payne, C., Thorpe, L. (2011), "Introduction: The Many Senses of Community in Kant", in C. Payne and L. Thorpe (eds.), *Kant and the Concept of Community*, University of Rochester Press, Boydell & Brewer, pp. 1-16.

Pinkard, T. (2002), *German Philosophy 1760–1860: The Legacy of Idealism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.

Posner, R. A. (2001), *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA.

Pigliucci, M., Finkelman, L. (2014), "The Value of Public Philosophy to Philosophers", *Essays in Philosophy* 15, pp. 86-102.
Rinne, P. (2020), "Love and Moral Psychology in Global Politics: A Kantian Reworking of Rawls and Nussbaum", *Con-Textos Kantianos*, no. 11, pp. 291-312.
Sandel, M. J. (2005), *Public Philosophy: Essays on Morality in Politics*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA.
Vereb, Z. (2022), "Sustaining the Individual in the Collective: A Kantian Perspective for a Sustainable World", *Kantian Review* 27, no. 3, pp. 405-420.
Weinstein, J. R. (2014a), "Public Philosophy: Introduction", *Essays in Philosophy* 15, pp. 1-4.
— (2014b), "What Does Public Philosophy Do?", *Essays in Philosophy*, 15, pp. 33-57.
Williams, H. (2003), *Kant's Critique of Hobbes: Sovereignty and Cosmopolitanism*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, UK.
Wood, A. W. (1996), "Introduction", In A. W. Wood and G. di Giovanni (eds.), *Religion and Rational Theology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.
Wurgaft, B. A. "Against Public Philosophy", Aeon (2021), https://aeon.co/essays/the-dangers-of-public-philosophy-according-to-leo-strauss, Accessed on September 3, 2022.
Wyrębska-Đermanović, E. (2021), "Kantian Moral Education for the Future of Humanity: the Climate Change Challenge", *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 55, pp. 1045-1056.
Zweig, A. (1999), "Introduction", In A. Zweig (ed.), *Correspondence*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.