

Foundations for Communities of Philosophical Conversation



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Andrea Christelle
Sergia Hay
James William Lincoln
Eric Thomas Weber

Abstract

In this paper, four leaders of the Society of Philosophers in America (SOPHIA) argue that there are public, shared needs and benefits for people to develop communities of philosophical conversation. We believe that there are seeds for philosophical community that need space to grow. We offer a plan and resources for starting, building, and maintaining such communities.

1. Introduction

People often think that philosophy is only a luxury or is merely an intellectual exercise, but, in fact, the world abounds with philosophical conversations. From hospital ethics committees to religious study groups talking about freedom or death, numerous communities discuss pressing philosophical issues that matter in our day-to-day lives. Unfortunately, not everyone has the opportunity to participate in such conversations. In addition, people care deeply about these issues and acknowledge their importance, but they don't always recognize them as philosophical. Founded in 1983, the Society of Philosophers in America (SOPHIA) engaged in strategic planning in 2015. Their resulting declaration reaffirmed the society's commitment to "use the tools of philosophical inquiry to improve people's lives and enrich the profession of philosophy through conversation and community building."¹ In this paper, four SOPHIA leaders argue that there are shared public needs and benefits for people to develop communities of philosophical

conversation.² These needs are for fellowship, critical thinking, dialogue, enriched understanding, and tolerance. We believe that there are seeds for philosophical communities that need space to grow, and here we offer a plan and a set of resources for starting, building, and maintaining such communities.

In what follows, section 2 explores the nature and challenges of engaged communities of philosophical conversation. In section 3, we consider what kinds of benefits can come from and what needs can be filled with communities of philosophical conversation. Participants have also reported that benefits for them have included deep and meaningful personal and transformational development, such as in mind-opening and liberatory feelings, as well as empowerment to think for themselves and with others about difficult topics. Finally, section 4 provides suggestions for developing,

1. SOPHIA, "Strategic Plan," *SOPHIA: Society of Philosophers in America*, 2019, <https://www.philosophersinamerica.com/strategic-plan/>.

2. Consistent with the aims and values of SOPHIA, we anticipate and invite feedback and debate about the argument and points presented here from other members and leaders of the society. As such, while this paper is an attempt to clarify and sharpen philosophical ideas central to SOPHIA's mission, we understand this effort as open to revision and fine tuning.

building, and maintaining local and global communities of philosophical conversation.

2. The *What*: Community

John Dewey argued that the idea of democracy “is the idea of community life itself,” rather than a form of government. He claimed that “the clear consciousness of a communal life, in all its implications, constitutes the idea of democracy.” There are great difficulties, however, in forming and maintaining a community. Dewey believed that “the prime difficulty [for democratic life] is that of discovering the means by which a scattered, mobile and manifold public may so recognize itself as to define and express its interests.”³ In any given space, such as a town, a city, or a school, people come and go. They share some interests and not others. They understand themselves as part of something shared and of many things not shared. Their interests may seem to overlap with respect to contexts, objects, and experiences held in common, yet people can understand those things differently. For our purposes, it helps to consider the many different types of philosophical communities that already exist or can be developed.

The different needs people have for philosophical conversation, in part, determines the kinds of groups people form, and those groups can range from formal organizations to more casual meetings. For example, hospital ethics committees engage in systematic decision-making and address special medical cases. Obligations, consent forms, and lawsuits raise expectations concerning the duties of doctors, nurses, and hospital staff. Hospitals have recognized that when attorneys lack clear direction from past cases about what to do, they need to consult a variety of people from different backgrounds and philosophical points of view in order to consider what it would mean to offer the best care and judgment for their patients. Contrast a formal setting like this with a more informal context, such as that of teenagers who long for

enriching discussion of freedom or democracy. The teenagers’ impetus to build a community may be far more general, and their interests may range from the nature of friendship to artificial intelligence, and may stem from a good movie, book, or teacher. The longevity of the group for teenagers may be temporary and short-lived in contrast to the life of a hospital ethics committee.

The scope of contexts and opportunities for potential communities of philosophical conversation is vast, but these contexts do have common features. These include: (a) opportunities to get together in person or to commune virtually, such as via social media or even by email, (b) an interest in thinking philosophically with others in ways that are genuinely conversational, rather than one-directional, and (c) attentiveness to the ways in which philosophical thinking matters in people’s lives, helping to make their lives better.

As an organization, SOPHIA offers tools and resources designed to enable communities of philosophical conversation in their various forms. SOPHIA was founded in 1983 and crafted our new mission statement in 2015. SOPHIA chapters can be more or less formal, but each requires a minimum of three official local members, which seemed like a necessary minimum for beginning and building a community. SOPHIA communities can get together for rich conversation as infrequently as one or two times per year, such as for those who wish to organize large events, or as often as they like, with some chapters getting together monthly.

Another aspect of community building can take place beyond the local community. SOPHIA is both a national and international organization, with our first international chapter in development in New Delhi. Today, such exchanges can be instantaneous and are no longer limited to the written word. SOPHIA has held two online symposia and has created a short format peer-reviewed journal series called *Civil American* for the purpose of fostering dialogue across distance.

Last, but not least, through people’s participation in national or international societies, individuals and groups at the local community levels can participate in national organizational work. Examples in SOPHIA include: (i) joining a

3. John Dewey, “The Search for the Great Community,” from *The Public and Its Problems*, in *The Later Works of John Dewey, Volume 2: 1925-1927*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UUP, 1984), pp. 325-350, 327, 328.

panel at a conference, (ii) giving an interview on the society's radio show and podcast, "[Philosophy Bakes Bread](#)" on WRFL Lexington, 88.1 FM in Lexington, KY, and (iii) having a dialogue in an online symposium. Participation at the national and global levels can also take the form of creating and sharing resources for enabling philosophical conversations elsewhere. SOPHIA has also begun some partnership efforts with organizations like the [Philosophy Learning and Teaching Organization](#) (P.L.A.T.O.).

The aims of people who wish to form communities of philosophical conversation can be varied. At the same time, it is important to remember that philosophy can be fun. In the next sections, we describe a number of concrete benefits that people might be interested in for themselves and their groups regardless of their aims. To ensure these benefits arise in philosophical communities, SOPHIA and other organizations can follow several models to inspire our efforts. For example, many people are intimidated by public speaking, Americans' number two fear in a 2001 Gallup poll.⁴ Nevertheless, Toastmasters International, a public speaking organization, has 16,400 chapters in 141 countries.⁵ This example shows that people can build their skills, even with regard to activities that seem daunting, and enjoy themselves in the process. People who value community, philosophical conversation, and the various benefits of each may be very excited to create local and global philosophical communities.

For those who wish to create communities of philosophical conversation, Dewey's warning remains. By what means shall they delineate who their community members are or ought to be? As one of our reviewers, Ron Sundstrom, notes, if groups are more formalized, they may become less intimate and natural. However, in our experience, formal philosophical gatherings of strangers have resulted in intimate interchanges as well. Philosophical groups will vary, but to be part of an organization like SOPHIA means adopting certain moral com-

4. Geoffrey Brewer, "Snakes Top List of Americans' Fears," *Gallup*, March 19, 2001, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1891/snakes-top-list-americans-fears.aspx>.

5. "Facts for First-Timers," *Toastmasters International*, 2019, <https://www.toastmasters.org/membership/facts-for-first-timers>.

mitments, which we discuss in section 4. In addition, it is important to recognize that many communities of conversation already exist, or resources for them do, such as in coffee shops, libraries, community foundations, schools, colleges, and universities. One need not start a philosophical community from scratch, and doing so will often involve failing to appreciate the philosophical discussions already going on around us in our communities. In the last section of this paper, we will return to the matter of how to create such communities of philosophical conversation. And it is worth noting that it remains vital to building a philosophical community that a group makes an effort to define itself and its interests, which can be the subject of rich and important philosophical conversation.

3. The Why

Philosophers have noted that people often aim to evade philosophy,⁶ and some have gone on to say that this evasion leads to dire consequences for democracy.⁷ Public figures, like Senator Marco Rubio, have argued, "We need more welders and less philosophers."⁸ Fortunately, the Senator has changed his tune on the matter.⁹ Exposure and access to philosophical study is often only available to those who decide to take it for elective credit in college. In addition, some scholars have rendered philosophy even more inaccessible

6. Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

7. See, for example, Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); and Michael J. Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012).

8. Alan Rappeport, "Philosophers (and Welders) React to Marco Rubio's Debate Comments," *The New York Times*, Nov. 12, 2015, A23, <https://www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2015/11/11/philosophers-and-welders-react-to-marco-rubios-debate-comments/>.

9. Alex Leary, "Rubio's No Longer Making Fun of Philosophy Majors," *Tampa Bay Times*, Apr. 4, 2018, <https://www.tampabay.com/florida-politics/buzz/2018/04/04/rubios-no-longer-making-fun-of-philosophy-majors/>.

and elitist by favoring highly specialized and exclusionary forms of it.¹⁰ Given this, many hold negative stereotypes of what philosophy is and what purposes it can serve; many assume it is intimidating, boring, overly-serious and technical, adversarial, pointless, and removed from regular concerns. In spite of these misunderstandings, there are many real-world contexts in which philosophical reflection can benefit individuals and groups and even simply be fun.

3.1. Skills Development

Certainly, people have conversations about philosophical topics—like about the fairness of capitalism or about the responsibility of journalistic accuracy—all the time. Even if people converse about topics that contain philosophical content (like fairness and responsibility), these conversations may not be conducted philosophically, that is, actually using the methods of philosophy. These methods supply us with certain techniques and skills for wading through complex problems and ideas. These methods are value-laden, meaning that they assert value claims about better ways of thinking and communicating. This is not to say that philosophical method is static or universally agreed upon¹¹; as value-laden methods, they are themselves subject to philosophical investigation and justification. Among others, these skills include:

- defining terms and using them consistently
- untangling different ideas that, on first glance, may seem to be the same
- identifying poor or misleading forms of reasoning in ourselves and others
- organizing ideas in logical order
- revealing and evaluating assumptions

10. Several contemporary philosophers are providing critiques of this narrow conception of philosophy; see, for example, Kristie Dotson's "How Is This Paper Philosophy?" *Comparative Philosophy* 3, no. 1. (2012): 3-29.

11. The APA articulates some general shared methods and values for the discipline of philosophy in their "Statement on the Major," n.d., <https://www.apaonline.org/page/major>.

- considering multiple viewpoints
- clarifying and weighing competing values

Take, for example, the first skill listed: defining terms and using them consistently. In a conversation about equitable pay for all genders, one participant might use the term "feminism." As the conversation progresses, however, it might become clear that other people mean different things when they use this term. For some, it might mean something like "the position that women should be treated fairly," while for others, it could convey "the position that women are better than men." Establishing a definition for the term to be used in the conversation helps determine the appropriateness of its use and contributes to an improved common understanding of the participants' meanings and reasons.

People can acquire these critical thinking skills on their own with a lot of discipline and effort, but they are developed best when practiced with others. As Michel de Montaigne writes, "We may whet and sharpen our wits, by rubbing them upon those of others."¹² One cannot sharpen a knife without making contact with another object. Furthermore, philosophical methods don't just develop practical thinking and conversational skills (some of which are listed above), but, in the right context, they also tend to cultivate attitudes that enhance our knowledge and improve the quality of our engagement with others, such as:

- openness to new ideas
- charity for opposing views
- flexibility with one's own position, particularly when presented with new evidence or compelling reasons
- modesty in recognizing the limits of our knowledge and experience
- generosity in sharing ideas and views, and providing useful criticism to others

12. Michel de Montaigne, "On the Education of Children," Chapter XXV in *The Works of Montaigne*, edited & translated by W. Hazlitt (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1580/1860), 89.

- patience in developing our positions or allowing others to come to their own
- courage to engage others about controversial issues
- hospitality and friendliness for learning with others

Opportunities for the development of knowledge and effective interpersonal skills should not be reserved for some but should rather serve obvious purposes for all. Local and online communities of philosophical conversation can increase the number of opportunities and ease of access for people to develop these skills. SOPHIA chapters aim to do just that. Such communities showcase philosophy's relevance to those outside the academy. This, in turn, could dispel some of the misunderstandings that have prevented people from engaging with philosophy.

3.2. Experience—Discovery and Transformation

Changing the way that one thinks about the other side of an issue is different from changing one's position on that issue. What makes philosophical dialogues different from ordinary conversations or special interest advocacy is that philosophy aims to explore and consider various points of view fairly.¹³ There are many ways in which one can be transformed through philosophical self-discovery. Some powerful ways in which people experience such changes include: (i) feeling liberated, (ii) uncovering shared values, and (iii) deepening understanding of opposing views. It is important to remember, furthermore, that philosophical dialogue can lead not only to personal transformation but also to communal transformation.

3.2.1. Feeling Liberated

As SOPHIA leaders, we have witnessed many transformational experiences through philosophical dialogue. One example of this kind of

liberation occurred for a student, who we will call Jim. At one point during a class, Jim told his instructor that he did not want to question his beliefs, especially his religious views. The instructor asked, "Are you in the right place for yourself, then, pursuing a liberal arts education?" The questions considered in the course were broad, as the topic for all freshmen was "Self and Society." A person's private views are their own, in a sense, yet they can have implications for how society treats others. Jim wanted his views to be reflected in the public sphere, but he felt uncomfortable when others asked him for justifications or proposed alternative views. In the same class, an atheist student from Bangladesh did not share Jim's views. He was polite and civil, as was Jim, which was important for the overall experience. Jim was in a freshman writing course that covered a number of influential texts, including the atheist psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud's views about civilization, as well as Christian author C. S. Lewis's engaging book, *The Screwtape Letters*. After a time, Jim returned to say that he realized that he did want to consider tough questions. He had never encountered such civil, reasonable people who held views that he rejects. He also appreciated the environment of the classroom, as well as the ideas and language that were covered in the course, which, he said, gave him new, better ways of understanding his own views. He said that he felt liberated by the experience, though his faith remained as strong, if not stronger. Jim's case shows how community members often want to talk about difficult issues, but they want to do it in a civil space. Learning about others' deeply held views on difficult matters can be liberating and transformational. Good philosophical communities, such as the one Jim encountered, foster this kind of experience.

There are community examples of this same phenomenon. In Sedona, community members gathered to talk about medical aid in dying, which they carefully distinguished from euthanasia. Most people at this forum thought that those with a terminal diagnosis, in a condition of pain, should be able to receive medical assistance that would enable them to peacefully end their lives. The reasons cited most often centered around personal autonomy and minimizing suffering. There are natural, Kantian, and utilitarian associations with these

13. David Bohm explains how the process of dialogue can reveal different ways of interpreting the world, and build new, shared ways of understanding. See David Bohm, *On Dialogue* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

considerations, and community members are often interested to learn how their moral intuitions line up with philosophical theories. Despite a general consensus, some people felt it was morally wrong to hasten death in any way. Because this is such a deeply personal issue, people appreciated a climate of civility and respect, while maintaining divergent views. Assessments of these forums reveal that, although people rarely experience a complete shift on a position, they did report thinking about issues in different and more nuanced ways after hearing others reason through their views.

Over the course of the last decade, SOPHIA leaders have found that careful and caring facilitators play a crucial role in guiding transformational philosophical dialogues. Good facilitators need not be professional philosophers, although we often draw from among them for this purpose. Facilitation should be guided by the values of respect, civility, and intellectual humility. These virtues are key values for organizations like SOPHIA. In a word, friendliness is a crucial virtue needed for liberatory and transformational experiences in philosophical dialogue.

3.2.2. Uncovering Shared Values

Philosophy often inquires into beliefs and matters that underlie people's claims. A common fear people have about entering into conversation about difficult subjects is that disagreements seem irresolvable. When people enter into dialogue, however, they often do find points of agreement, which can offer routes to compromise, resolution, or, at least, mutual understanding.

For example, The League of Women Voters of the Greater Verde Valley, Arizona, holds a quarterly "[Philosophy and Politics](#)" meeting. In March 2017, the group organized a conversation about the "Goodness of Government." In this dialogue, one issue that came up was taxation. A participant felt that there should be a flat tax. Another person disagreed and called for a progressive income tax. The group noticed that even though one person favored a flat tax and another preferred progressive taxation, both people wanted things to be fair. The dialogue revealed a shared value, namely fairness, and

an agreement that fairness should be realized as far as possible. Of course, agreement about the goodness of fairness does not necessarily produce agreement about *what* is fair. They were disagreeing about what is fair in tax law, without realizing at first that they agreed that fairness is important. The work of facilitators and fellow participants is to identify and articulate such underlying, shared values.

This willingness to work together can be transformational for communities. Today, many countries around the world, and especially the United States, are experiencing serious problems of incivility, frustration, and violence, and they lack spaces in which to cultivate the patience to think through difficult and nuanced issues together. We believe the increasingly adversarial environment laden with personal attacks and quips, those things that amount to cheap and easy "shots," is antithetical to philosophical dialogue, careful thought and consideration, and community building. The space and occasion to practice and refine philosophical skill allow for personal and communal transformations because they open us up to each other and to ourselves.

3.2.3. Deepening Understanding of Opposing Views

When one person disagrees with another, it sometimes seems like the person or group with whom he or she disagrees is unreasonable. For example, gun control and gun rights activists might both marshal reasons in favor of their positions, and, because they feel so strongly about their own reasons, fail to realize the warrant of the opposing view. When someone who favors gun control learns that the possession of a firearm saved someone's life, or when an advocate of gun rights learns how a child accidentally killed herself, both usually build a degree of respect for how an individual's particular life experiences have shaped their view. Hearing another person express their reasons often builds an empathetic response, even if it fails to convince another person to change her fundamental position on the issue. Understanding someone else's position in relation to their life experiences, which is different from adopting their outlook, builds tolerance for disagreement.

Philosophical dialogues can be liberating, identify shared values, and build respect for opposing views.¹⁴ Dialogues can be serious, challenging, or disruptive. They can also be enjoyable, inspiring, and even funny. Whether one feels disquieted or delighted—the experience of inquiring in deep and surprising ways is a meaningful human activity. Philosophical dialogues can take many forms and address a wide variety of topics. Dialogues may shift what a movie means to viewers and may change the way people vote. Dialogues can help us face our own mortality and make sense of our seeming indifference to suffering in the world. Topics like “The Seriously Ironic Politics of Feminist Laughter” can get a group reminiscing and laughing about the artful machinations practically demanded of career women in the 1970s and 80s. On a less humorous note, the #MeToo movement reminds us that these gender imbalances are real challenges that women face. These are issues that matter to people, and exploring them together creates a rare opportunity for us to think about our lives and this world, a need that SOPHIA recognizes. While engaging in these dialogues develops our critical skills, the reason people usually participate is because they are enjoyable and rewarding.

Almost everybody can and does talk about political issues like gun rights or general issues like human happiness. What, then, is the added value of talking about them philosophically? There are many, but two of them stand out. One is the long tradition of theories, vocabularies, and works available for enriching dialogue, and the other is the kind of training and skills that philosophy can bring to bear to understand reasoning. Topics like the nature of happiness have been of interest since ancient times, and the philosophical tradition is filled with meaningful theories that can illuminate

14. See, for example, Bertha Alvarez Manninen, *Pro-Life, Pro-Choice: Shared Values in the Abortion Debate* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2014). See also her interview with Eric Thomas Weber and Anthony Cashio on *Philosophy Bakes Bread*, episode 4, transcribed by Drake Boling, WRFL Lexington 88.1 FM, Lexington, KY, Feb. 7, 2017, <https://www.philosophersinamerica.com/2017/02/07/008-ep4-shared-values-in-the-abortion-debate/>.

such dialogues. The other value is that philosophers are trained to build and evaluate arguments, to ask and investigate questions, to make clear distinctions that foster critical and creative thought, and to understand the basis for our views. Most people have opinions about issues like happiness, but the purpose of philosophical dialogues is not simply to hear various opinions. Philosophical thinking and dialogue aim to understand the reasoning behind them and then to assess the quality and character of that reasoning.

4. The How: Organizing Philosophical Communities

“No community comes into existence out of two doctors but rather out of a doctor and a farmer and, in general, out of those who are different...”

— Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*¹⁵

We believe that meaningful philosophical community is best achieved when members care for each other in some mutually respectful way, a development that takes interaction and familiarity.¹⁶ A community that cares for its members acts in ways that facilitate genuine inclusivity.¹⁷ Members who care for each other actively listen to those with whom they might disagree and respond in ways that allow people to feel comfortable continuing meaningful conversations. Where people wish to create and maintain communities of philosophical conversation, they must embody moral guidelines of inclusivity and compassion, act according to principles of respectful social en-

15. Aristotle, *Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Bartlett & Collins (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2011), 100.

16. “Care,” in this sense, takes on a dual role. Echoing Virginia Held, “care” is both a practice and a disposition. Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global* (New York: Oxford UP, 2007).

17. For more information on the relationship between acts and dispositions in the moral/political domain, see Margaret Olivia Little, “Seeing and Caring: The Role of Affect in Feminist Moral Epistemology,” *Hypatia* 10, no. 3 (1995): 117-37 or Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1969).

agement, and take meaningful steps to build and sustain fellowship.

4.1. Moral Guidelines for Inclusivity and Compassion

Building a philosophical community, like community organizing in general, is an ethical task because it is fundamentally about how people relate to one another. Adopting certain moral guidelines is essential in order to develop and maintain healthy, well-functioning communities of philosophical conversation. As such, we propose that community builders should adhere to moral guidelines that embody inclusivity, compassion, and care so as to allow for deep ongoing patterns of engagement with other people and their interests.¹⁸ Whether one aims to build a formal structure or simply to enjoy informal communities, relationships matter and must be acknowledged. Yet, if people cultivate the skills necessary to practicing healthy disagreement, they will be better equipped to engage in public discourse for the purpose of progressing dialogue and social justice. Reflection, the questioning of assumptions, and belief revision are social values necessary for making philosophical habits an accepted and expected part of how one lives. In some communities, changing one's mind or even questioning a personal belief can be seen as a kind of weakness or immaturity. These kinds of standards must be challenged because they prevent us from developing personally and from coming to reasoned decisions about issues of public interest.

We believe these observations reveal that *the primary social directive of any attempt to build philosophical communities is to effect social change whereby philosophical dialogue, meditative reflection, and belief revision are embraced and encouraged conceptions of how to live*. As such, we propose that social relationships or structures that enhance people's sense of belonging, allow for self-affirmation, and foster self-discovery are essential to the tasks of building a philosophical community.

18. Deane Curtin, "Compassion and being human," in *Ecofeminism: Feminist Intersections with Other Animals and the Earth*, eds. Carol J. Adams and Lori Gruen (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

In contrast, social alienation whittles down a person's sense of belonging and undercuts their capacity to think reflectively because a basic need has not been met.¹⁹ Whether overt or covert, forces that cause social alienation have the power to turn people away from each other and from themselves.²⁰ Thus, we believe that social alienation can undercut people's ability to feel *at home* in their communities and *at home* with themselves. Socially alienated individuals are typically forced to make strategic and defensive choices in order to survive in communities that commit acts of exclusion or communicate cruel or indifferent attitudes.²¹ In its most basic form, social alienation communicates to people that they are *other* and not valued.

For these reasons, we propose four moral guidelines for developing philosophical communities inspired to motivate the previously mentioned social directive. *The first moral guideline is to foster an environment that encourages and supports relationships of recognition*. These kinds relationships acknowledge the emotional and social needs of its members. In philosophical dialogue, these relationships occur when people are charitable to one another's views, acknowledge their lived experiences as meaningful, and appropriately communicate to them that they are valued members of the community. Recognition is important for establishing an inclusive environment for philosophical dialogue because individuals feel free to openly engage with others when recognized. Additionally, focusing on recognition during the development of a new or existing community can prevent banal forms of inclusion. It is important to recognize

19. Evidence of this can be found in the innumerable stories of those who come-out in an effort to affirm their felt sense of gender or sexual identity.

20. See the "Deformed Desires" section of Anita Superson, "Feminist Moral Psychology," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Winter 2014 Edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/feminism-moralpsych>.

21. Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1964) describes this whittling down as the reduction of the individual to a one-dimensional existence.

that saying “all are welcome” is different from including members in conversations that formulate the interest and trajectory of a community.²² Surveying interests, rotating discussion leadership, taking time to seriously consider a variety of interests, and giving people time to express their ideas can go a long way to making people feel included because it can give them a sense of investment in the direction a community is moving.

The second moral guideline is to express a mode of open receptivity to the relationships and priorities already present in the larger community by communicating a genuine willingness to include multiple standpoints in the project of doing philosophy. This is important because it is problematic to believe that one should or could seek to reorganize individual or local priorities away from the lived experiences of every-day life towards some philosophically abstract vision of the world. Moreover, such a belief is flawed because the local community is never completely homogenous and it already possesses its own values, priorities, and modes of communication.²³ As such, we take open receptivity to be an important part of building successful philosophical communities.

The third moral guideline we propose is to seek to understand a community's varied relationships and priorities according to the lived experiences of members and groups already present in the existing community. Every community, whether defined by familiarity, proximity, or the digital landscape, is comprised of many smaller groups. As such, to think that one has a complete picture of a community's values and priorities from a single perspective is to fall prey to intellectual hubris, which undermines philosophical dialogue. We believe that productive philosophical dialogue is incompatible with the task of imposing interpretations or priorities onto any individual, group, or community. We take pluralistic understanding to

be an important part of building successful philosophical communities.

Lastly, *the fourth moral guideline we propose is to embrace the plurality of philosophical standpoints and methodologies that may already be present in the community or its groups.* This follows from the observation that philosophizing, in the sense that is important here, is a conception of how to live that may already be present in a community. It can be found in various groups. People are invested in the process of living, and that process includes forms of philosophical engagement with values, faith, science, existential crises, and so on. The idea that creating a philosophical community requires the imposition of a philosophical value or methodology is flawed because communities *do not need saving* from a lack of philosophical relevance. We believe that the process of developing philosophical communities seeks to create occasions for explicit philosophical dialogue and to encourage philosophizing as an accepted and valued conception of how to live. We therefore argue that accepting different methodologies and standpoints is an important part of building successful philosophical communities.

These moral guidelines for organizing philosophical communities are fundamentally interconnected and are motivated by the primary directive to effect social change in some degree, at least in the aim of rendering society more thoughtful. Organizing philosophical communities is an interpersonal process whereby people seek to create new connections or alter current connections between members of the social world.²⁴ This is accomplished by providing occasions for philosophical dialogues in ways that foster recognition, are sensitive to those priorities and values *already determined and interpreted* by those in the existing community, and embrace a plurality of philosophical methodologies.

22. We express our indebtedness to Iris Marion Young's discussion of Internal and External forms of exclusion in making this point. See Iris Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (New York: Oxford UP, 2000).

23. Terry Mizrahi, “Community Organizing Principles and Guidelines,” *Social Workers' Desk Reference, 2nd Ed.*, ed. Albert R. Roberts (New York: Oxford UP, 2009), 872-82.

24. Terry Mizrahi, “Community Organizing Principles and Guidelines,” *Social Workers' Desk Reference, 2nd Ed.*, edited by Albert R. Roberts (New York: Oxford U Press., 2009), 872-82.

4.2. Practical Principles for Organizing a Philosophical Community²⁵

Community organizing, as theorized by those in the social work discipline, cultivates communities of trust, solidarity, and, as we see it, mutual recognition. Following that scholarship, we propose the following practical principles for organizing philosophical communities.

1. *Organizing philosophical communities requires us to adapt the process to meet community values.* No one path exists for developing a philosophical community. Adapting the process to reflect local sensibilities and multicultural expectations should temper efforts to formalize meetings and meeting processes. An organizer who tries to force a community to engage in philosophical dialogue by imposing procedures that fail to align with existing sensibilities regarding conflict resolution, personal boundaries, and so on will face obstacles that can be avoided. Rather, organizers should strategically use various forms of greeting and vernacular to foster a recognizable and comfortable form of social engagement.²⁶ The topics explored and the ways they are discussed need to adapt to the sensibilities of those at the metaphorical table.
2. *Organizing a philosophical community is a complex value-based process.* People's values reflect and inform their experiences and perceived needs. Seeking to understand the pluralities of views in the community is essential for building

meaningful philosophical partnerships and dialogues. In this way, multicultural literacy is essential to communicating and cultivating interest in a philosophical dialogue because such literacy is the foundation for building bridges between worldviews.

3. *The community and its groups define the salient issues and philosophical interests according to their own history.* Individual experiences give people access to a unique understanding of that community's issues and needs.²⁷ This is because these experiences are shaped by a social history which defines contemporary values and social symbols. As such, the members of the larger community, and its parts, must be allowed to define the topics or themes to be philosophically explored on their own terms. They will inevitably choose issues, topics, or themes that would go unseen or underappreciated otherwise.
4. *Communities and groups are formed around a set of accepted facts and values.* There is an intimate relationship between facts and values in community and group formations. The way the world is and the values used to evaluate it are distinct but interrelated. One of the ways people engage in meaningful interactions with members of the community is to acknowledge these differences by opening up dialogue about conflicting values and exploring factual disputes in compassionate ways. This action guiding principle, therefore, requires us to embrace a search for some set of commonalities amongst the different lived experiences of a community's social groups. This does not mean that people should focus on what everyone has in common rather than on our differences or vice versa. Rather,

25. The following principles are adaptations or reiterations of those proposed by Terry Mizrahi in "Community Organizing Principles and Guidelines." Unless otherwise stated, Mizrahi's project informs the philosophical take on these action guiding principles in a comprehensive way. As such, we have selectively adapted many of his proposals and have expanded upon them to emphasize their potential for organizing philosophical communities.

26. For more on the importance of greeting and rhetoric, see Iris Marion Young's *Inclusion and Democracy*.

27. For more information, see Patricia Hill Collins's work on standpoint epistemology and intersectionality, especially, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990), and Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2016).

the goal is to acknowledge that differences exist because of the way people interact with each other and that these differences are not necessarily in need of reconciliation in all cases.²⁸

5. *Communities are neither monolithic nor homogenous.* No single member or group in a community represents the interests of the entire community. Practically speaking, there is always another perspective to engage.
6. *Communities, even informal ones, possess relationships of authority and influence.* Every community is made up of multifaceted structures of power on both the formal and informal levels. This power can take the form of capital, social capital, or political position.²⁹ Working within the context of these relations is key to cultivating the social capital with which to persuasively invite people to join a philosophical dialogue.

4.3. Steps for Organizing a Philosophical Community³⁰

In contrast to the principles above, one of the major goals of this paper is to propose a concrete yet flexible set of steps by which people can attempt to organize philosophical communities. We submit the following in an effort to achieve that goal. It is vital that the reader

28. This notion of *common differences* is helpfully formulated by Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Boundary 2*, 12/13 (1984) 333–58, www.jstor.org/stable/302821.

29. For a concise, yet illuminating, discussion of the notion of social capital and its evolution, see John Field, *Social Capital (Key Ideas)*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2016). Field's work tracks the evolution of the concept from Bourdieu's first writings to its contemporary impact on the internet and in public policy.

30. These steps have been adapted from those recommended by the National Educational Goals Panel's 1993 report on educational change. See National Education Goals Panel 1993-1994, *Community Organizing Guide*, retrieved from: <http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/negp/reports/orguide.pdf>.

recognize these for what they are: flexible suggestions. Compassionate forms of community, we believe, establish relationships of mutual recognition and create positive philosophical experiences.³¹ In the following steps, we suggest a model of a compassion-based community-building.

1. *Identify a leadership team.* This can be a small group of two or three people who have an interest in engaging in a deep exploration of philosophical issues. It is important to remember that this is a leadership team, not a topic or dialogue style selection team. This group should be looking to foster and mediate dialogues in a philosophical manner, rather than selecting which topics or formats are important. The goal is to *identify a small group which can aid in the coordination of your effort to create occasions and spaces for philosophical dialogue.* This group can then, if they see fit, seek support from larger organizations by working with philosophy departments at universities, by creating a SOPHIA chapter, and so on.
2. *Create and maintain partnerships within the existing community.* It is important to recognize that there are multiple organizations within a community that have their own missions and goals. *Take the time to identify and research the multiple organizations that currently exist and make efforts to introduce yourself and your goal (to cultivate philosophical dialogue in the community) to those groups.* Making partnerships requires acknowledging that the organizations you are looking to work with have an important agenda of their own. Your goal is to open up a philosophical venue for deep discussions of issues and concerns from those group's perspective. Note: sometimes introductory meetings over a meal can be very helpful here depending on cultural sensitivities.

31. Dalai Lama, *Ethics for the New Millennium* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999), 47.

3. *Develop a sense of multicultural literacy by exploring local community interests that identify community issues.* It is important to remember that the larger community is made of smaller communities as well. *Conducting an audit of the partnerships you have made is important.* It helps you identify those who have yet to be invited to the philosophical discussion, what communication styles and languages are present, and makes you sensitive to the following features: attitudes towards conflict, approaches to completing tasks, decision-making styles, and attitudes regarding emotional or personal matters.
4. *Promote investment in a philosophical dialogue centered on local interests and issues.* While developing partnerships and engaging with the local community, one will typically notice that *people can be already engaged in philosophical discussions about value in some shape or form.* The goal, then, during your efforts to develop partnerships, is to foster an awareness of these discussions and to take the time to show how regular community dialogues on those topics can be valuable to those groups.
5. *Develop a strategy for holding regular philosophical dialogues.* While partnerships are being made, develop a strategy for holding regular meetings in which people can engage in philosophical dialogues about issues in the community. *This strategy should include a plan regarding: who will facilitate the discussion, how the leadership team can support the facilitators, the level of appropriate formality, and the structure of those gatherings.* Again, the goal here is to let the community define the discussion on its own terms. *The process can be adapted to facilitate the desired outcomes.*
6. *Continue to develop cultural literacy & partnerships.* Ultimately, *you should never stop learning from or developing partnerships with the community.* Most of the community organizing process involves diplomacy and an exploration of the issues deemed relevant by your community partners. This means that the ultimate goal of developing a philosophical community in your existing community is to (1) have people engage in discussions that impact their lives, (2) expand the sense of communal connectedness between existing segments in the community, (3) articulate compassionate practices that correct inequities in the promotion of topics relevant to community dialogue, and (4) *establish bridges and social ties among people from different backgrounds and cultures.*
7. *Implement the strategy, evaluate, and adapt.* Once a few partnerships and issues have been identified, the leadership team should ensure that the first organized dialogue takes place in a low risk and accommodating time and place. Once the meeting takes place, *the leadership team in conjunction with those who participated should evaluate the effectiveness of the format, time, location, and topic discussed.* Feedback should be collected in ways comfortable for the local community. The process should be adapted to facilitate effective outcomes. Your strategy should adapt to what you learn during the evaluation process. This is a cyclical process and you should expect to consistently adapt your methodologies.

5. Conclusion

Having too few occasions for engaging people in in-depth and ongoing philosophical discussion is, in many ways, a limitation to both public life and to philosophy as a field. Philosophy aids people in the investigation of value and assumptions about the world, and it pushes them to think about the reasons for their beliefs. Ultimately, we believe that philosophy is capable of enriching everyday life. Moreover, and perhaps more relevant given the context of this paper, everyday life is capable of enriching philosophy. The philosopher's engagement with lived experiences in public life can reveal

a theory's unintended consequences or a new phenomenon to explore, and it can reveal undetected assumptions. Public life, in this sense, becomes the testing ground and environment in which philosophy can experiment, learn, and flourish. In this way, we believe that philosophical communities, our drive to develop them, and the way people execute that development are essential to the enrichment of philosophy itself. For the many reasons presented in this paper, we encourage readers to build philosophical community together.

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Additional Resources

SOPHIA’s website:

<https://www.philosophersinamerica.com>

SOPHIA Chapter Manual:

<https://www.philosophersinamerica.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Chapter-Handbook-Published100918.pdf>

SOPHIA Meeting Resources:

<https://www.philosophersinamerica.com/activities/meeting-resources/>

P.L.A.T.O. The Philosophy Learning and Teaching Organization:

<http://www.plato-philosophy.org/>

Center for Philosophy for Children:

<http://depts.washington.edu/nwcenter/>

Public Philosophy Network:

<http://publicphilosophynetwork.ning.com>

CONTRIBUTOR INFORMATION

Andrea Christelle is the founder of Sedona Philosophy and a member of the Board of Trustees of the Society of Philosophers in America (SOPHIA). Previously, she founded and for five years directed Philosophy in the Public Interest. Sedona Philosophy is a program that encourages philosophical dialogue in beautiful natural settings. Check out [Sedona Philosophy](#) and follow them on Twitter [@SedonaPhilExp](#) and [Instagram](#).

Sergia Hay is an associate professor of philosophy at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington. She teaches courses in applied ethics and the history of philosophy. Her area of scholarly specialization is Søren Kierkegaard, in particular his ethics, philosophy of religion, and influence by Johann Hamann. She is also a founding member of the Tacoma Philosophy Group (<https://www.meetup.com/South-Puget-Sound-Chapter-of-SOPHIA/>), a public philosophy chapter of SOPHIA. She is currently working on a book about the positive role of silence in Kierkegaard’s ethics.

James Lincoln is a PhD candidate in philosophy and an affiliate student in the Center for Equality and Social Justice at the University of Kentucky (UK) where he studies ethics, epistemology, and social philosophy. His primary research is in moral perception and his secondary work is in the philosophy of community. He serves as national secretary for the Society of Philosophy in America (SOPHIA) and as 2018-19 President of the Graduate Student Congress at UK. For more information about James visit JamesWilliamLincoln.com.

Eric Thomas Weber is associate professor of Educational Policy at the University of Kentucky and Executive Director and Member of the Board of Trustees of the Society of Philosophers in America (SOPHIA). He is the author of *Uniting Mississippi* (2015), *Democracy and Leadership* (2013), *Morality, Leadership, and Public Policy* (2011), and *Rawls, Dewey, and Constructivism* (2010). He also produces and cohosts the award-winning and syndicated "Philosophy Bakes Bread" radio show and podcast on WRFL Lexington, 88.1 FM in Lexington, KY. Check out SOPHIA and the show at PhilosophersInAmerica.com and Philosophy-BakesBread.com, and follow him on Twitter [@EricTWeber](https://twitter.com/EricTWeber) or on Facebook [@EricThomasWeberAuthor](https://www.facebook.com/EricThomasWeberAuthor).

Foundations for Communities of Philosophical Conversation



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A Public Holistic Response

Christopher P. Long

At a time when public debate over substantive issues of importance to the human condition is riven by sharp political divisions, toxic dichotomies perpetuated by click-bait media marketers, and technologies that privilege hyperbole over slow and thoughtful deliberation, this essay on creating communities of philosophical conversation comes as a welcome salve. In “Foundations for Communities of Philosophical Conversation,” we find both an articulation of the transformative power of philosophical dialogue and an indication of how to create communities capable of sustaining and nurturing them. Drawing on the infrastructure and strategic plan of the Society of Philosophers in American (SOPHIA), the co-composers advocate for creating spaces in which we might open ourselves to new ideas, engage thoughtfully with opposing views, and recognize the limits of our own positions. In contemporary public life, opportunities for such self-reflective deliberation are as rare as they are urgent.

The power in the approach this essay takes lies in the attention it pays to the process by which and the values according to which communities are created, established, and maintained. With regard to process, there are suggestions about the importance of coming to a shared definition of your community, how to build and nurture the trust that is required for genuine dialogue, and how to create a truly welcoming space in which differences are embraced and affirmed. At the heart of the approach advocated for here are commitments to values of inclusion, responsibility, openness, and ethical imagination. Cultivating habits of interaction shaped by an intentional commitment to

these values will have a powerful transformative impact on our relationships with one another. Over time, such habits of dialogue might shift the general tenor and tone of our broader public discourse. If one of the strengths of this essay is the depth of practical detail into which it goes to open such public spaces of reflective dialogue, an aspect of this work that needs further development concerns how we might draw on the habits such discussions facilitate to foster and develop more generous, inclusive, and nuanced modes of broader public engagement.

To flourish, public life needs spaces for collaborative reflection that enable us to tarry with the deep complexity of the challenges we face. Such spaces must be intentionally created, particularly at a time when the information that is pressed upon us quickly is delivered by algorithms that remain opaque to us. This essay goes a good distance in helping us create such spaces and in articulating why they are important. It leaves the responsibility with readers to establish and maintain communities of inquiry capable of enriching public life; and it challenges us to ask how we might cultivate in ourselves and in our public engagements with one another habits of philosophical dialogue that can empower more collaborative and innovative responses to the most complex challenges of our time.

Christopher P. Long is professor of philosophy and dean of the College of Arts and Letters at Michigan State University. His extensive publications in Ancient Greek and Contemporary Continental Philosophy include four books: *The Ethics of Ontology: Rethinking an Aristotelian Legacy* (SUNY 2004), *Aristotle On the Nature of Truth* (Cambridge 2010), an enhanced digital book entitled *Socratic and Platonic Political Philosophy: Practicing a Politics of Reading* (Cambridge 2014), and *Reiner Schürmann and the Poetics of Politics* (Punctum 2018). He is co-founder and editor of the [Public Philosophy Journal](#) and the editor the *Journal for General Education*.