

# Connected Communities

## Philosophical Communities

Jules Evans and Thomas Dixon



# Background

## Executive Summary

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Grassroots philosophy groups have proliferated in the UK, the US and beyond over the last 15 years. This is in part thanks to social networking websites like meetup.com and Facebook, which have made it easier for organisers to publicise their groups: there are now 846 philosophy groups on meetup.com alone, some of them with thousands of members. Today, philosophy groups meet in pubs, cafes, bookstores, parks, old people's homes, prisons, in virtual worlds and elsewhere. Such groups challenge formal models of education and traditional divisions between high and mass culture, and affirm the public's appetite for informal philosophical discussion.

This project examines and promotes the contemporary rise of grassroots philosophy groups. The project's outputs consist of a 30,000-word research report, a seminar, and a website ([www.thephilosophyhub.com](http://www.thephilosophyhub.com)), and has generated over 20 media articles and interviews so far. The report seeks to map the landscape of grassroots philosophy groups, and to bring together existing research findings and resources regarding those groups. The report seeks to ask: who goes to philosophy groups, and what do they get from them? It looks into the historical precedents for contemporary philosophy groups. Finally, the report suggests ways that groups could develop in the future.

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**Key words**

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Well-being

Belonging

# A brief history of philosophical communities

In the first section of the report, we attempt to sketch a social networks history of philosophy, similar to Randall Collins' *Sociology of Philosophies* (Collins 1998) but with more of a focus on philosophy groups outside of academia. We highlight historical moments when philosophy groups flourished, and look at the innovation of new forms of community throughout history.

We begin in ancient Greece, looking at the symposium, the cult, the academy and the commune (Nussbaum 1996), and then look at humanist circles in the Renaissance (Wojciehowski 2011), at Italian academies (Everson et al, forthcoming); the Royal Society (Hunter 1989); salons (Craveri 2005), coffeehouses (Cowan Williams 2005), and clubs like the Select Society in Edinburgh (Rae 1895).

We follow the expansion of the conversation in 19th-century working-class pub philosophy groups like the London Corresponding Society (Thompson 1963). We look at philanthropic adult education movements like Mechanics Institutes, Chautauquas and Lyceums (Stubblefield & Keane 1994), before looking at communities committed to more radical social reform, particularly among the Russian intelligentsia of the late 19th century (Berlin 1994). We then look at atheist communities in the 19th and early 20th century, including ethical societies and Humanist clubs (Dixon 2005).

Finally, we examine the professionalisation of philosophy in the early 20th century (Campbell 2006), and set it against the continued attempt by some to connect philosophy to the wider public through initiatives like the Worker's Education Association and the Plebs League (Rose 2002).

## The rise of the mass intelligentsia

In this section we bring the social history of philosophy groups into the modern age, examining the expansion of higher education in the 1960s, and the rise of what sociologists have called the mass intelligentsia (Flacks 1970, Bell 1973). We look at how, in the last few decades, the division between high and mass culture has become blurred through the rise of 'mass intelligent culture' (Parker 2008, Evans 2012). We examine some of the community forms this has led to, such as reading groups (Hartley 2002), literary festivals and ideas events. We contextualise the growth of philosophy clubs within this rise of mass intelligent culture.

## Mapping the grassroots philosophy landscape

We then attempt to map the grassroots philosophy landscape in Europe and the US, identifying five main streams. We argue that all these streams grew out of the rise of the mass intelligentsia in the 1960s, and from the desire to take philosophy beyond the 'ivory tower' and apply it to social and personal problems.

## Applied ethics

We examine how the applied ethics movement arose in the 1960s out of the Civil Rights movement, and how it developed into bioethics (Jonsen 1997), animal ethics (Singer 1975), feminist ethics (Brownmiller 2000), environmental and business ethics (DeGeorge 2005) and other attempts to apply philosophy beyond academia. We identify some of the

grassroots social movements that have grown out of applied ethics, including Greenpeace and Transition Towns (Graeber 2009).

## Matthew Lipman and Community Philosophy

Matthew Lipman's work on Philosophy For Children (P4C) has inspired a lot of research and academic interest (Lipman 1991), but much less has been done on philosophy for adults, or 'Community Philosophy' as it has been called. We look at the Socrates Cafe movement begun by Lipman's student, Christopher Phillips, in the US (Phillips 2002). We also examine Community Philosophy projects that have developed in the UK around SAPERE, the charity, including Philosophy in Pubs (Evans 2012), and projects with Age Concern and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Tiffany 2009). We consider the role of grassroots philosophy groups in supporting deliberative democracy (Phillips 2012).

## Philosophical Counseling and Cafe Philo

Philosophical Counseling was launched on the continent in the early 1980s as an alternative or rival to psychotherapy (Achenbach 1984). It hasn't taken off (Baggini 2010), but it did lead to the Café Philosophique (or Cafe Philo) movement, which was started by Marc Sautet at the Café de Phares in Paris (Sautet 1995). We examine the success of the Cafe Philo movement, and also look at the rise of popular philosophy magazines like Philosophie and Philosophy Now, and their role in supporting grassroots groups like Philosophy For All and

events like the Month of Philosophy in Holland or Les Nuits de Philosophie in France.

## The revival of virtue ethics

In the last 40 years there has been a revival of the ancient Greeks' idea that philosophy should be a practical therapy for emotional suffering (Nussbaum 1996), and a way of life (Hadot 1995). We examine this revival in academia, in popular philosophy organisations like the School of Life and the Idler Academy, and also in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and Positive Psychology (Evans 2012, Robertson 2010). We look at some of the grassroots initiatives this has led to, such as Action for Happiness and NewStoa.

## The Skeptic movement

Finally, we look at the modern Skeptic movement, which was launched by philosopher Paul Kurtz and others in the late 1970s to try and spread critical thinking in mass society (Kurtz 2001). We explore how it has become a flourishing grassroots informal learning movement via such networks as Skeptics in the Pub (Evans 2012).

## What do philosophy groups do for their members?

In this section we draw on surveys and interviews with community philosophy group organisers and members to try to outline some of the reasons people join philosophy groups, and also why they set them up (Diament 2001). We identify five main motives: for learning, for sociability, for belonging, for self-help or well-

being, and for civic and political mobilisation; and identify examples of groups that have grown out of these various motivations. We also look at the importance of various locations to each group's modus operandi.

## Possible paths forward

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1. Both university-based academic philosophy and grassroots philosophy would benefit from closer links. Grassroots philosophy clubs would benefit from the expertise and resources of universities, while academic philosophers may find a deeper engagement with society to be revitalising and informative. Working with philosophy groups is a practical and cheap way for universities to revive their tradition of extension and community learning. We also recommend that universities provide informal courses in practical philosophy for their undergraduates and the wider public, and are launching such a course at QMUL in 2013.
2. We suggest philosophy groups could play a role in mental health services by connecting with Health and Well-Being boards and NHS services in local communities. We also suggest grassroots philosophy could play a role in organisations, combining ethics training and 'employee well-being' into a single virtue ethics approach.
3. We warn that grassroots philosophy may at present be relatively confined to the middle class, and is sometimes at risk of becoming lifestyle advice for the affluent. We suggest philosophy groups could re-discover the sense of social purpose that animated grassroots philosophy at earlier stages of its history, for example in the late 19th and

early 20th centuries. We ask how to make philosophical communities places both of social practice, and of compassion and care.

4. We recommend that we keep the conversation going between philosophy groups, partly through the Philosophy Hub, and also through events like philosophy festivals. We suggest groups get together annually for a grassroots philosophy festival. And we recommend widening the conversation by building links with other philosophy groups beyond Europe and the US. A key research priority going forward would be to research and explore contemporary grassroots philosophy movements in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

## Oral history accounts

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The appendix of the report provides several interviews with key figures in the contemporary grassroots philosophy landscape, which will hopefully be a useful resource for future researchers and practitioners. They include Rick Lewis, editor of Philosophy Now; Christopher Phillips, founder of Socrates Cafes; Lizzy Lewis, development manager at SAPERE; Paul Doran, co-founder of Philosophy in Pubs; Roman Krznaric, founding faculty member of the School of Life; Martha Nussbaum, professor of law and ethics at the University of Chicago; and Lord Melvyn Bragg, broadcaster, and others.

## Notes from the seminar

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An evening seminar was held in October at Queen Mary, University of London. The seminar brought together some of the leading practitioners of community philosophy, from

SAPERE, Philosophy in Pubs, Skeptics in the Pub, Philosophy For All, the Royal Institute of Philosophy, the London Philosophy Club, Academy, and other informal learning groups like Pub Psychology. Participants welcomed the opportunity to meet other group organizers, and expressed pleasant surprise at the diversity and creativity the groups displayed. All participants expressed a desire to hold such a get-together annually. There were quite a diverse range of opinions about the best way forward for groups: many groups are quite happy continuing as they are. Organisers discussed the perennial challenge of finding good venues, and the importance of venues in setting the tone of your group. Some groups were wary of seeking public funding, because they were worried about being coerced by funders or government, while others have already accessed funding from charities and other bodies. The question of groups' relationship with academia was also controversial. On the whole, however, it was felt that groups would profit from greater links to university-based academic philosophers, and vice versa. Talks from the seminar are available on YouTube here:  
[www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLx1il\\_bKDuxFZdUygMZRkAZQFLUmYcSrs&feature=plcp](http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLx1il_bKDuxFZdUygMZRkAZQFLUmYcSrs&feature=plcp)

## Media impact

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The project has generated substantial interest in the media, including articles by the project-lead in the Financial Times (Life & Arts weekend cover story) and the Huffington Post; as well as a segment on BBC 2's Culture Show. The project-lead gave talks on practical philosophy and philosophy groups on BBC Radio 4's Four Thought, Radio 4's Last Word, BBC Radio London's Sunday morning show,

ABC Australia's morning show, RTE-1's Pat Kenny show; on the Guardian Books podcast, and elsewhere. The project-lead gave talks and workshops on grassroots philosophy at Hay-On-Wye festival, How The Light Gets In, Latitude festival, Galway Arts Festival, Dartington's Interrogate festival, the Institute of Public Policy Research; the Faculty of Public Health; the British Arts Festivals Association; and workshops at philosophy groups around the country and in Amsterdam, Ireland and Belgium. The project was also mentioned in articles on grassroots philosophy in the Independent, Newsweek, the BBC World Service, the New York Times philosophy blog, La Repubblica, El Confidencial, Morgenbladet in Norway and South Korea's Dong-A Ilbo. All these resources will be made available on: [www.thephilosophyhub.com](http://www.thephilosophyhub.com)

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