

NOVELTY

“For there are no new ideas. There are only new ways of making them felt – of examining what those ideas feel like being lived.” – Audre Lorde

Academic philosophy has a novelty problem. Novelty has become a litmus test for a contribution’s value. This results in a common undertaking for academic researchers. Read a bunch. Look for holes and gaps. Figure out what hasn’t been said. Try to insert yourself in a conversation by saying something new. On first glance, this approach might appear to make sense. If it’s not new, why do we need it? Yet a fixation on novelty sculpts a landscape of philosophical inquiry that is inhospitable and self-undermining.

What does it mean to contribute something novel in philosophy? We might think of novelty as having two senses: discovery and ingenuity. In the first sense, a contribution is valued because it is (or is taken to be) the first of its kind. In the second sense, a contribution is valued because it manifests a certain quality, namely, ingenuity, innovation, originality, or inventiveness. These values come apart. An ingenious idea depreciates in value if it has already been “discovered”. The longer an idea has been in circulation, the less original it seems. Alternatively, mere discovery decreases in value if it fails to innovate; a newly discovered contribution might be poorly conceived or superfluous. While ingenuity without discovery is redundant, discovery without ingenuity is insignificant. True novelty combines both. Yet, both concepts are fraught with difficulty and the pursuit of novelty in philosophy faces myriad problems.

First, the mechanisms through which philosophers have been trained to recognize ingenuity are particularly susceptible to bias. Unlike the sciences, in which empirical tests can be deployed to assess the value of a contribution, philosophers are often left relying on their intuitions. Ingenuity in philosophy has traditionally been attributed to natural brilliance or innate talent, where such assessments tend to call up images of bearded white men. Indeed, as Kant famously derided, “a learned woman might just as well have a beard, for that expresses in a more recognizable form the profundity for which she strives”. Over two centuries later, Sally Haslanger demonstrates the continued prominence of such sentiments, recalling a colleague who tells her he had “never seen a first rate woman [in] philosophy and never expected to because

by Emmalon Davis
University of Michigan

women were incapable of having seminal ideas”. And in 2016, Daniel Storage and colleagues found that students used the words “brilliant” and “genius” more frequently to describe professors in fields like philosophy, where comparatively fewer women and African Americans have PhDs. The ability to have one’s contributions recognized as novel in philosophy depends, in large part, on whether the *contributor* is seen as capable of having novel ideas. Thus, biased assessments of capability have an outsized influence on assessments of ingenuity in the field.

Second, the pursuit of ingenuity incentivizes trivial discoveries. It’s quite easy to discover something new, if the contours of inquiry are narrow enough and the threshold for novelty is fairly low. Over time, however, as Massimo Pigliucci notes, these efforts:

yield increasingly diminishing returns, so that certain discussion threads become more and more limited in scope, ever more the result of clever logical hair splitting, and of less and less use or interest to anyone but a vanishingly small group of professionals who, for whatever reason, have become passionate about it.

But this is not the type of value that can sustainably power entire disciplines of inquiry. The quest for novelty thus risks turning philosophy into a “fast fashion” industry – cashing in on hot trends to make a quick contribution, only to end up buried in intellectual landfills at the end of the season.

Third, the pursuit of discovery can directly undermine ingenuity by hindering our ability to identify it. A rush to discover ever more new ideas generates a kind of surplus production. Yet a proliferation of contributions results in information overload. When evaluators are overloaded and overwhelmed, they rely on heuristics like familiarity to evaluate contributions. In such environments, innovative ideas are less likely to be recognized, since the value of a new contribution is heuristically assessed in virtue of its relation to old paradigms and existing frameworks. Researchers quickly learn that to garner legitimacy, they must anchor their ideas to old frameworks. Paradoxically, what already exists becomes further entrenched.

Finally, the pursuit of discovery promotes a fiction. While a philosophical contribution might reflect

original thinking and innovation, it is often the case that other thinkers at different times and places have contemplated and expressed similar ideas. The fact that the same innovative idea occurs to many people doesn’t make that idea any less innovative; still, attributions of “discovery” are usually reserved for one person (or, at most, a small cluster of people). But although ideas are ostensibly first theorized in a particular book or article in association with a particular theorist, they don’t necessarily have their origins there and are generally the product of many minds and experiences. Insights of philosophy come from our participation in dialogue, and the “aliveness” of conversations (sometimes decades and centuries long) isn’t easily captured in a single book or article, no matter how robust the bibliography. Despite this, the myth of discovery authoritatively ascribes the origin stories of ideas to fixed points in time.

In a troubled credibility economy like philosophy’s, discovery (as with ingenuity) is more likely attributed to those with greater status – owing to, e.g., their gender, race, seniority, institutional prestige, or access to platforms to disseminate work – irrespective of their actual place in an intellectual history. Even where the myth of discovery masquerades as fact, attributions of discovery don’t reliably track chronology.

Given these challenges, can novelty be reconfigured? To begin, we might reconfigure how novelty is assessed, shifting assessments away from the individual and towards the collective. I mean this in two ways. On the one hand, individuals may not be the appropriate performers of such assessments. That is, as individuals, we should be sceptical of our ability to assess and proclaim a contribution – both our own and others’ – as novel. What might appear new to us is not necessarily new to another; even amongst experts, individual perspectives remain limited. This speaks to the value of disseminating work more widely to determine its novel status, rather than having a novel status determine whether the work gets disseminated in the first place. Assessments of novelty should be collective assessments, not just the assessments of a select few who operate as gatekeepers. So long as philosophers’ continued participation and advancement within the field is tied to the novelty of their individual

contributions, assessments of novelty are likely to lack scope and be skewed by self-interest.

THE FACT THAT THE SAME INNOVATIVE IDEA OCCURS TO MANY PEOPLE DOESN'T MAKE THAT IDEA ANY LESS INNOVATIVE

On the other hand, we can shift away from seeing individuals as the appropriate subjects of such assessments. How we assess and evaluate novelty is not just a practice of looking to the past, to see how an idea or concept relates to what comes before it, but also how it relates to what exists alongside it and how it shapes what comes after. Sometimes it is only possible to identify a contribution as novel far ahead into the future, when looking back and seeing a shift that was ushered in, but which couldn't have been identified at the time of its emergence. Likewise, what may appear to be novel in the moment may turn out to have been quite common. This suggests that the appropriate subject of our analysis of novelty is the shape of inquiry *as a whole*, not any individual contribution by itself. This should lead us to assess novelty not as a function of individual efforts, but as a function of the relationships between those efforts.

Perhaps more substantially, however, we can reconfigure how novelty is valued and pursued. Increasingly, novelty is valued and pursued as an end in itself. This mode of valuation is emblematic of a product model of philosophy, where achievement is valued over effort, and products are valued over the processes through which they are produced. On a product model, philosophical inquiry is driven by a disproportionate focus on and narrow pursuit of knowledge production, an attitude Cynthia Townley refers to as "epistemophilia". As Townley writes "knowledge acquisition has been the exclusive focus of academic inquiry and collecting knowledge is assumed to constitute the unique epistemic obligation and ideal for agents". Within this context, academic philosophers are increasingly trained to see themselves as valuable only insofar as they can

produce knowledge. As we scramble for new ideas, we objectify and instrumentalize the subjects of our study (and ourselves) along the way.

If epistemophilia is marked by the excessive valuation of knowledge production and accumulation, then philosophy in academic institutions can be said to cultivate such valuation. It is here that the pursuit of novelty as an end in itself finds its footing. Thus, resisting a product model of philosophy's value can help provide insights into how novelty, insofar as it is valuable, is valuable in philosophy.

One alternative to the product model is a value-synthesis model. Academic institutions adopt a system that divides contributions into three arenas: research, teaching, and service. While the value of each is assessed differently by different institutions, these arenas are generally governed by divergent aims and constraints. Research contributions are designed for other scholars, with the goal of generating new discoveries and advancing knowledge. Teaching contributions are designed for (enrolled) students, with the goals of greater dissemination and understanding of existing knowledge, promoting collaborative learning, and developing skills and interests of people who will participate in the future shaping of our world. Service contributions are designed for departments, universities, and wider disciplines, with the goals of organizational and administrative functioning. Service also encompasses engagements with the broader public and aims to ensure that relationships with our communities mutually shape institutional values and practices.

It might seem as though this trichotomy effectively covers the range of values that the product model was said to exclude. Rather than engender a neutral separation, however, a tiered hierarchy emerges. With the greatest resources and investment in the most powerful institutions increasingly funnelled into research-oriented domains, a focal value on knowledge production and accumulation is steadily reinforced. Moreover, this system arbitrarily cuts off the benefits of integrating different modes of engagement, many of which can't be sensibly separated. Indeed, many have argued that philosophy should engage more

prominently with the public, not merely in terms of providing services and educational resources to broader communities, or by collaborating with communities to enable their knowledge and values to shape academic inquiry, but even more fundamentally to reshape and redistribute the resources – land, money, opportunity, and social capital – that our institutions often hoard. A tiered, split separation between research, teaching, and service – where each is responsive to different aims and audiences – does not easily foster pathways to blend these values or to reconceive their significance.

KNOWLEDGE IS NOT JUST VALUABLE INsofar AS IT IS PRODUCED, BUT ALSO INsofar AS IT IS DISSEMINATED, UNDERSTOOD, APPLIED, INTERROGATED, INTEGRATED, REJECTED, AND PRACTICED – IN A WORD, LIVED

When we think about the values that guide effective teaching and service, these are often at odds with a conception of what it is to be a good researcher or what is expected when producing knowledge in a specialist niche. Research production often takes place within the context of a narrow conversation, where such a conversation appears to necessitate rigid forms of communication. These forms of communication serve as proof of a researcher’s expertise, a shorthand to facilitate faster understanding amongst a select few, and a hazing of less credentialed audiences who have not yet demonstrated themselves worthy of participation.

Inclusive pedagogy and effective service, on the other hand, embrace an expansive and empathetic conception of audience, contextualize contributions and explore them from a range of perspectives, and treat inquiry as alive and collaborative. If a contribution renders an idea more accessible, or surveys the landscape of inquiry, or organizes and compiles previously disparate efforts, or

re-draws our attention to something that already exists, or explores different ways in which inquiry can be understood or usefully employed, why think that this is less novel? On a value-synthesis model, the pursuit of novelty in philosophy is recalibrated to integrate and synthesize these aims.

Knowledge is not just valuable insofar as it is produced, but also insofar as it is disseminated, understood, applied, interrogated, integrated, rejected, and practiced – in a word, lived. As Pigliucci puts it, “Human beings need more than facts and formulas, more than experiment and observation. They need to experience it in the first person, and they need to reflect critically on all aspects of their existence. They need to understand, in the broadest possible terms, which means they need to philosophize”. Integrating and synthesizing these values goes a long way in foregrounding the goals of good stewardship for the future of philosophical inquiry – both within the academy and outside of it.

Alternatively, we might replace the product model with a game model. Philosophy is comprised of a range of activities that we might, in other contexts, readily classify as games. Philosophy involves argumentational sparring, word play, creating and escaping objections, identifying and exploiting weaknesses or gaps in an opponent’s position, and generating or solving puzzles and paradoxes. Philosophy also involves building and exploring worlds, constructing simulations and models, designing thought experiments, and speculative reasoning. While the former concerns the kind of game play that consists of challenges and obstacles, the latter involves a more imaginative type of play.

Games may seem trivial and arbitrary, however, and a game model of philosophy might appear counterintuitive. Wasn’t excess trivialization part of the problem? Challenging the view that games are trivial and arbitrary, C. Thi Nguyen writes that games offer:

...a way of specifying particular modes of agency. This is what make games a distinctive art form. Game designers designate goals and abilities for the player; they shape the agential skeleton which the player will inhabit during the game. Game designers work in the



medium of agency. Game-playing, then, illuminates a distinctive human capacity.

If philosophy is aptly characterized as a game, philosophers can be said to explore novel forms of human agency deployed in the process of meaning-making and inquiry about the world. These are the kinds of agency that are needed to engage with philosophical problems of our contemporary moment and future, to understand how these problems have been tackled before and various answers resisted, to organize and interrogate our findings, and to grapple with our own positionality in the world in the context of this inquiry. For Nguyen:

Games turn out to be a technique to inscribe and transmit sculpted agencies. They let us communicate

modes of agency, and store them. Games let us create an archive of agencies.

If philosophy is a game, then who are the game designers? If the game designers are not representative of the game players, there may be a mismatch or narrowing in the types of agency that can be explored, recognized, or appreciated. For example, the content of many philosophical problems and modes of expression may presume certain forms of cultural familiarity and exclude others. Moreover, when philosophy is engaged in environments plagued with sexism and racism and other forms of exclusion, people may be forced to shift or conceal aspects of their agency to participate. Engagement as equals may be artificially diminished based on who determines the rules of play. If the

“archive of agencies” we as philosophers are able to explore is limited to those agencies imagined by white men and western elites, then the rules and structures of our games demand serious revision.

ON A GAME MODEL, THE VALUE OF NOVELTY IN PHILOSOPHY LIES NOT SO MUCH IN IDEAS TO BE PRODUCED, BUT IN THE EFFORTFUL STRIVING IT TAKES TO PRODUCE THEM

Still, one might worry, it may feel disrespectful to treat philosophy as a game, given the seriousness of many topics that philosophers consider, including personhood, oppression, moral responsibility, consciousness, identity, and so on. Here, however, the game model might actually help us identify those philosophical methodologies and techniques which specify the wrong modes of agency for a given context or task. Nguyen articulates two modes of play: achievement play (or playing for the “win”) and striving play (or playing for the sake of the struggle). Now there may be certain philosophical inquiries where an orientation of achievement play is simply inappropriate; if achievement becomes the ultimate or sole focus and goal, our efforts as philosophers become co-opted by these aims. Likewise, effective engagement in philosophical inquiry, like any effective game play, requires that all participants are accountable for the responsibilities they incur in the cooperative endeavour. Absent reciprocal investments of commitment and respect, our collective participation in such inquiry may indeed be waste of time (or worse!).

On a game model, the value of novelty in philosophy lies not so much in ideas to be produced, but in the effortful striving it takes to produce them. Thus, the pursuit of novelty in philosophy could inspire us to explore, uncover, and express different modes of agency – both for ourselves and for our fellow players.

Emmalon Davis is an assistant professor in the philosophy

department at University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Her work explores the social processes through which knowledge is collectively developed and disseminated within and across communities. In particular, she looks at how race and gender oppression exert a distorting influence over these processes. She is currently working on a project exploring the political philosophy of black feminist abolitionist Maria Stewart. This research is supported by fellowships from the ACLS and from the Notre Dame Institute for Advanced Study, where she is in residence for the 2022-2023 academic year.