


Philosophy of the City and Transdisciplinary Possibilities

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Abstract

Philosophy of the city has increased in popularity over the last decade, emerging as a subfield with multiple research foci. This paper explores it and some of them, showing how some are positioned to influence real-world decisions. It exhibits the pattern behind such works and, in turn, reveals what defines the philosophy of the city as an area of rigorous and socially applicable research. Due to its inherent usefulness for dealing with urban affairs, philosophers of the city could also employ their research findings for other purposes, such as being members of governmental committees, similar to researchers in environmental ethics and the philosophy of technology. Moreover, several philosophy professors have been teaching courses in this area, providing students with the critical-thinking skills to make sense of the city and helping them examine urban life and its numerous dimensions. With this view laid out, the attention turns to the possible future for the philosophy of the city by comparing it to neighboring subfields.

Keywords: philosophy of the city; teaching; urban life

1. Introduction

Philosophers of the city have made numerous contributions toward understanding how cities have several dimensions that require investigations beyond what neighboring academic areas such as urban studies, geography, and urban planning can produce by the nature of their orientations. A few include metaphysical and ethical aspects (among others). Insights regarding these topics depart radically from those disciplines, offering an orientation that exhibits elements particular to the philosophical enterprise. They include living, moving, working, playing, building, and thriving in metropolitan environments. This notion entails rethinking research methods, suggesting that what counts as research in the philosophy of the city does not align well with much of mainstream philosophy in general. Rather than existing as a subfield with narrowly defined and entrenched debates, some research in the philosophy of the city remains characterized very differently.

For instance, philosophers of the city often take it to the streets. They deal with topics such as food systems, artificial lighting and darkness, discrimination, gentrification, infrastructure, pedestrian safety, urban mobility, participatory governance, and environmental justice in metropolitan

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regions. While this reality strays from some academic norms, examining it suggests that the philosophy of the city offers numerous advantages from scholarly activity that remain applicable far beyond customary boundaries. In other words, much of the research in this field could benefit scholars of the city and, perhaps in a limited capacity, influence real-world outcomes.

This point entails that some such investigations have transdisciplinary possibilities, showing promise for policy and design considerations. This area also has education aspects that deserve study, challenging long-standing curricula and practices. Consider, for instance, that many philosophy classes focus exclusively on highly conceptual topics. While work in the philosophy of the city deals with theoretical elements, focusing on the city requires looking at concrete manifestations of those abstractions. Consider, for instance, that if one talks about equitable distribution, one can examine this concept as it relates to municipal services such as transportation and waste management.

To teach lessons that can enhance students' metacognitive abilities and use their existing knowledge, forward-thinking instructors take lessons from the streets to classroom seats. They teach students to look for philosophical thought patterns and paradoxes as they manifest in their daily lives in the metropolitan sphere. In turn, this paper aims to examine these ideas, unpacking what they could mean for the possible future of this subfield. It highlights the kind of contributions that have, are, and could continue to emerge in the academy and beyond regarding urbanity.

To undertake this task, I begin surveying several unique contributions in the literature that emblemize the points above, illustrating how some scholars "do" research in the philosophy of the city. Next, I discuss why this body of work matters for philosophy as a discipline, showing how it can advance applicable insights and pathways for its dissemination worldwide. Fleshing out these notions also exhibits some of the trajectories of this subfield as it exists based on evidence, setting the stage for understanding the benefits of this research area for the immediate and distant future. Next, I explore ways that the philosophy of the city could advance by examining how philosophers in neighboring applied areas, such as the philosophy of technology and environmental ethics, have entered the public sphere, using their skills in government offices. In closing, the attention turns to advanced courses these philosophers teach worldwide, suggesting that this work could enhance pedagogical measures across colleges and universities.

2. Research in Philosophy of the City

Philosophy of the city is a new area of study. Most of its researchers have specialized backgrounds in other philosophical subfields. They include but are not limited to phenomenology, environmental ethics, epistemology, philosophy of technology, metaphysics, and political philosophy. Despite this vast array of backgrounds, the city brings them together, serving as a common topic for inquiry. These backgrounds help us understand the city and its many issues, providing numerous ways to gain unique perspectives. One could argue that approaching the city from several specific sub-disciplines will benefit philosophers striving to understand how different approaches can yield several outlooks, offering opportunities to engage in work that compares frameworks in a new fashion. This point aside, perhaps in the future, philosophers of the city will have "philosophy of the city" as their primary research specialization from the outset of their careers. If research in philosophy of the city advances this far, it could give us more wisdom about how to exist together in complex social settings. It could contribute to a more profound knowledge of humankind's shared existence.

For instance, one primary benefit that philosophy of the city provides is diagnosing the urban condition in myriad ways to learn what cities mean for humanity regarding how ordinary urban life is extraordinary when looking at it through a philosophical lens. This work is the view that comes into focus after examining the vast array of topics that *each* philosopher of the city studies. Each strand of thought, such as a research article, a book chapter, or a monograph, exposes insights into aspects relevant to city living. Examining such works collectively provides clues regarding the ways that research in philosophy of the city can benefit real-world affairs. Not only is this research valuable in this way, but the insights gained from such ventures exhibit how the philosophy in the academy continues to advance in novel ways. Bearing this point in mind, one would be hard-pressed to hold that philosophy is dead to the modern world. Although exploring the city is present in philosophy's history, its presence in current work and future endeavors must hold steady, especially considering that most of Earth's people now reside in urban environments.

For instance, looking at ancient Western philosophy, Plato and Aristotle offer enhanced views relevant to understanding cities. Plenty of works that thought about cities philosophically came before philosophy of the city emerged as it is known today (e.g., Biermann 1974; Gunn 1998; King 2000; Lawson 2001; Light 2001; Kirkman 2004; Cunningham 2007). Recent work from philosophers of the city who participate in the Philosophy of the City Research Group makes this notion evident. Some authors focus on controversial issues such as race and place, residential segregation, and gentrification, participating in these discussions by offering insights grounded in philosophy. Ronald Sundstrom's (2003; 2019) and Tyler Zimmer's (2017; 2022) work are exemplars. Other topics are lesser known, and their mere existence can motivate us to look at cities in ways that might have gone unnoticed.

For example, Taylor Stone (2017, 2018, 2021) has written extensively on urban nighttime lighting. His philosophical orientation to this topic illustrates that he is dealing with a subject that has real-world concerns and is inherently interdisciplinary—but holds steady as a philosophical enterprise. He engages with philosophical discourse, employing thinkers such as Immanuel Kant to understand nighttime aesthetics in urban environments to provide a deep understanding of the issue (Stone 2021). However, thinking about nighttime lighting in cities is not only an aesthetic affair. To make this point evident, Stone (2017) examines the issue through the lens of contemporary environmental ethics, developing a framework that can help guide policy decisions.

Examining Stone's research can provide us with several lessons. First, we can employ philosophical insights and data to enhance the views of cities and urban situations. This notion accounts for the claims I made during the introduction. Consider, for instance, that this work helps us understand a particular dimension of urban existence: nighttime aesthetics and their ethical implications for humans and nonhumans. This kind of investigation exhibits the interdisciplinary nature of work in the philosophy of the city and could have lasting impacts on municipal policy. Considering these points, we see that perhaps Stone has spent his time wisely making such studies.

If we take a step back and look at Stone's research, we can see it as a tiny glimpse of the city as a panorama. His work reveals that one esoteric issue is an entire research strand with intra, inter, and transdisciplinary elements. Yet, despite existing in this manner, we cannot examine the relevant matters in isolation from a range of other affairs. For instance, this subject ropes in considerations for topics such as energy, democracy, and public space. This point signals that aside from the robust area of exploration that Stone reveals, it remains wedded to the full complexity of the city. Theoretically, it also serves as only one element germane to understanding the philosophy

of city's applicability, one that many researchers in the philosophy of the city explore. Here is what I mean.

We know we are dealing with numerous elements of the city. Stone's work accounts for one aspect that aims to reveal its foundational issues in a kind or specific case of an urban environment. Yet, several philosophical investigations follow the type of pattern Stone's research aligns with, more or less. If we were to look at these explorations in tandem, a view would come into focus showing how each kind of investigation reveals another research vein needed to understand cities *philosophically*. In turn, this kind of transdisciplinary-oriented work in the philosophy of the city can help inform areas like policy development. Bearing in mind that philosophy of the city is a new subfield, many of its researchers have backgrounds in neighboring areas, such as environmental ethics and philosophy of food.

Consider, for instance, Samantha Noll's (2017) research on urban food systems. She examines the complexities of food sovereignty in metropolitan environments in her paper, "Food Sovereignty in the City: Challenging Historical Barriers to Food Justice." This work investigates how local communities often struggle with attaining nutritious fruits and vegetables. Her work's orientation remains inherently philosophical, illustrating the foundations of the struggles for food justice. Yet, her methodology also employs history's lessons to flesh out the conditions associated with food attainment and its troubling circumstances as communities encounter such situations in urban centers. This approach yields a view of the problematic issues related to food sovereignty. Still, it does so in a manner that endeavors to undercover the base of our understanding of such matters.

Other works in the philosophy of the city analyze the concept of the city in ways that significantly challenge how we think about the city as a technical term. For example, Lewis Gordon, a philosopher with expertise in numerous subfields, including but not limited to Africana philosophy, existentialism, and phenomenology, elucidates deep-seated problems that trouble how we understand cities foundationally. For example, Gordon's (2017) work on the constitution of cities is another topic that shows what it means to be a city. For instance, Gordon argues that citizens precede the city. Unless people have the ability to change the city, they do not count as citizens. Having intentional or systemic barriers in place to improve people's ability to become citizens is a substantial challenge for any municipality that wants to claim city status (Epting 2023). Interpreting this notion in most contexts means that people have the financial and social means to influence the shaping of the place they call home. However, such realities are too far out of reach in many locations to be meaningful. They are like mirages in the desert, seemingly always in front of but they move farther away as you approach them. In turn, it is possible to have "cities" without citizens. In light of this idea, calling such places "urban centers" is more fitting (Epting 2023). Cities are places where people can dwell meaningfully with others rather than exist as people who work, clean, serve, and entertain people with economic and social power. One main takeaway from Gordon's position is that when thinking about cities, we must examine them in their historical and present-day contexts.

Building onto Gordon's insights, Shane Epting (2021a) has dealt with the ethical dimensions of urban mobility, focusing on how transportation affects marginalized and vulnerable people, the public, nonhumans, possible future generations, and urban artifacts (e.g., buildings, bridges, and ballparks). He advocates for "moral ordering," an approach that brings these stakeholders into view for issues wherein they are simultaneously affected. Such an approach could benefit municipal, state, and national measures to improve travel in the city and beyond.

What is significant about the works above is that they demonstrate how to do philosophy in ways that do not merely produce more philosophy for philosophers, which has become a substantial critique of academic philosophy (Frodeman & Briggie 2016). Any urban dweller can talk about cities, showing that their mere existence is inherently inclusive, unlike the pages of most professional philosophy journals. In turn, writers exploring related subjects in this area are in a good position because their audience is not already excluded due to the topic's esoteric nature. Still, this notion does not entail that all such works will remain accessible, but the point is that these researchers are not relegated to areas requiring extensive training to approach them. Considering that urban topics are also inherently interdisciplinary, works in the philosophy of the city also remain within conceptual reach for academics in relevant fields such as urban planning, engineering, architecture, sociology, and public health. Philosophers of the city who keep this point in mind position themselves to rejoin conversations particular to the academy and beyond.

Perhaps the most impressive philosopher of the city who has this quality is Michael Menser. He helped launch and guide New York City's Participatory Budgeting Project (PBP) while publishing the first research-based monograph on this topic (Menser 2018). Participatory budgeting involves municipal agents turning over a modest portion of discretionary funds to community groups so they can vote on neighborhood projects (Menser 2018). By employing these real-world measures, these residents can regain a small portion of influence that can help them become citizens, favoring the Gordon-ian/Eptin-ian sense of the term. This kind of work, done in the academy and in the street, illustrates how philosophers of the city can think inside and outside of established traditions. Although researchers in other disciplines, such as environmental science and geology, frequently engage in fieldwork to advance knowledge, one can argue that philosophers could also undertake such outings to observe abstract principles in practice.

Though Menser is pushing the philosophy of the city into new territory, other novel enterprises can also employ philosophical insights to address issues in urban environments. One challenge is that there are few precedent cases to reference in this new, organized research vein. However, neighboring subfields such as environmental ethics and the philosophy of technology have already made such advances. Even though these subfields differ, they are close enough to follow as a model to guide efforts. In the following section, the attention turns to those areas to understand how philosophers of the city could make similar advances.

3. Philosophers in Government Positions

Although it is typical for philosophers in European nations to consult with government leaders on pressing issues such as emerging technology, the practice is far less common in the United States. Still, a select few have served the Executive Branch in official capacities, showing how philosophers can employ their wisdom in several ways that push against established limits of professionalization. This section examines a few instances that include environmental ethicists and a philosopher of technology. In turn, we can see how philosophers of the city *could* engage in similar roles in the future as the subfield becomes more established and well-known.

For example, Andrew Light was one of the first environmental ethicists to consult for the United States Government. While he is on leave from his career as a philosophy professor, Light is presently the Assistant Secretary of Energy for International Affairs at the U.S. Department of Energy, a position that requires presidential nomination and Senate confirmation is not Light's only work in government. Previously, he was the Senior Adviser and India Counselor for the U.S. Special Envoy

on Climate Change and a Staff Climate Adviser for the Office of Policy Planning, a part of the U.S. State Department.

Philosopher Kyle Pows Whyte works in environmental ethics, philosophy of food, and indigenous affairs. He is currently the George Willis Pack Professor at the School for Environment and Sustainability at the University of Michigan. In addition to his scholarly and community work, he serves on the White House Environmental Justice Advisory Council under the Biden Administration.

While philosophers with advanced specialization in environmental ethics have a proven track record, this “crossover” trend is advancing to other areas. For instance, turning to the philosophy of technology, Patrick Lin, a philosophy professor at California Polytechnic State University, exhibits how expertise in this subfield can benefit emerging issues in space exploration. Lin currently serves on the U.S. Space Council Advisory Group. He (Cal Poly para 4-5, 2023) remarks on how his background will benefit this project, showcasing the strengths of applied philosophical endeavors:

What I hope to bring to this important group is a new perspective, guided by my ethics experience in outer space affairs, artificial intelligence, robotics, cybersecurity, bio-engineering, security and defense systems, and other relevant technology domains. It’s very encouraging to see this administration seek out practical expertise in ethics in this crucial work. I’m excited to serve on the NSpC UAG to help guide the responsible and sustainable development of outer space.

Although Lin’s work with this group shows how philosophy professors can contribute to emerging technologies and exciting areas such as space exploration, this undertaking is not his first trans-disciplinary partnership. Lin has engaged with numerous government agencies and leading businesses, as noted below (National Aeronautics and Space Administration para 4, 2023):

Dr. Lin has worked with or delivered briefings and invited talks to government, military, industry, and academic organizations, including United Nations, U.S. Department of Defense, CIA, DARPA, U.S. National Institutes of Health, U.S. National Academies of Sciences, Cal-EPA, Google, Apple, Sony, IBM, Tesla, Nissan, Bosch, Daimler Benz, Stanford, Harvard, UCLA, US Naval Academy, U.S. Air Force Academy, U.S. Army War College, and many others.

Although the instances above are limited, they show how philosophers researching relevant topics can influence the offices that deal directly with these affairs. There is no reason why philosophers of the city cannot do the same. Consider, for instance, Ronald Sundstrom or Tyler Zimmer, who would be excellent additions to the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Samantha Noll could work with committees for the Department of Agriculture, focusing on urban food sovereignty and security. If these philosophers were to hold positions in committees relevant to their research, it would not be the same as having philosopher kings, but at least they could influence policymakers. So, there is that.

While these examples are limited, they highlight how such research could provide new insights into the everyday urban issues that remain inherently philosophical. Examples include dealing with topics such as fair practices and the equitable distribution of resources. Moreover, philosophers of the city who research applied areas such as those mentioned above could also work with state agencies, municipalities, businesses, and community-based organizations to develop equitable

practices that directly affect several stakeholder groups. Aside from measures of this sort and traditional research, teaching classes in the philosophy of the city is also developing as an enterprise with promise. Recently, courses taught in this emerging area have enlightened students about the philosophical nature of the places many call home, providing ways to see how lessons from philosophy can be directly applied to their everyday lives. The following section moves in that direction to gain insight into these pedagogical advances.

4. Teaching Philosophy of the City

Along with the advances in the research described in the previous section, professors at colleges and universities worldwide have started offering courses in the philosophy of the city and similar classes that bring urban issues into view. Epting has taught Philosophy of the City and Transportation Justice courses at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. He also teaches a course, 'Creating Future Cities,' to primarily engineering students at the Missouri University of Science and Technology. Brian Elliott teaches a course called 'Philosophy and the City' at Portland State University. Remmon Barbaza teaches a course in philosophy of the city at Ateneo de Manila University.

Gerald Erion (2018) teaches an innovative class at Medaille College, focusing on the city of Buffalo, making excellent use of Frederick Law Olmsted to deliver transformative learning experiences. To help contribute to understanding the educational benefits of teaching this course, Erion (2018) published an article that studies his experience in the classroom teaching a class on the philosophy of the city, noting the benefits that such a course can provide students. His findings indicate that the motivation is there to enhance learning experiences, which, in a sense, shows that the city can serve as a laboratory for elucidating complex thought. Erion (2018, 147-148) makes this point evident:

We may thus have grounds for expand philosophy's traditional scope to include study of the city, in the city. In any case, I now think Medaille's City class as a genuine philosophy course that asks students to do the kinds of things that philosophy can be great at teaching: critical and creative thinking, abstract thinking, logical argument, and so on. At the same time, we can also connect with significant development in other areas, and indeed, with significant developments outside the academia. But most importantly for our purposes here, such courses can inspire new ways to teach philosophy, including non-traditional applications to significant parts of our world. We are just getting started, and this paper sketches out just one approach, but we can see that the potential for teaching and learning in philosophy of the city is significant.

In the passage above, we see Erion's success in the classroom illustrates that taking curriculum in new directions aligns with advances in research and the history of urban thought. His testimony exhibits that his students were able to learn the skills of the philosophical trade in ways that could provide life-long lessons on how to see the world surrounding them through a lens that reveals the meaning and significance of everyday, ordinary things and events. If there is one worthwhile goal that all students should gain from any philosophy class, this skill should outrank most, if not all, lessons.

What is exciting about the teaching of philosophy of the city by using the city as a laboratory is that it inherently provides measures that align with revered teaching practices that champion hands-on learning, such as those endorsed by John Dewey (1930). As mentioned earlier, achieving this learning outcome is challenging when teaching in a discipline such as philosophy that involves

dealing with highly abstract topics. Yet, by developing courses that address this aspect and include a kind of “hands-on” element of direct experience with the city, the challenge transforms into an experience wherein learning by doing holds steady as a central tenet of instruction. One might worry that incorporating this dimension could dilute other aspects required for education in philosophy, such as logical argumentation, which is an unsubstantiated claim. However, as Erion notes above, his experience teaching the philosophy of the city exhibits that such lessons bolster those aims.

Although the examples above are few, they show how lessons on and from the city can engage students, encouraging them to use philosophy to understand the world surrounding them. Teaching these courses shows students that philosophy not only exists in the canonical text but also teaches them that philosophy “lives” in their community. If we can agree that the unexamined life is not worth living, perhaps the unexamined city is not worth living in. If we can train the next generation of world leaders to view their cities philosophically, a better world may be possible.

5. Concluding Thoughts

The philosophy of the city has grown significantly in the past decade. Numerous research strands have emerged, signaling part of what defines this unique subfield. By examining the work of philosophers specializing in this area, we can identify characteristics illustrating that some of this work can support transdisciplinary efforts beyond the academy. Although one could argue that all works in the philosophy of the city should resemble mainstream areas with long-standing debates and polemical positions, holding that philosophers of the city should endeavor to create that kind of environment is wrongheaded. Such a view aligns with what Lewis Gordon (2006) describes as “disciplinary decadence.” This notion means that instead of accepting the philosophy of the city as it is—as it has been built by the philosophers engaging in the inquiries described in the previous sections—it should conform to someone’s theoretical concept of what they think it should be *instead*.

While this research will continue and could change, such advances will help redefine the subfield, meaning that how an area is defined remains subject to fluidity and shifting parameters of inquiry. This paper established this view, signaling that there is promise for lessons in the philosophy of the city to transcend the academy, providing insights that could benefit urban life and what it means to call a city by that name.

Considering that philosophy is at home in colleges and universities, it is promising to see courses engaging this area emerging worldwide. As philosophy and cities are significant for all urban dwellers, especially considering that urbanization will continue indefinitely, the hope is that these courses will enhance students’ abilities to see the places they call home in ways that reveal what is extraordinary in the everyday. In turn, they can take philosophy from the classroom to the street.

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