**Interview with Sara Goering**

**“Good Public Philosophy: Interdependence, Education, and Ethics”**

ANNIE DWYER: Welcome to *Going Public*, a podcast dedicated to exploring public scholarship and publicly-engaged teaching in the humanities. My name is Annie Dwyer and, at the time of this recording, I am the Assistant Program Director of a Mellon initiative at the University of Washington’s Simpson Center for the Humanities.

The initiative's name is *Reimagining the Humanities PhD and Reaching New Publics: Catalyzing Collaboration*. Since 2015, two successive Mellon initiatives by this name have supported public scholars at the University of Washington–both faculty developing new graduate seminars in the humanities with public-facing components, and doctoral students pursuing public projects in the humanities. The episodes of *Going Public* consist of interviews with Mellon-supported public scholars after they have launched their projects or taught their public-facing seminars.

Please do check out our companion website, which includes faculty fellow syllabi as well as doctoral student fellow project overviews, artifacts, and other ephemera.

The podcast, along with the website, is intended to serve as a resource for scholars interested in developing similar projects and seminars. You can find the *Going Public* website at [www.simpsoncenter.org/goingpublic](http://www.simpsoncenter.org/goingpublic). You can also find the link in the description of today’s episode.

Today's episode, "Good Public Philosophy," is an interview with Sara Goering, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Washington. In the summer of 2021, Sara received a Mellon Summer Fellowship for New Graduate Seminars in the Humanities. Over that summer, she developed a course titled “Ethics Matters,” which she taught for the first time in winter of 2022. Our conversation explores, among other things, the public nature of philosophical questions, the value of collaboration, and pedagogical approaches to public-facing projects in graduate education.

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ANNIE DWYER: Thank you so much for joining me today, Sara.

SARA GOERING: Thanks for having me.

ANNIE DWYER: So as a way to introduce listeners to your work, I'm wondering if we could talk a bit about how “Ethics Matters” fits into the graduate certificate in ethics offered by UW Department of Philosophy. As I understand, the course is one of the required courses for this graduate certificate in ethics, so it plays a central role in equipping graduate students across disciplines with the skills and knowledge they need to integrate ethics into their chosen field. What difference does it make to center public-facing scholarship in an ethics course like this? Another way to ask this question is: when you bring ethics and public scholarship into the same frame, what's the result? How does ethics benefit from a public orientation? How might public scholarship benefit from a consideration of ethics?

SARA GOERING: There's a lot in there. The “Ethics Matters” class is one of two of the core courses, but students to finish the certificate need to take one. Many people take both, but they only need to take one– “Ethics Matters” and “Justice Matters.” I want to say that these are courses that draw people from all across the university. In a typical course, I might have somebody from Communication, from Education, from Public Health Genetics, from the Law School, from the I-School, from Political Science. Students are coming together who don't have other shared disciplinary backgrounds or skill sets, mainly because they want to focus on something normative, something ethics- or justice-related in their own graduate work. They're coming to this certificate in ethics, or the class even without the certificate, to learn a bit more about philosophical foundations in these areas and get some tools and skills and language that they can bring to their own work.

Not all of that work that they're trying to do in these different departments or schools will be necessarily public-facing. But in our moment, there are so many broad–and not just in our moment, but all through history–there are so many ethical dilemmas, debates, questions about justice and equity that are ongoing public conversations. Often, people jump out with a position without maybe fully doing the work to articulate what they mean by certain terms or words they're using within those arguments or thinking how they will sit within different communities or different contexts. Those are some of the skills that philosophy can train students for–getting very precise about what we mean by, for instance, a word like “trust” or “autonomy” or “integrity.” Students come to learn about those “middle-level moral concepts.” In our class, we cover moral status, autonomy, respect and self-respect, trust, integrity, and forgiveness. There are so many more that we could cover–that's a little subsection of what's possible.

Adding in the public facing element allows people to think, “How do I take this important piece of my own work and my discipline that has to do with an ethics or a justice issue and make sure that that gets legs to move beyond the academy or academic audiences?” And by reading some of the public-facing work that's been done in these areas, they also get models, then, for how that can be done in different formats. And they can recognize the difficulty of doing it. If we're reading both the long-form academic pieces and the short blog posts or op-eds, you see that it looks short, but there's a lot of work that goes into condensing down a complicated subject in that model.

ANNIE DWYER: Absolutely. I'm curious in particular about the kind of cross-disciplinary composition of this particular classroom. The fact that students are taking this ethics certificate or pursuing this course in order to pursue the ethics certificate and coming from other disciplines. How does this cross-disciplinary space either lend itself to or complicate conversations around public scholarship? Or how does that sort of play out in the classroom?

SARA GOERING: It's a difficult class to teach because of the different backgrounds, but it's also so rewarding exactly because of that. Bringing people together across these different disciplinary backgrounds opens up different spaces of imagination to see. For instance, take something like autonomy, which we talk about. I know it well from my own work working within medical ethics or the medical setting.

But one year I had a student from dance doing an MFA and she was interested in her project and critiquing the way professional dancers are trained from a young age and sort of given narrow constraints on what's allowable or acceptable in terms of body weight, what they do with their time, even to the minute corrections on body form in order to get the dance right. That's a different frame around autonomy than I was used to seeing within the medical context.

If you add in a social worker, a person doing an MSW, you also get a slightly different frame and a different perspective on what the value of autonomy is or how physicians interpret autonomy in one way, but often, in a direction that aligns with what they think is right. For instance, this time I had a practicing social worker within a hospital setting who was wanting to do a project looking at the significance of autonomy and the social worker's role in ensuring patient autonomy, especially for people from underrepresented minorities, in doing advanced care planning. She was seeing something different from what you might see if you're doing a typical medical ethics approach, looking at it from a physician's perspective or maybe a nurse's perspective. She was seeing a much broader set of social determinants around autonomy and wanting to convey those out to other social workers to have some impact with the kinds of things that she was learning to try to improve practice for other people.

So having each of these different disciplinary perspectives opens up the social imaginary or the space that we can think about the moral concepts within. Having that kind of insider-outsider or different disciplinary perspective makes us understand the concept much more effectively.

ANNIE DWYER: Oh, absolutely. It sounds like that was so generative. And also, you're practicing the work of translating these key terms to different publics by translating them across disciplinary boundaries. And there's the excitement around how these different concepts are refracted when you're considering them from different disciplinary positions or perspectives.

SARA GOERING: Yeah. It's interesting. There's a way in which the course itself is a public face because it's facing away from philosophy and trying to draw in students and practitioners. Sometimes people occupy both spaces.

ANNIE DWYER: Absolutely. I'm curious, too, you mentioned your work in medical ethics. It's important in our interview to highlight for listeners that you're no stranger to public engagement. You currently lead the ethics thrust of the UW Center for Neurotechnology.

SARA GOERING: In the Neurotechnology Center, my role has been thinking both with people who are currently using neural technologies and research studies to understand more about what it's like to use that device–how using a device affects our sense of responsibility or authenticity or a sense of agency. And horizon-scanning to see what's coming down the pipeline in this area and how that might alter some of our other moral values, like privacy…and thinking about a different kind of access to the interior spaces of our minds. So in those ways, I am also thinking about philosophy as a practical tool that gets taken up in these outside philosophy spaces in neurotechnology, in electrical engineering, or with the philosophy for children in the schools, too.

ANNIE DWYER: I'm curious, how did that shape how you taught your class? Or did your work, your own field philosophy play into or shape your pedagogy in any way?

SARA GOERING: Every experience we have shapes us in some way. I would say–to make it explicit–I think I have now had more practice trying to translate philosophy into plain language in order to make it more accessible for people who don't have the same kind of training. That's one of the skills that's required for good public philosophy–not oversimplifying, but knowing a way to capture important nuance within the philosophical work without having the incredibly dense prose or difficult-to-use lingo that ends up excluding people who aren't already part of that club.

ANNIE DWYER: Right. Right. I'm wondering if we can get a little more of a sense of the texture of the course by learning more about what students produce. As I understand, they had the opportunity to either write a traditional term paper or do a project that was more public-facing. Did students pursue that latter option? And if so, what were some of their projects?

SARA GOERING: Yeah. So a few of them I can mention. It's hard because we are in the quarter system and we only have 10 weeks to produce things. Some of the things are more plans and ideas and outlines and rough drafts of things than they are the final product at the end of that 10 weeks.

The first one that I would mention is this person who's working as a Master's in Social Work doing a video. She wanted to give a talk focused on what autonomy means. Some of the things that we read in the class looked at autonomy–or what we think of autonomy as self-determination. In the Western world, it's a very individualistic focus on autonomy. My being autonomous is having a certain kind of internal alignment and wanting to want what I want and being able to do that. Some of the pieces that we read in the course in that week were more focused on the ways in which we're much more interrelational and interdependent, even in our coming to decide what our values are or what matters to us and then enacting our agency on the world.

So she produced a video and then a list of resources that would be made available to social workers to say, “One of your jobs can be not standing back when a person is approaching end-of-life planning and needs to make decisions about care, leaving that to the physician, who is typically the person in charge of this discussion, then helping the person decide or asking the person to decide what they would most like to go into their end-of-life care–but saying there's a way in which you want to make sure that person's needs are being heard.” If it's too episodic (i.e. “In this moment, what do you want?”), if we think of autonomy as just involving this person and not involving their family members, there's a certain kind of artificiality about that.

So as a social worker, if you're observing what's going on, there's a way in which you can and should, she argues, advocate for the person who's there to have the access to their relational resources, to people who can support them or help push back. Sometimes, if a person doesn't want something and the physician thinks that's the right thing, then there can be a kind of undermining move of questioning that person's competence.

But if we think of autonomy in this more relational way, then even if there are some questions about their capacity, their broad competence, if they can be held in place by their closest loved ones who know them well, then there's a way that the social worker can try to make sure that those voices are heard. She was saying, “I think a lot of social workers aren't trained in this setting, wouldn't know that they can have this role to play, and would think, ‘Well, doctor is just asking what the patient wants. Patient says something, and we're done.’” It's this event rather than trying to get a broader sense of that person's values and their support structure.

ANNIE DWYER: Oh, what a powerful project. I love that.

SARA GOERING: Yeah, it was great…thinking how hard it is to talk about the nuance that's there if we're thinking of autonomy more relationally and [to] give guidance on what maybe you want to do–not just think, but do–in your practice. It's complicated to figure out all those things. She was putting together sets of resources where people could go find more information or watch other video talks about this kind of thing.

ANNIE DWYER: That's fantastic. What I love about that example too is there's a conceptual intervention–thinking about autonomy more relationally–and then the practical application. Such a rich project.

SARA GOERING: Yeah. Then another one that I would mention…of course, it all depends on what we think of as public-facing. But this is a person from English who was interested in developing a curriculum for early writing students, which could be used within a university setting, but could be used more broadly as well. The thing that they were taken with–this was a new word to me–was adoxography. A-D-O-X-O-G-R-A-P-H-Y, adoxography: writing in praise of something trivial or even worthless, as a kind of writing exercise, writing practice. Find the beauty in trash or the beauty in a blade of grass, or something like that. And we were talking about the readings and discussions we had around moral status in general. Moral status–people think they know what they ought to do generally, until facing a dilemma or something.

But what gives something moral status? What does it mean to have moral status? And within our Western history a lot of times, that's been reserved for Human and only Human within philosophical circles. It's sometimes reserved for particular kinds of humans. Certainly, looking back, particular kinds of humans. But from Jeremy Bentham onward, there's been discussion about animals having moral status in virtue of the fact that they can suffer. Then does it need to be sentience, this capacity to feel something and suffer that grants you some level of moral status? Or could there be things that don't have that capacity, but nonetheless should have moral status?

Of course, we have from the '70s Christopher Stone talking about whether trees have standing. Trees are often not thought to be sentient in the relevant ways by most philosophers, but of course, they're alive. Is it everything that's alive? How do we define what’s alive? You can see how difficult it can get. We also talked about ecosystems or collections of things or a river, which is comprised of both inanimate and animate entities within it, even if they're small scale and not understood to be sentient. So how do we think about what it is…

ANNIE DWYER: What's an entity, right?

SARA GOERING: …what it is to have moral status. And then thinking about writing along this line, in praise of something that appears to be trivial or appears not to have moral status…but maybe, when you start thinking about it more thoroughly, as you try to praise the things that are part of that, you might start to recognize and think through a broader sense of what moral status is or could be or what that would mean to say that a tree has moral status in its own right. Not just indirectly because it's instrumental in the whole ecosystem, but in its own right. That's a fascinating direction to go, too. They're not just wrestling with the questions of moral status within the context of the class, but also thinking, “Well, how could we use this framing to get people to think outside of the box on what they typically take moral status to be in order to….”

ANNIE DWYER: Absolutely. Yeah.

SARA GOERING: Yeah. Right. Right. And explore that.

ANNIE DWYER: Yeah, so the philosophical question connects up with questions about rhetoric, about writing. Yeah. Oh, these are incredible projects. You've said a couple of things, in terms of talking about philosophical concepts that you were exploring in the class about relationship, about interrelationship, and it got me thinking about collaboration. And of course, you were developing this course and received a fellowship that was a joint fellowship with Michael Blake as part of the second iteration of the Mellon grant, which was focused on collaborative work and was trying to establish a model of funding collaborative pairs rather than individuals. I'm wondering if you could speak a little more to just the process of developing this course in collaboration with Michael. How did that process work, and what do you think it yielded?

SARA GOERING: That's a good question. Let me start this way. Philosophers still primarily work alone in the context of typical philosophical work. It’s less fun and it's less fruitful in terms of the range of ideas that you can bring to something. So working with Michael on developing this and thinking about different public-facing philosophical pieces that we could use. There are just things that he's aware of that…we're all fed a firehose of information and news coming at us and there's no way that we'll ever be aware of all the things that would be fantastic within a course.

Working with him is a way to double my eyes or my awareness of what's out there. And also to think beyond that my typical way of looking at things, which has a feminist relational bent to it always…to think, “OK, there might be other pieces that I would want to bring in because not everybody coming to the class will have the same kind of orientation that I do.” I still love to–I was going to say include, but that's not quite accurate. That's the base of my course because I think this is a better way to think about ethics, but to have some different kinds of pieces out there as well is helpful. And Michael was fun to work with on this.

We trade the course pack and forth. I'll teach it, and the next time it's offered, he teaches it, and then back to me. That means that we can keep building in a stair-step manner on each other's syllabi…

ANNIE DWYER: Oh, that’s great.

SARA GOERING: …because each of us changes it a little bit. Hopefully, in the next iteration, he'll find new and more inventive ways to do public-facing work within the context of the course.

ANNIE DWYER: Yeah. Yeah. I think that's so helpful. And that's another way in which the “Ethics Matters” course is exemplary–it's not a one-off course that integrates some public-facing component, but it is a core part of the curriculum that's taught. Is it almost every year?

SAR GOERING: Now, I have to think about this. I think we teach it every other year. And then the “Justice Matters” course happens every other year.

ANNIE DWYER: OK. Every other year. At the very least, it's taught every other year by two people. So I think it leads to a curricular transformation that goes beyond the sort of one-off course, right? I don't know if you have any thoughts about that: how to facilitate that, how to integrate public scholarship into graduate training in a way that is more sustainable and integral. This course is such a great example of it, so I think if you had insights coming from the experience of developing it with Michael, that would be so useful for folks.

SARA GOERING: Yeah. I still need to sit more, now that I'm through the course, and think about what could be done better, and then how to take some of the things that I tried in this iteration of the course into my typical philosophy seminar for grad students. Our department has branded ourselves as committed to engaged philosophy, so, regardless of the area, we're very engaged with ongoing matters of interest in the public–neurotechnology, immigration, climate change, all of these huge issues for our world right now–trying to make sure that philosophy and ethics is integrated into the work that we do to try to address those things.

But, of course, we're also trying to train philosophy grad students to be ready to write dissertations, and if the dissertation is still a more traditional format, which is five chapters, more like a book, then we have to think: “How do we incentivize the more public-facing or shorter and more public-directed work, like a blog or an op-ed or podcast or video, for that matter?” Our students are creative about this, but we need to figure out ways to embed it within our curriculum so that it's a more regularized part of what we're teaching them to do. We're still working on that.

ANNIE DWYER: I think it's a process. This course is a great example of it, but certainly, there's so many different ways that we can think through how to recognize and valorize work that students are often doing in an extracurricular way.

SARA GOERING: Yeah. One of the things the philosophy department does…we have a little fund, a little pot of money from a donor and we award Rader Awards in the summer for innovative philosophical projects.

ANNIE DWYER: Oh, that's fantastic.

SARA GOERING: So…“Take some time out from when you're not teaching, typically–or if you're not teaching, or just in the half of the summer when you're not–to do some innovative project that expands the boundaries of what you would otherwise be doing.” One of our past students, Stone Addington, put together a podcast to talk about philosophical issues, and now works for Humanities Washington and has this non-academic career focused on public-facing humanities. That little pot of money can spark new ideas as well. But that's, of course, separate from the typical curriculum. So we still have to work on that level of integration.

ANNIE DWYER: Right. Right. And I think a kind of bookend approach can be really useful. I think graduate students are so resourceful, so it oftentimes doesn't take a lot of support in order to sort of, like you said, just kind of spark something that will end up being very generative for them down the road. Yeah.

SARA GOERING: One of the students from the winter was coming from Public Health Genetics and was so frustrated with online public intellectuals who are loud, bombastic talking voices about issues that they are not trained to know about. This is what she wanted to do: use their venue and their model to push back against them. So she worked up a draft version and she filmed herself doing it–a short video about trust in experts and what trust means. She used some resources from the Center for the Informed Public, but also, went through pieces that we have, say, Annette Baier's piece about trust and distrust, to say, “Here's what trust is. Here's a problem. Let me give you an example of this online.” Her idea was that if she is face-right-in-the-screen and as provocative as they are, then she might get the hits the same way that they do, using their tools against them.

ANNIE DWYER: Oh, that's fantastic. That's a project that's also questioning what public scholarship is and should look like and what are the ethics of public-facing work. It's thinking in a number of different ways. I love that.

SARA GOERING: It's fun as an instructor. This was my first time looking at final products like that. It's out of my realm of what I normally look at and try to evaluate and give comments on. But, of course, you can see things that work and then you can see things where, as a viewer, you think, “Oh, that needed to go by more quickly, or that went by too quickly.” I realized that we're all consumers of public information. We do have some awareness of what's effective and what's not, even if I'm not trained in that area. It was great to be able to stretch in that way and see what she was working on producing.

ANNIE DWYER: Absolutely. What you just said makes me want to ask a question about evaluation and if you have any more general thoughts on how one goes about evaluating public-facing work or publicly-engaged scholarship, especially in a graduate classroom, and especially in an interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary graduate classroom. What are some of the considerations or ways that you went about that difficult task?

SARA GOERING: That's a good question. I brought the same tools that I would use for evaluating philosophical papers, but in this different environment: “Is it clear what you're trying to get across?

Is the main thesis, even if it's not ever referred to in that way–it's implied in the video–is that clear? Is it reiterated, started at the beginning and reiterated again at the end? Do you, as you're going through, think about how there might be other ways of viewing this thing?”

A typical philosophical paper has to involve this self-identified objection section and a response to that, which is part of recognizing the limitations of your view. There are ways to do that within the context of even a quick video like this. Or do you, if you're doing the video for social workers, show references and perspectives that might be different from the one that you're talking about so that you could be inclusive of a variety of perspectives, even if you are arguing for a particular view? I felt like they transfer; it's just in a different medium.

ANNIE DWYER: Yeah. That's really interesting. It's almost like you're teaching philosophical thinking while allowing for different generic manifestations of that. Very cool. Well, on a closing note, do you have any advice for other professors who are thinking about doing publicly-engaged courses, or even just aspiring public philosophers?

SARA GOERING: Yeah. Maybe two things. We'll see if I remember the second when I'm through with the first. The first thing I would say is that jumping in and trusting students who are creative and know way more than I do about how to put together a great video or about what makes for a lively and provocative curriculum, for that matter, curriculum for writing, in this case…sometimes, I would worry “Well, if I haven't done my own podcast or I haven't done my own video, I'm not going to be in a position to help them.”

But it turns out that students have a lot of these skills already on their own and want the freedom to be able to do that with support from you about the kinds of things or some of the content that can go in there. Trusting them and also reiterating that I do want these things. I'm not just offering it as a “Maybe, if anybody's creative you can make this,” but saying “I would love to see this.” Things can have more impact than they do if we're just writing an academic paper, in many cases. So encouraging them to think through that possibility and then supporting them along the way. They have a lot of the skills that I don't have. So trust in the students would be one thing.

In terms of doing the public philosophy, it does open you up. I haven't had the experience yet of being completely trolled–I know that it can also open people up to horrible responses. But seeing the impact in a very immediate way is also rewarding for doing that kind of work. It's hard. It looks easy. If you have a short, punchy piece, it looks like, “Well, it shouldn't have taken you that long.” But again, to condense it down takes a lot of work, and to be true to what you're trying to say without oversimplifying is difficult. But it becomes the kind of thing you can send to relatives that’ll read it. You can put it out there in the world and you'll get responses from people who say how much they value it or appreciate that work. And that's something that doesn't happen often in our academic circles, to get that kind of positive feedback.

We just hosted George Yancey–who is a fantastic public philosopher–last weekend. As he writes about in his book, *Backlash*, which was about the response to his post in *The New York Times*, "Dear White America," it's awful and it's threatening, and public philosophy also has that risk because you've put yourself out there in that way. He has taken a lot personally, but he has created and helped create this important conversation. In that way, you can see the impact, even though I feel awful for him for the kind of response that he's gotten from some parts of society.

ANNIE DWYER: Yeah. Well, I think that's so useful for students, though, to just highlight both the risks and the rewards. And what you said about trusting that they have the skills and knowledge to do really impactful work is also something that is so useful. Well, thank you so much for talking with me today, Sara.

SARA GOERING: Sure. Thank you for inviting me.

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ANNIE DWYER: This episode of *Going Public* was made possible with help from the University of Washington’s Simpson Center for the Humanities staff, particularly, C. R. Grimmer, who is also the Communications Manager at the Simpson Center; our sound editor, Oliver Gordon; and of course, support from The Mellon Foundation. The Mellon initiative at the Simpson Center, *Reimagining the Humanities PhD and Reaching New Publics: Catalyzing Collaboration* was led by Kathleen Woodward, Director of the Mellon initiative, Director of the Simpson Center, and UW Professor of English; Rachel Arteaga, Assistant Director of the Simpson Center and Associate Program Director of the Mellon initiative, and myself, Annie Dwyer, Assistant Program Director of the Mellon initiative. We hope you check out additional episodes of *Going Public* on our website at [www.simpsoncenter.org/goingpublic](http://www.simpsoncenter.org/goingpublic) and wherever you get your podcasts.