

# **Which Role Should Philosophy of Science Play in the Public Discourse?**

**:: Stefano Canali and Carlo Martini**

## **Abstract**

This feature reports the content and result of one of the World Café sessions held at the Logic and Philosophy of Science conference (12<sup>th</sup> March 2025), which focused on the role that philosophy of science is playing and could and should play in the public arena.

## **Keywords**

Public Philosophy; Science Communication; Public Understanding of Science

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At the Logic and Philosophy of Science event held in Milan, the philosophy researchers gathered at the conference discussed the topic during a double World Café session. Early-career scholars, postdocs, and faculty members engaged in an open conversation about the role that philosophy of science is playing and could and should play in the public arena. This World Café session was elicited by the recognition that several philosophers play the role of public intellectuals in many European countries, including Italy, and are asked to comment on several timely issues in the general media. Yet most of the time it remains unclear what kind of expertise philosophers bring to the public discourse and most of the time none of the philosophers who currently engage with the public discourse are philosophers of science. At the same time it seems to us that philosophers of science have expertise that can be helpful to many areas of the public discourse, including issues such as climate change, technology development, public health crises, mis- and disinformation, gender issues, and more. We thus wanted to use some time during the Logic and Philosophy of Science meeting to discuss these issues and collect insights from participants, and we did so with a number of conversations that spanned a wide range of topics we illustrate below.

A first topic of discussion had to do with the cultural context of public discussions to which philosophy of science can contribute. Many of the participants said that the cultural context in countries such as Italy comes with what can

be considered prejudices or at least implicit assumptions on what philosophy is and what counts as philosophical expertise. The image of the philosopher seems to be still very much equated to Continental and Post-modern ideas, where the philosopher is most often an intellectual that is versed in literary studies and the history of ideas. This is in stark contrast to contemporary philosophy in general and philosophy of science, whose experts are rather interested in the role of science in society. At the same time the fact that philosophers – even if a more traditional type of philosophers – are often called to comment on current affairs and in the public discourse was considered generally positive and a starting point for more public engagement from philosophers of science. Moreover, the increasingly specialist nature of philosophy of science – we are increasingly experts in the philosophy of a specific discipline, like medicine, economics, or physics, rather than philosophy of science tout court – was mentioned as a possible obstacle for public engagement, as something that does not make it easier for the media to receive our expertise.

A series of considerations focused on when and how philosophy of science should engage in the public discourse. Public engagement may be considered among our responsibilities but can be very time-consuming and should probably require acquiring new skills for the task. In this direction, many commented on the fact that this is most often an activity that won't get recognition and consideration in the CV

of philosophers of science or amongst colleagues. Indeed the increasing visibility that may come with public engagement might be seen as a problem by colleagues and its results can be difficult to measure and qualify. The problem is that, while we have tools to measure the outcomes and quality of research and teaching we don't have something similar for public engagement.

Several participants to the World Café session discussed the topics where philosophy of science expertise would be important and to which ends engagement on these issues should point towards. There are several topics that are central to the public discourse on which philosophers could discuss as experts, at the same level as other scholars and scientists. And yet media discussions often take place at a time scale that makes it difficult to philosopher of science to engage – many participants mentioned the pandemic as a clear example in this direction, where philosophy of science expertise could have contributed to better understand several issues (e.g. the role of models, the implications of fast science, private-public interests in medicine, etc.) but the media cycle was very fast and changing.

We concluded this session with a set of critical remarks but also a range of suggestions and directions where we could go as philosophers of science contribute to public debates. Our role is changing and perhaps should change – in the direction of better informing the public and colleagues on the nature of scientific knowledge, its capacity and limitations, and the

role it can and should play in our societies.

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