



## TRANSCRIPT

### *Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa*

#### **2023 Lebowitz Prize: A Discussion on the “Norms of Attention” by Two Philosophers**

This special episode of Key Conversations is joined by Dr. Kristie Dotson, the University Diversity and Social Transformation Professor at the University of Michigan, and Dr. Susanna Siegel, the Edgar Pierce Professor of Philosophy at Harvard University. Each year, the Lebowitz Prize is presented to a pair of philosophers who hold contrasting views of an important philosophical question that is of current interest both to the field and to an educated public audience. The professors discuss the topic for the 2023 Lebowitz Prize, which is the "Norms of Attention".

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Fred Lawrence: This podcast episode was generously funded by two anonymous donors. If you would like to support the podcast in similar ways, please contact Hadley Kelly at [hkelly@pbk.org](mailto:hkelly@pbk.org).

Thanks for listening. Hello and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. Since 2018, we have welcomed leading thinkers, visionaries, and artists to our podcast. These individuals have shaped our collective understanding of some of today's most pressing and consequential matters, in addition to sharing stories with us about their scholarly and personal journeys. Many of our guests are Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars who travel the country to our Phi Beta Kappa chapters where they spend two days on campus and present free public lectures. We invite you to attend. For more information about Visiting Scholars' lectures, please visit [pbk.org](http://pbk.org).

Today it is my pleasure to welcome two remarkable philosophers to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa, Dr. Kristie Dotson and Dr. Susanna Siegel. Kristie Dotson is

University Diversity and Social Transformation Professor at the University of Michigan, and Susanna Siegel is the Edgar Pierce Professor of Philosophy at Harvard University. These two scholars are the 2023 recipients of the Lebowitz Prize for Philosophical Achievement and Contribution, awarded by the Phi Beta Kappa Society in conjunction with the American Philosophical Association, the APA, for recognition for their outstanding achievement in the field of philosophy. Each year, the Lebowitz Prize is presented to a pair of highly regarded philosophers who hold contrasting views of an important philosophical question. Our 2023 winners topic is "Norms of Attention", which they presented at the 2024 APA Central Division meeting in New Orleans in February. We're delighted to be with them today to talk about their respective viewpoints on this topic. Welcome, professors.

Susanna Siegel: Thank you, Fred. Thanks for having me.

Kristie Dotson: Thank you.

Fred Lawrence: Congratulations, first, on winning the Lebowitz Prize. We think of the Lebowitz Prize as being particularly significant for two reasons. One, of course, it's a recognition of excellence in philosophical achievement and recognizing excellence in the liberal arts and sciences, as core to the mission of Phi Beta Kappa has been for the 250 years that we've existed. But I think the Lebowitz Prize is significant for another reason. It's not a single winner. It's presented to two people, two people taking contrasting views on an important topic or inquiry. It's a model of respectful disagreement, I might even say collaborative disagreement, which I dare say has never been more important than it is today. Before we turn to our topic on which you received the Lebowitz Prize, I do want to take a moment to talk a little bit about your personal journeys that brought you to the field of philosophy and to the work that you've been engaged in. So Kristie, let me start with you. Did there come a moment when you said to yourself, "If I can swing this, if I can make a living doing this, I want to be a philosopher?"

Kristie Dotson: That's a really good question. I want to say yes, I think that we make it to this point, but I think of philosophy as an art and anyone who pursues an art must at some point wish that they could make a living at it, right? Can I make a living at this thing that I have come to realize that I love? I think maybe I've always loved it, but I don't think I always knew it was philosophy. So I don't come up through the philosophy channels. I didn't have a philosophy undergraduate degree. My first masters is not in philosophy. It was in my master's training in literary theory, where it became apparent to me that what I really liked was the philosophy part, I suppose, the theory part, I should say, and was given advice to go towards philosophy. So I ended up in professional philosophy, maybe with a great number of other tools and ways of thinking about the world, but also about theory production. Before I got to a professional philosophy training with its particular methods and approaches, I had that moment thinking, "Well, I love this theoretical art. Wouldn't it be great if I could make a living at it?"

Fred Lawrence: My daughter is a fiction writer. She had a mentor who told them early on, she and her fellow MFA students, "If there's anything else you can imagine yourself doing, then go do it. If there's nothing else you can imagine doing, then you're meant to be a fiction writer." I don't know if that's quite fair, but is that a little bit true of the art of philosophy, do you think?

Kristie Dotson: I believe I've given that very same advice. I don't know if it's fair though, but I have given it just to cover my own sense of the risk of this and to communicate that. But we were just recently at a conference and you'd be surprised how many people were just like, "It's this or nothing," and I wish them the best as I wished myself the best when I was on that same path.

Fred Lawrence: On that same path. So Susanna, what was your path? What was your route to this point in your career?

Susanna Siegel: Mine was a little different in that when I was a child, I was obsessed with Lewis Carroll and Alice in Wonderland and Logic Puzzles, and so I think even before I knew what the word philosophy meant, and of course it's a hard word to know what it does mean ever let alone as a child, I was sure I wanted to be one. As I got a little older, a little older as a child, I thought that philosophy was the study of absurdity because I had read about this thing in the Logic Puzzles book that I somehow found, that I heard this thing, *reductio ad absurdum*, and I'm like, "Wow, you could just study absurdity your whole life. That sounds pretty fun." So it was already in my mind long before I knew what it was. And I think that's the thing that can happen to people, because I actually noticed with my daughter, she knew she wanted to play the violin before she had ever heard the violin.

She knew what it was, and she was like, "That's me." So it is possible to have these identifications that are very strong and actually motivating, but they're not exactly empirical, they're more top down, you get an idea. But actually, here I am. So I entered college as a philosophy major, though I also studied a lot of social theory, and I did go through a time of indecision and ambivalence about whether it would be something more politically engaged, which in retrospect, I had really zero skills for at the time. So I'm glad I didn't do that, probably would've been a terrible community organizer as a late teen. But it ended up being philosophy and I'm happy it did.

Fred Lawrence: So I suppose that if I'd taken that little girl reading Lewis Carroll aside and said, "You're going to be a philosophy professor when you grow up," she would've said, "That checks out. That sounds like something..."

Susanna Siegel: Yeah, I would've been like, "Yeah, I know. What are you telling me for? I told you that that's only the way." That's what I would've said. I was a little sassy.

Fred Lawrence: So Kristie, same, same question. When you were a little girl, if I'd taken the seven or 8-year-old version of you aside and said, "You'll be a philosophy professor someday," what would that little girl have said?

Kristie Dotson: What is that?

Fred Lawrence: What is that? Yeah.

Kristie Dotson: I mean, that's what I would've said, "What is that? What's that question?" I don't think... I mean, some of my work orbits around the difficulty of us figuring out the answer to that question. Maybe if you explained to me further what it was, I'd have been like, "Yeah, that sounds great." I didn't have that correlation in my spirit.

Fred Lawrence: So you are both engaged in epistemology, the branch of philosophy that deals with knowledge. How do we know what we know? What's the difference between a belief and an opinion? How do we justify the statement that we say all the time, "I believe this to be true," what does that statement mean? How do we justify that? Your project, as I understand it, and what excited me so much when it came in, is that it focuses on what do we recognize as being worth recognizing? If we're conscious of being conscious, what are we actually conscious of? Maybe a homelier version of the task is that now famous story, I think a lot of people first came to know of it when David Foster Wallace used it in his commencement address at Kenyon in 2005, the story of the two fish swimming in the water.

An older fish comes by in the other direction and says, "Morning, you two. How's the water?" And the two young fish look at each other and say, "What's water?" Wallace entitled that address, This is Water. So how do we go about deciding what the norms are that do or don't cause the fish to pay attention to the water? What is your account of what it means to pay attention, to be aware of what we're aware of? Susanna, let me start with you this time.

Susanna Siegel: We have these two very difficult concepts in the title of our topic, Norms and Attention, and so it's a good thing we only have one word in between them or else we'd have way too much to explain. Both of these concepts are incredibly complicated because there are so many varieties of each thing. There's a lot of varieties of attention and then there's all sorts of things people can mean when they talk about norms. When you have a situation like this, when you have a lot of things that go under one label, there's always a philosopher's question about that, which is, "Are these the same thing and it's not really an accident that we use the same word for all of them, or are they just different things?" And really we need to ditch the vocabulary and have something more specific if we want to get in deeply to what we're actually talking about.

But philosophers and especially philosophers who work in ethics or epistemology are actually interested in something pretty different when they talk about norms, which is

not so much what pressures actually guide people, but instead, what pressures should guide people? So what should you attend to? And that of course could come apart from the social norms in a specific place in this more sociological or descriptive sense. And one of the really wonderful things about the exchange we've had, from my point of view, and one of the things I'm really pleased about and I'm actually grateful to everybody for giving us the opportunity to do is we decided that, like a podcast where you're talking to one another but there is an audience, we thought we wanted to have an exchange of letters. So we have done something we call epistolary philosophy, and the more we talked about it and thought about it and did it, the more we thought, "Gosh, this is actually an interesting genre. This is an interesting form," because the first novels were epistolary.

*Dangerous Liaisons*, this great movie with John Malkovich, but in the 18th century when it was a novel in France, it was all done by letters. And of course that's a well-known genre now where there isn't a single narrator coordinating things, but there are just people writing letters to one another, and we decided we would do that, we would do that. It seems like in the spirit of the Lebowitz Prize where people are talking back and forth, and the thing that was so distinctive about it really interacted with the topic itself of norms of attention, both norms in both senses. And it interacted that way because here we were writing to one another because we agreed to submit our proposal for this prize together because we like talking to one another. And when I thought about what letters do, especially when they're not letters... It's like the novelist, Bram Stoker, when he wrote *Dracula*, he was making up all these characters.

He's making up Van Helsing, he's making up all of the people who get their blood sucked and so on, and then he was picturing their personas and he was picturing what they would say, and he was writing letters in their voice from various scenarios. But we're not doing that, we're us. We are us. We are writing to one another. So it's like, I want to know what Kristie thinks about this, and I wonder how she reacts to what I might think about it. And so there was really initiative coming from within the letter writers and I think it's very, very special. And the more we thought about it, we thought, "Well, this could be a genre of philosophy," because it's sort of... I wouldn't say it exactly splits the difference between the desire to talk to one another where we are the main addressee and interlocutor versus when you write a treatise, you're like, "I'm writing for posterity. I'm writing for anyone who wants to read this."

Fred Lawrence: Very 19th century like really, in terms of the tradition of the great correspondences, and it's never been clear to me whether the figures, particularly if they were relatively well known at the time of the correspondence, had some sense that this would be published.

Kristie Dotson: I think the interesting thing about the letters is Susanna has a beautifully dialogic model that she's done in the past, which is short burst here with an interlocutor to go

back and forth instead of us having these big blocks where we just preach at the sun and somebody overhears it and responds. So she already had this dialogic model. I'm actually working on a book of philosophical letters, probably more in the Bram Stoker's position, but actually these are people who've either been alive or are alive now, and I had this sense that if we're going to talk about norms of attention, and we are in the way that we're going to do it, we should probably stick with the things that we know about this dialogical structure that actually the mode of address, the Dear Susanna, the Dear Kristie, the invoking of a relationship that is longstanding, actually has an influence on what we're paying attention to.

So in talking about norms of attention, we choose this format that brings the discussion not just on the page but off of it, that actually what we're going to pick up on is going to be as much part of this process of talking about norms of attention as about our positions on norms of attention. So starting here, we did it this way not just for funsies, although it was a lot of fun, but also for the topic, the topic of norms of attention, that realizing that it's actually... It may be tied to what we're attending to and what pressures we have, but it's also tied to who we're talking to. It's also tied to our relationships to each other. I think it's a great place to start with this epistolary form, what it did for the topic and why I think the split of your position versus mine is a little harder to do when the form itself is actually meant to actually uncover something about norms of attention.

Fred Lawrence: Susanna, you said that you found Kristie to be an extraordinarily valuable interlocutor, and I took that to be at least in part about helping you understand your own position. Are there examples in the letter exchange where it's not just that your idea became crystallized in a way or that it sharpened it in a way, but you thought, "Actually, I think I've got this one wrong. I think now that I've read this, I need to think about this a different way"?

Susanna Siegel: Well, in *The Kansas City Star* scenario, which we had picked as our subject matter, let's talk about norms of attention with respect to this retrospective from 2020. So what they did is they took six different topics for 140 years, *The Kansas City Star*, at some points it was *The Kansas City Star Times* because there was a morning times and an evening star, there was morning and an evening newspaper back in the day. But this newspaper, they really devoted an extraordinary amount of resources going into their archives, really just using reporters, I mean people who would otherwise be covering things happening right now. And at a time when newspapers are strapped for resources, it is an amazing thing to do, that they thought it was important to wring their hands about the past and show something about what they had done.

A lot of newspapers in 2020 issued these apologies, but only *The Kansas City Star* had this thing that could just as well be part of some thesis in US history as well. And that's why I was taken with it, partly it's just interesting. I mean, it's interesting to see, they

had all these comparisons between their coverage and a certain scenario in 1922, they had one on crime, which we talked about, but they had these other five topics of very long pieces on the 1977 flood, on school desegregation, of course, you have to think of Brown versus Board of Education, and sports and culture and all sorts of coverage that they were talking about, the civil rights movement. So I was just interested, I mean, I was as interested as I would be in... As anybody should have been, and that's why they wrote it, of what we were being shown about the coverage and the fact that they were showing it to us.

Now, the fact that it was an apology, I hadn't really thought that much about it before was the status of it as an apology, just exactly what was odd about the apologies. It's odd to have the very entity that did it apologize for it because you never quite believe them. I mean, look, you did this for 140 years and it's not like it's all that, and it hasn't really gotten better, and now suddenly you're saying this. Now of course it's an institution, so there's different people and staffed differently and all that, but even so, they're certainly speaking from within the company and they start their whole apology, the editor Mike Fannon starts by saying... And *Kansas City Star*, you have to know, has a long history of being actually very powerful at accountability journalism in certain specific other contexts and they're proud of that.

It's part of the history that they have. That's their self-conception of themselves as a newspaper is like, "We know how to do accountability journalism." And they say, "Well, we're holding a very powerful actor to account, it just happens to be ourselves." And so then they slapped the word apology on it as a lot of people were apologizing in much less substantive ways. So I think I fell into assuming when I read this, that here they are showing us what they did and then they're apologizing for it, and I jumped to the conclusion that what they say they did is what they're apologizing for. But as we talked back and forth, it really became clear that this distinction between how stories, of how attention is directed and why stories, two aspects of the descriptive part of norms of attention that it was missing.

I mean, if you murdered someone, if you assaulted somebody and you're like, "Well, the way I did it was I got the knife and I grabbed them in the dark, I carjacked," whatever it was, you just said how you did it, there's something missing if you don't say why you did it. Why did it seem like the thing to do? How could one be the same person who did this now, are they really as distant as they are from it before? And a convincing apology has to be specific enough to let the addressee know that they understand what was done, but also somehow credible and enough that you believe that they really are distant from it. So there's two pitfalls. There's a pitfall of are you really distant from it? And then there's a pitfall of do you really even understand what you did?

And what came out in our discussion was that *The Kansas City Star* was really just focused on exposing themselves as having done it, which I think it was an important thing to do. And actually we might disagree, but what we might disagree about is what was the value of it, given that it isn't really completely believable that it would be different. But I still think it's very, very important that they did it. But yeah, they didn't say why and they didn't say why they did it. No. I mean, they are a newspaper, and so they're doing things in the style of a newspaper. It was important to them to say, "Let us take all of our resources and all of our tone, all of our skill as archivists, all of our skill at storytelling, all of our skill as accountability reporters, and just write as we would if we were doing that."

And that's what a newspaper would do if they were writing accountability for someone else. They wouldn't be talking about why you did it. Walter Lippmann said, "What you should do if you're producing this sort of journalism in this "objective way" is you absolutely don't talk about motives," because who knows? Who knows what the motives are? What you do is you say everything surrounding it. So they did it in that style, and I understand why they did it that way, but there's a little bit of a tension between talking about what they did and then calling it an apology. Or it is, as Kristie said right off the bat, an odd apology. So this was a side thing in the letters, but it became really the main theme as we went back and forth.

Kristie Dotson: For some of the norms of attention differences between us, on the one hand, we have this retrospective period. Who called it retrospective, period. 140 years, here's coverage that wasn't so good on our side. Here's some much better coverage in Black newspapers, for example, which is amazing. As a pedagogical tool, you're like, "Thank you for this. Thank you. Leave the apology out, because you are now directing attention a different way. You're not actually now talking about what you did, you're now talking about something else that requires something else. And I was talking to my daddy about this and he was like, "Now give me an example." I'm like, "Dad, all right, so you're sitting here," it was in a coffee shop. "You're sitting here in this open coffee shop. There's a whole line of people on one side, someone jumps the curve, hits you with the car.

They're going so fast, but they only hit you and they miss everybody else. They get out of the car and say, 'I'm sorry, I was going too fast.' That's it." They're like, "This is how it happened. I was going too fast. I jumped the curve. I hit you. I apologized to everybody." The people who didn't get hit may feel a sigh of relief, like, "Whew. They were just going too fast." But the person who got hit by the car, that is an insufficient apology. It's insufficient. It directs attention in strange ways. It's almost as if you don't have any obligation that you actually didn't need to not hit me, rather, you just needed not to go that fast. Absurd. And it does direct attention, right? It doesn't just perform inadequate or very good journalism, and actually, I think it violates norms of attention around this apology.



I'm like, it's directing attention in strange ways and the person who's cracking on the ground, other people were like, "Well, you know what? I thought it was... You've got to give him some credit for trying to apologize." My life has now been radically changed for how this has worked. And this apology doesn't account for that. I do think that again, as a retrospective without the apology, we're looking at good journalism. With the apology, we're looking at a further directed attention that's violating, I'm going to claim some norms. But the only way to see that I think is to make them move away from the how story, which I think you're absolutely right, Susanna. Perfectly reasonable around the hows of certain types of journalism, not at all reasonable about the why.

Susanna Siegel: Yeah, I think that's totally right. See, I've got that crown of light bulbs. I've got that crown of light bulbs. I think that's right.

Fred Lawrence: So the last question for each of you is going to a higher level of abstraction from the norms of attention project itself, and that is the ongoing nature of the Lebowitz Prize in your lives. Is epistolary philosophy now the new method? Do you feel a desire to continue to engage in this kind of an approach going forward? Or is this just for the prize and the project is completed?

Kristie Dotson: Oh, I'll start. I mean, we are ringing the bell on epistolary philosophy. We've been telling everybody, "You should try this, you should do this. This is how we should do this." But you know, my engagement with Susanna on this, it wasn't... All I hear in that apology is the problem. I did not hear the side of the how of the journalistic side. I hear it now. I hear, "Okay, retrospective, that's how it should be done, maybe how it could be done without these kinds of problems." I didn't hear that. My attention wasn't captured. It just went straight to who you were apologizing to and for why, not what this whole thing was doing. So my account gets far more nuanced in our discussion here between us. I'm not necessarily going to move on from that apology, but I will and I will see and appreciate far greater the retrospective, what it does to direct attention and why and how. The good news is that we talk about things that have a lot of things you can say about it without any of us having to be absolutely wrong. But we are directing attention, and what this epistolary form does is keep a record of how we are directing attention.

Susanna Siegel: It does. And that's very, very powerful because just as one of the things that *The Star* does is it says, "Here's this episode, here's how we reported it. Here's how the *Kansas City Call*, a Black newspaper writing at the same time, covered it." And then you just see that contrast and you say, "Okay, right. We need enormous attention." We need some theoretical apparatus to help us analyze why one is better than the other? How come you only know what... What even happened? What even is going on? You just don't find that out from *The Kansas City Star*, but you don't know you don't find it out until you see the *Kansas City Call*. But with the letters, it's a structurally similar thing without the stark inadequacy of one relative to the other. It's just that you could see

just how deep and detailed and how much depth there is to a topic by seeing what people can make of it and what they see and what they don't see without that amounting to an objection or something. There's absolutely something missing.

And it could be a subtle thing, but once you see it, you realize, oh, this is actually a very big thing. And you can get that, and this is why people love philosophy, because you can get that if you read five articles and then synthesize them by yourself or if you're lucky with some friends or with some students in a seminar. But you could actually also do it in conversation. You could do it in conversation by surfacing these things. And we sensed, I think we must have both intuited, we didn't go into this thinking it was going to be epistolary. I knew that Kristie was working on her amazing book of letters. So it's natural to think once I said, "Oh, let's do it little bit by bit," and then like, "Hey, let's make them letters," because I know Kristie's into letters. I had read some of these letters and they're amazing. And I'm like, "Yeah, let's do letters."

But yes, our sixth sense told us this would be a good way to surface it, but I think it's more like that. And so sorry to disappoint the people who are looking for a disagreement. What is the thing such that you say, "Yes" and she says, "No"? It didn't quite come out like that. But in a way, it was all the better to illustrate what we're even talking about.

Fred Lawrence: The whole idea of a letter correspondence is about the betweenness and it is about the ongoing dialogue. There's a reason that there are certain authors whose letters are still in the process of being published. I'm thinking of this ongoing project of publishing the complete letters of Henry James, which I think has got years and years ahead of it, and there are volumes and volumes passed, but one gains enormously by seeing what happened when his attention was drawn to the page and what he was going to write and what he wasn't going to write, and that's in response to another, and it allows us to be part of that ongoing conversation. So I'm delighted that the Lebowitz Prize gave you the impetus to, I'm not going to say to conduct, I'm going to say to begin to conduct this epistolary exchange, and I'm delighted that we were able to share that with you today on Key Connections with Phi Beta Kappa. Thanks so much for joining me today.

Susanna Siegel: Thank you, Fred.

Kristie Dotson: Thank you. Thank you.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast is produced by Phantom Center Media and Entertainment. Kojin Tashiro is lead producer and mixed this episode. Michelle Baker is editor and co-producer, and Hadley Kelly is the Phi Beta Kappa producer on the show. Our theme song is Back to Back by Yan Perchuk. To learn more about the work of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and our Visiting Scholar program, please visit [pbk.org](http://pbk.org). Thanks for listening, I'm Fred Lawrence. Until next time.

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