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Philosophically keen

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Public radio is a long way away from Hollywood, but even there, a weekly show featuring two Stanford philosophy profs talking about such things as whether suicide is ever justified and the nature of beauty must've been a hard sell.

But "Philosophy Talk" is winning a solid audience of people who appreciate its slogan: "The show that questions everything . . . except your intelligence."

"The reason it seems unlikely is partly the fault of the media consistently underestimating their audiences," says co-host Kenneth Taylor, chairman of Stanford University's philosophy department. "People want more light and less heat, more reflection and more substance. Our target audience is reasonably thoughtful, reflective people, a segment that's been underserved by most media."

Although the program is still a ways away from national syndication, its listeners are a passionate lot, Taylor says -- www.philosophytalk.org gets 25,000 hits a month from a hundred nations.

Oregon Public Broadcasting was one of the first public radio stations to broadcast the show and remains a stalwart supporter. Taylor and co-host John Perry, a Stanford University professor whose idea "Philosophy Talk" originally was, will be in Portland this week for two shows. One is part of the annual meeting of the American Philosophical Association's Pacific Division, the other is a taping session Friday night before a live audience at OPB's Southwest Portland studios.

The 100 or so tickets went quickly, but Friday's session also will be videotaped for On Demand on Comcast Digital Cable. "Philosophy Talk" airs at 8 p.m. Thursdays on KOPB (91.5 FM), though there's no word yet when the Portland show will run. The phone-in guest on Friday's taping will be Elizabeth Kiss, director of the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University.

"Our culture misses the point of philosophy and thinks that it's abstract, irrelevant to everyday life, too hard for most folks to fathom," Taylor says. "Philosophy, when done right, can be hard, really hard, but it's also a great deal of fun and deeply satisfying. There aren't many places in our society for free thought unconstrained and unmotivated by anything but intellectual curiosity."

"But 'Philosophy Talk' is unlikely in one way," he adds, "because philosophy is a long conversation with a beginning, middle and end, and radio is a medium designed for people to dip in and dip out. So John and I have had to train ourselves to always talk right to the point and to have the story arc always in mind and give lots of landmarks for listeners who may be tuning in without having heard the beginning."

Then there's the academic problem: Taylor and Perry have broken themselves of the academic's desire to cover all possible intellectual aspects of a subject, which reads as equivocation or meandering on the radio, but their weekly guests are unlikely to have logged much time behind a microphone.

"Most academics are professional thinkers," Taylor says. "They're not ready-made for a radio program because they want to lay all the groundwork before coming to a point. And they tend to lecture, so we've had to develop code words. When you hear one of us say, 'So, cut to the chase,' that means 'quit lecturing.' "