

Polymaking Philosophers

Since at least the time of Socrates, philosophers have been trying both to understand the world and to change it. Although Socrates himself was executed for his services as "gadfly" and questioning conscience of the state, quite a few philosophers through the subsequent centuries (Leibniz, Hume, Bentham, Mill) distinguished themselves in political and diplomatic posts or exercised considerable influence as social and legal reformers.

In this century philosophy has been increasingly accused of arid abstraction, of occupying itself exclusively with technical linguistic puzzles that have no bearing on large and enduring human concerns. Thus it has been charged that philosophers no longer have any special contribution to make to the governing of just states. But philosophers continue to seek positions in the design and administration of public policy, and they continue to believe that their philosophical training, and in some cases their philosophical convictions, have significant application in the policy arena. QQ spoke to six philosophers who now hold posts on Capitol Hill, in the administration, or as congressional lobbyists; they came to their current positions by varied routes and handle different responsibilities from different philosophical and political perspectives. But they agree that philosophy has had a clear value in enhancing the contribution they are able to make in their new roles.

Philosophy Goes to Washington

Philosopher John Hare came to Washington because he had just finished writing his book, *Ethics and International Affairs*, and decided that to write further on the subject he needed more understanding of how the political process worked. After a year as a Congressional Fellow, he moved to his current staff position on the Subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs. Jerry Segal, who developed an interest in political activity during the years of the anti-war movement, went back to school for a masters' degree in public affairs after four years of teaching philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania. He first worked on the House Budget Committee and then moved to the Agency for International Development (AID), where he is now Senior Advisor for Agency Planning.

Roger Pilon and Ernest Loevinsohn both left philosophy for public policy as a natural outgrowth of long-

standing political involvements. Pilon, long active in Republican party politics (at one time even "raising eyebrows" as a "legitimate Republican election judge in the city of Chicago," while a graduate student in philosophy there), spent several years at conservative/libertarian think tanks before being tapped by the Reagan administration transition team for a policymaking post at the Office of Personnel Management. Loevinsohn, a committed anti-hunger activist during graduate school and while teaching philosophy at Rice University, "jumped at" a proffered chance to join Bread for the World, a Christian citizens' lobby against hunger.

Vanda McMurtry landed his jobs as senior legislative assistant to Congressman Lee Hamilton and professional staff member of the Joint Economic Committee after surveying a "pretty grim" job market in academic philosophy and "coming on down to Washington to see what [he] could find." Four months of knocking on doors paid off, and he has worked for Hamilton for the past five years. Col. Michael Wheeler, Staff Secretary to the National Security Council, took a "serendipitous" detour from his military career to earn a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Arizona and then taught philosophy and political science for five years at the Air Force Academy before returning to a series of military staff assignments and administrative roles.

The Wages of Philosophy

Although these six philosophers came to their present positions from different routes, all agree that the skills they developed while studying and teaching philosophy have proved enormously useful in the varied kinds of work they have since pursued. McMurtry explains that "in working with the Congress, coming up with ideas, communicating ideas, analyzing ideas, and arguing about ideas are of the utmost importance," and he credits his philosophical background for developing his analytic and argumentative skills to their fullest usefulness. Wheeler agrees that "the ability to write, to articulate thoughts, and to think logically is crucial to the policy environment." Loevinsohn particularly stresses the linguistic facility that has carried over from his philosophical work. In a last-minute fight over the wording of an amendment to a recent foreign assistance authorization bill, he was "beckoned into the back room" and asked

on short notice to come up with "a verbal formula that got most of what we wanted while avoiding an objection raised by the administration." Within moments the new language was in place, and Loevinsohn says: "I couldn't have done it so quickly without training in linguistic philosophy."

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transplanted philosophers appreciate the heightened sensitivity to concepts and values that is a legacy of their philosophical training. Hare notes that "Some of the concepts we have to work with here, such as human rights, or less familiar concepts, such as winning a war, are common coin in political discussions. Yet they have a long philosophical background. By being sensitive to that background, one is better able to see the implications of these discussions." As an example of the role philosophical concepts play in setting policy, he cites the disagreement between the Reagan and Carter administrations over whether economic rights count as human rights, and the difference this has made in their foreign policy toward Central America.

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Segal feels that philosophical training has given him "a greater ease at raising value questions. Most of the people who work in policy areas are trained in the social sciences and don't have the vocabulary for dealing with value issues; dealing with value issues doesn't fit in with their sense of professional identity as value-free analysts." Segal's willingness to address fundamental objectives of public policies gives him a somewhat different role in an environment where "most discussion is about means, rather than basic values."

In a similar sort of carryover, Wheeler's exposure to

research in the philosophy of anthropology and the presuppositions of cross-cultural studies has sensitized him to the complexities of understanding "the motivations and conditions of cultures significantly different from one's own." This kind of sensitivity, he believes, is critical in a world in which we have diplomatic relations with over 150 nations. His philosophical training has also helped prepare him to address the moral dilemmas he faces as a practicing Catholic, influenced by recent developments in the Church's moral teaching on nuclear armament, since he has had and plans to have more military assignments involving strategic nuclear weapons.

In at least some cases, philosophers have brought with them to their policy-oriented jobs substantive moral and political positions that they developed while studying and teaching philosophy. Pilon and Loevin-

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sohn both wrote doctoral dissertations defending views that now motivate and animate their present work. Pilon's University of Chicago dissertation, "A Theory of Rights: Toward Limited Government," developed views that he obtains "immense satisfaction" from being able to apply. His practical experience working to restrain and curtail what he perceives to be governmental excesses has convinced him "more than ever that government should not be involved in many of the activities in which it is currently involved. . . . [By working in government] I learned a posteriori what I suspected a priori." Loevinsohn's Princeton University dissertation on justice in international relations put forth moral positions on the duties of affluent to underdeveloped nations that he tries to realize in drafting and influencing legislation. As a philosopher, Loevinsohn defended the thesis that to aid those who are starving is a moral obligation, and not a discretionary matter of charity.

Benefits and Burdens

The benefit of their new situation most commonly cited by policymaking philosophers is the immediacy of the satisfactions they derive from policy-oriented work. McMurtry comments that while "professors spend years writing a book or see students fifteen years from now develop into good philosophers, here the horizon is much closer. The issues on the national agenda are very pressing, and they are all dumped on the Congress." Much of his workday is taken up with

attending to unexpected emergencies of all kinds, and while such work is exhausting, it is intensely gratifying as well. Loevinsohn recalls one amendment he proposed and saw passed that appropriated \$43 million of emergency food aid, largely to Africa. That single accomplishment enabled him to feel that "if I died tomorrow it would be okay; I'd done something that made life worthwhile." While he can imagine that philosophers could feel an analogous satisfaction in their research, "the time lag is a little longer."

For Hare, the best part of working in the government "is the access to information . . . I'm overwhelmed with information. It just comes pouring in every day." McMurtry, hailing politics as "very fun," enjoys the degree of public contact his job affords. And Pilon grants that an additional benefit of working as a policymaker rather than as an academic is "the tremendous increase in income over the academic world."

But the transition is not accomplished without any sense of loss, and many of those who have left the academic environment miss keenly the time and leisure for reflection and independent scholarly pursuits. The same access to information that is one of the policy world's chief benefits is also one of its banes: Hare confesses that at times he resents the sheer bulk

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of paper flow; Pilon agrees that his tussles with the bureaucratic paper avalanche ("that we in the Reagan administration are trying to reduce") leave him "very little time to reflect and keep abreast of current events in the intellectual world." Segal worries that "One pays an increasingly heavy toll the longer one is completely cut off from an academic environment. Over the years, I have come to appreciate both the value of being able to do research in an academic setting and the value that teaching has for one's own thinking." In a bureaucratic environment, "psychological freedom of thought is increasingly constrained by bureaucratic standards of relevance." And the work does not let up: McMurtry has taken one vacation in the past five years.

The ideal solution contemplated would be some sort of compromise between the immediate satisfactions of actively influencing policy and the reflective leisure enjoyed in the university. Pilon notes that he has been able to take advantage of at least some of the wide array of conferences and lectures that Washington has to offer while giving lectures himself from time to time. Segal would like to see some "permanent division of

time," whereby he could maintain "a foot in each arena." He would welcome an opportunity to teach on a regular basis (he is currently teaching one day a week at the University of Maryland), but fears that if he returned permanently to academia he would miss the stimulation of his involvement in policy. Wheeler voiced interest in someday teaching a seminar on a subject such as nuclear deterrence, where he could weave in his diverse interests in history, bureaucratic politics, international relations, and philosophy, as well as drawing on his practical experience. McMurtry daydreams about teaching a class part-time if the demands of his current position could be relaxed to permit that arrangement. A full professional life, it was felt, can straddle academia and the wider world beyond.

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Those interviewed agreed that there is more than one path leading to a successful career in policy and more than one path leading out from academic training in philosophy. Wheeler praises "the traditional British approach to public service, where one receives a liberal education and then enters public service and receives on-the-job training through nuts and bolts experience," valuing his broad philosophical background over a narrowly focused program of technical career training. McMurtry urges philosophers to consider a

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broader range of options for applying their philosophical expertise, commenting that "Philosophers in particular and humanist professors generally define themselves too narrowly." His advice to those embarking on their careers today: "Follow your inclinations and you'll be a lot happier. Go ahead and study philosophy, and then see how you can work with what you've learned." He concludes: "It's a big mistake to think that philosophical training is only relevant in a university."