

The Public Turn in Philosophy

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Over the last decade and a half, philosophy has come out of the academy and “gone public” in a way it has not done for many years. Both inside and outside the academy philosophers now commonly write about affairs of life and affairs of state. They serve on hospital advisory boards, staff national study commissions, and testify before Congress. Philosophers still teach in philosophy departments, but they also now teach in law schools, medical schools, and business schools. A philosophy class these days is as likely to be about nuclear deterrence as about the naturalistic fallacy.

The “public turn” hasn’t been welcomed by everyone. Some say it is pretentious and dilettantish for philosophers to believe they can say anything useful about public policy issues. Neither their training nor their experience suits them to make a contribution. They should do what they do best: cultivate the life of the mind in its reflection on fundamental intellectual puzzles raised by language, science, and culture. They should teach the philosophical classics and not mislead their students with glib and uninformed solutions to public problems.

Are these criticisms well founded? Does the “public turn” in philosophy add something valuable to public discussion about education, foreign policy, cultural progress, the family, the economy, the military? Does it illuminate public policy choices? Can it?

In what follows, two philosophers suggest answers to these questions. Robert K. Fullinwider, Research Associate at the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy, looks at the contribution philosophy can make