

The Public Turn in Philosophy

To make its research readily available to a broad audience, the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy publishes a quarterly newsletter: *QQ—Report from the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy*. Named after the abbreviation for “questions,” *QQ* summarizes and supplements Center books and working papers and features other selected work on public policy questions. Articles in *QQ* are intended to advance philosophically informed debate on current policy choices; the views presented are not necessarily those of the Center or its sponsors.

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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

to the discussion of public affairs; Dan W. Brock, professor of philosophy at Brown University and staff philosopher in 1981-82 on the President's Commission for the Study of Ethical Problems in Medicine and

Biomedical and Behavioral Research, looks at some of the conflicts philosophers face when they leave the academy behind altogether and assume actual policy-making roles.

Philosophers in the Public Conversation

How can philosophers make their best contribution to the nation's discussion of public affairs?

Public conversation is generally jumbled, hasty, and confused. Public debates are shallow, sterile, perpetually deadlocked. Disputants talk past one another, and arguments turn on unclear, murky, equivocal, undefined terms. Straw men abound, unspoken assumptions and unrecognized commitments remain hidden, and exaggeration and hyperbole rule the day.

Philosophers are good at arguments. They can take them apart and put them back together again, forwards and backwards, upside down and downside up. This facility makes it easier to distinguish the real connections between ideas from the spurious ones, and this is indispensable to sorting out and clarifying public controversies. Deadlocks can be broken by showing the contending parties that they've framed the question in the wrong way, or that they are not even talking about the same thing, or that the dispute they thought was about ends is really about means; and so on.

The aim as I see it is to reformulate an argument in a controversy so that its exponent says, "Ah yes, *that's* what I meant!" And to reformulate the argument on the other side, too, in the same way. Then the controversialists will have half a chance to address each other's arguments instead of doing the usual song and dance.

The way to think about a public policy is to think about the public policy, not about metaphysics or moral philosophy.

Now, it should be noted that clarifying and sorting out arguments are not enterprises that philosophers are uniquely able to carry out. Other humanists, too, trained in history, literature, and the languages can assist public debate toward greater clarity and perspicuity.

Still, philosophical education seems an especially good training for producing all-purpose argument doctors. The strength of philosophical training lies in its subject matter: metaphysics, epistemology, and moral philosophy. Studying them is good for the mind. This

is the way we used to justify teaching students Latin and geometry: they are good mental exercises. Metaphysics, epistemology, and moral philosophy are even better. They produce a higher quality mental acuity and conceptual sophistication.

This distinctive training of philosophers is both their strength and their weakness as they make the "public turn." What philosophers need to bring to public policy issues is their mental agility; what they too often bring is their metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical baggage. The way to think about a public policy is to think

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about the public policy, not about metaphysics or moral philosophy. Philosophers should leave behind the subjects of their philosophical training and bring only its product. "Applied philosophy" is a misnomer, because the phrase implies a subject matter and its application. The special subject matter of philosophy just gets in the way of making sense out of public policy issues.

Applied moral theory is an especial occupational hazard. The philosopher has a tool box filled with deontologies and consequentialisms, the principle of utility and the kingdom of ends, categorical imperatives, the highest good, and the logic of moral language. You got a problem? He's got a tool. Can't figure out what to do? It must be your old utility-based theory; replace it with the latest model deontology. But surely it doesn't matter what the base is. The rights, duties, and welfare that are relevant to moral and political decisions are not those abstractions at the *base* of some philosophical theory, but the substantial entitlements and values embedded in the law, institutions, culture, history, and material possibilities of our time and place.

There is obviously value in tidying up local areas of practice and reflection, and even in tying together broader areas of experience through common themes; but as we approach higher levels of generality, the practical use of such tidying drops off sharply. Moral theory has little practical relevance in the public turn. And

neither does the rest of the philosopher's baggage. The worst thing philosophers can do is bring their metaphysics, epistemology, and moral theories to the public conversation.

Now I want to argue that the *best* thing philosophers can do is bring their metaphysics, epistemology, and moral theories to the public conversation. I'm not taking back anything I've just said. The social value of the philosopher's metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical tools lies in their negative and destructive use.

The point is this. If all the philosophers disappeared from the face of the earth, metaphysics and moral theory would still abound. *Everybody* is a metaphysician and moral theorist—the preacher, the politician, the businessman, the terrorist, the economist, the lawyer—and all convinced of the direct practical import of their theories. Likewise, lift up almost any public policy rock and you'll see lots of crawly metaphysical and philosophical creatures scurrying about. The real

contribution the trained philosopher brings to public controversy is his nose for metaphysical baloney. But the point is not to set public policy on a *better* metaphysics or a *sounder* ethical theory. The point is to harass and harry every attempt to make public policy the front for some metaphysical program, or the realization of some moral theory.

This is a special negative role that the philosopher is well trained to serve. In fact, our profession began in this negative way. Long ago there was this presocratic Pat Robertson going on about how morality depends on religion and how he had direct knowledge from the gods, and Thales popped off, "You're all wet!" Unfortunately, this got garbled as, "All is water," and thus began a long tradition of metaphysical speculation. But the real beginning was negative, and from our beginning we should take our clue.

—Robert K. Fullinwider

Philosophers in the Halls of Policy

The public turn in philosophy has not only changed the content and focus of some philosophical work. It has also placed philosophers increasingly in new social roles that are less compatible with their traditional role as academic scholars engaged in critical analysis and development of arguments and assumptions. The general character of the shift I have in mind is from academic scholar to involved policymaking participant. Looked at this way, it is not just philosophy, but philosophers, who have gone public. This change in role has some deep-seated implications for philosophers that I believe have not been adequately recognized and discussed. The fundamental point is that the goals and constraints of the policymaking process are different from and in some important respects in sharp conflict with the goals and intellectual virtues of academic scholarly activity in general and philosophical activity in particular.

Truth is the central virtue of scholarly work. Scholars generally are taught to follow the arguments and evidence where they lead without regard for the social consequences of doing so. Philosophy in particular prides itself on questioning and critically evaluating what is otherwise taken for granted, whether because universally accepted or because an unrecognized assumption. Nothing is to be immune from question and criticism; everything is open to and must withstand critical scrutiny.

When philosophers move from academics, hoping that an occasional policymaker might read their scholarly journal articles, into roles in which they are more or less direct participants in policymaking processes, the scholarly virtue of an unconstrained search

for the truth—all assumptions open to question and follow the arguments wherever they lead—comes under a variety of related pressures. The first concern of those responsible for public policy is not truth, but is and ought to be the consequences of their actions for public policy and the persons those policies affect.

The end of a single-minded pursuit of knowledge is possible and defensible in the scholarly domain not only because of the value of knowledge, but also because the effects of the scholarly endeavor on the public are less direct, and mediated more by other institutions and events, than are those of the public policy process. It is the very impotence in terms of major, direct effects on people's lives of most academic scholarship that makes it morally acceptable not to worry much about the consequences of that scholarship. When philosophers become direct participants in the policymaking process, they must shift their primary commitment from knowledge and truth to the policy consequences of what they do. And if they are not prepared to do this, why did they enter the policy domain? What are they doing there?

Let me be more specific about some of the forms I have found this conflict between scholarly and policy goals and virtues to take in my own experience. In Washington, I worked on the professional staff of a presidential commission; though I had my own views about what the reports I was helping to draft should say, those views would have any effect only if I was able to persuade the other staff members and the commissioners of them. Thus, I found myself often looking to what the consequences on others would be of making a particular argument or taking a particular

position, instead of simply at whether I considered the argument or position to be sound. The goal then often became to persuade or even to manipulate others in order to reach a desired outcome instead of a common search for knowledge and truth.

Consider the issue of decisions to forgo life-sustaining treatment. I hold, with many other philosophers, that the difference between killing and allowing to die, as that difference is commonly understood, is not in itself of significant moral importance, and as well that stopping life-sustaining treatment is usually killing, though justified killing. Many of the commissioners held instead the more common view that killing is far more seriously wrong than allowing to die, and that stopping life-sustaining treatment is allowing the patient to die of his disease, not causing his death and killing. On the conclusion that stopping life-sustaining treatment at the request of a competent patient is morally permissible we agreed, but I believed that their reasoning for this conclusion was confused. My instincts as philosopher said: attack the confusion.

But what would be the consequences of convincing them that allowing to die is in itself no different morally from killing and/or that much stopping of life-support is killing? The likely result would be to throw into question their acceptance of the moral permissibility of stopping life-support. Should one then, could one respon-

sibly, attack what seemed the confusions in their position when the result of doing so might well be to lead them to an unwarranted and worse conclusion? Since the commission's report had the potential to have a significant impact on policy and practice, producing this shift in their views could have important adverse consequences in suffering and loss of self-determination for real people.

An important part of the policymaker's job is to "sell" a program, policy, or position to other participants in the political or policy process. As a result, the "packaging" of a policy proposal often determines its fate. The particular formulation and defense of a policy that is most likely to move it successfully through the policy arena may differ substantially from what a philosopher believes its correct formulation and defense to be. The easiest way to sell the public on patients' right to stop life-sustaining medical treatment is not to seek to convince it that this is simply a case of justified suicide or that what physicians do when they stop it is merely a case of justified killing. To cite one other example, philosophers who believe that infanticide can be morally permissible with newborns because newborns lack any right to life would have been ill-advised to appeal in the public policy arena to that view as the basis of an attack on the Reagan administration's so-called Baby Doe regulations.



PHILOSOPHY

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I believe this scholarly/policy conflict constitutes a less dramatic analogue of what Michael Walzer called the problem of dirty hands faced by politicians. Walzer argued, following Machiavelli, that success in political life sometimes requires violating the constraints of morality. We have good reason to want our representatives in political life to be good persons and so to have scruples against violating those constraints, but also to be willing to violate them when necessary to achieve important political goals and to know they are doing wrong when they do so.

Philosophers can view those among them who enter the world of policymaking as having dirtied their hands when they veer from the quest for truth with an eye on the consequences of what they say.

Likewise, philosophers come to the policy process with a commitment to knowledge and truth. That commitment is integral to the distinctive perspective philosophers bring to the policy process, to why there is any reason to want them there. Like politicians, however, we want philosophers sometimes to recognize that the consequences at stake in the policy process are sufficiently important to warrant their violating their scholarly commitment and to be prepared to do so by fudging on the truth. And finally, we want them to

recognize that according to the norms and virtues of the philosophical enterprise to which they remain committed, they act wrongly. Philosophers can view those among them who enter the world of policymaking as having dirtied their hands when they veer from the quest for truth with an eye on the consequences of what they say.

Does this mean that philosophers should avoid the policy process like the plague? I believe not. Philosophers who are fortunate enough to have the opportunity to use their analytical and critical skills at influential points in the policymaking process can help in some small way to improve and illuminate thinking and practice in respects that offer real benefits to the broader public. I, at least, have found that a deeply satisfying aspect of my own experience in the policy and medical worlds. Nevertheless, I believe the scholarly/policy conflict that I have focused on here does suggest that philosophers' forays as direct participants into the world of policy should best be partial and temporary. The philosophical virtues and perspectives that enable philosophers to make a valuable, distinctive, and effective contribution to policy are probably best maintained if they retain a primary base within the world of academic scholarship.

—Dan W. Brock

The articles by Robert K. Fullinwider and Dan W. Brock are condensed and adapted from talks they gave at "The Public Turn in Philosophy," a conference celebrating the tenth anniversary of the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy, held at the University of Maryland, October 16-18, 1986. Papers from the conference will be published in *The Public Turn in Philosophy*, edited by Judith Lichtenberg and Henry Shue, in preparation.