

# Teaching Philosophy and Public Policy

During the past decade, increasing public attention has been focused on the values and concepts that underlie our public policies. From this concern "philosophy and public policy" has emerged as a new cross-disciplinary field. In philosophy and public policy courses, current policy problems are examined in the light of ethical theory, while ethical theories are tested by their implications for policy choices. The Center for Philosophy and Public Policy has been engaged in curricular research, under a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, to produce four model courses in this field: *Ethics and the Legal Profession*, by David Luban; *Ethics and Energy*, by Douglas MacLean; *Environmental Ethics*, by Mark Sagoff; and *Human Rights and U.S. Foreign Policy*, by Henry Shue.

The emergence of these, and other, new courses on philosophy and public policy prompts a series of questions about the purposes served by this cross-breeding of disciplines. What does philosophy have to offer the study of policy? Does their synthesis produce some satisfying resolution of the problems each faces, or does it merely multiply two different sets of confusions?

There seem to be at least three pairs of complementary benefits that philosophy and public policy bring to each other in their academic marriage. To the passions of policy debate philosophy brings its characteristic emphasis on rigorous analysis and argument. Students exposed to a philosophical view of policy are trained to scrutinize unquestioned popular notions and dismantle flawed arguments.

In a complementary fashion, real-life policy cases spark student interest and breathe life into otherwise empty ethical abstractions. David Luban uses actual court cases in teaching legal ethics "because they prime students' moral intuitions; because they exorcise the 'smell of the lamp'; because they provide ready-made examples for the theoretical arguments that appear in their opinions; and because [as the Starving Poet said after transferring to law school,] 'the cases tell better stories, and besides, they're true.'" In this way, philosophy and public policy provide what the other may lack: the trained exercise of reason and a necessary spark of passion to make the reasons matter.

A second pair of benefits that philosophy and public policy bring to each other in the classroom is philosophy's frank appeal to moral values, tempered by

policy's pragmatic caution against easy moralizing. Rights, obligations, justice, autonomy, the nature of the good life—these are the stuff of moral philosophy. The philosopher is unabashed by arguments that rely heavily on these central ethical concepts. By the import of philosophy into the study of policy, students learn to look beyond economics, beyond cost-benefit analyses and pollsters' tallies, to what is indeed just and right and good.

The temptation to preach is ever present, however, and a strong dose of policy inoculates students against faith in moral platitudes and quick answers. Vague enthusiasm for human rights, for example, must be translated into policy. But are human rights best protected by strident denunciations of their violation, or by "quiet diplomacy" that verges on silence? Henry Shue, in his model syllabus, commends student exposure to such gritty complexities of policy as a major course objective: "The danger that one's actions may work against the very goals that one holds dearest is one of the central dangers of politics." Awareness of the dangers moderates moral zeal.

The third pair of benefits goes right to the heart of philosophy and public policy as an intellectual enterprise. In this field ethical theories and actual policy conflicts are brought to bear upon each other for mutual criticism and enlightenment. In Douglas MacLean's model course on the ethics of energy, for example, three policy problems are illuminated by the application of ethical concepts, while each problem in turn serves to criticize the inadequacies of the concept applied to it. Our dependence on foreign oil and need for national energy self-sufficiency is an issue in international distributive justice. Our need for a transition from nonrenewable fossil fuels to some renewable energy source such as nuclear or solar power raises in dramatic form our obligations to future generations, or intergenerational distributive justice. The choice between nuclear and solar power opens yet another set of issues: the analysis and evaluation of the risks posed by different energy alternatives and the values we attach to different ways of life. In all three cases, ethical questions must be addressed before policy questions can be resolved.

But in all three cases as well, the policy issues themselves signal limitations of the ethical theories in-

voked to resolve them. Both international and inter-generational justice show the inadequacy of current contractual and consent-based theories of justice, since other nations and generations are beyond any social contract in space and time. And in analyzing different energy risks, the very concepts of rights and justice prove inadequate—certain energy choices may distribute risks fairly and evenly, without violating any rights, and yet we may decide on some differently grounded vision of our common good that the risks posed are unacceptable. Thus policy and philosophy each extend the horizons of the other.

Likewise, in Mark Sagoff's course on environmental ethics, environmental problems test the traditional limits imposed on state authority over individual liberty and autonomy, as well as the concepts of liberty and autonomy themselves. Sagoff points out that "Personal liberties which seem the most progressive and the least harmful . . . are leading willy-nilly to a depreciation of our environmental resources." Our entire liberal framework needs to be reexamined when we confront its environmental implications.

Thus policy benefits by a sophisticated and careful examination of concepts such as rights, justice, liberty, role morality, while at the same time it provides crucial tests of these common notions. Courses in philosophy and public policy have as their goal the establishment of a "reflective equilibrium" between the two.

What if the result is not reflective equilibrium, however, but exponentially expanding confusions? Political scientists who turn to philosophy are struck by the lack of any consensus on basic ethical principles, as common moral intuitions are challenged and often con-

tradicted. Philosophers teaching courses in public policy are struck by widespread disagreement even among experts—on the risks and benefits of energy alternatives, for example, or the actual extent of human rights violations under repressive regimes.

This confusion has its dangers. For Shue, chief among these is the invitation to moral relativism: students "conclude glibly that no one really knows either what is going on or what principles ought to be guiding our responses to what is going on and that, therefore, everyone should just be sincere and do his or her best without worrying too much about getting anything right." But if this slide into relativism can be resisted, the very engendering of confusion itself may be one prime contribution of courses in philosophy and public policy. Sagoff gives his course's conclusion as: "Reality is complicated and situation-bound. This is not a flamboyant conclusion for a course in environmental ethics. It is the strongest, however, one might hope to find." And Shue says simply, "People who don't want to talk about messy situations don't want to talk about policy." He might have added that people who don't want to talk about messy situations don't want to talk about philosophy, either. Or for that matter, about life.

*Maryland Courses in Public Philosophy (Ethics and the Legal Profession, Ethics and Energy, Environmental Ethics, and Human Rights and U.S. Foreign Policy) are available from the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy, at a charge of \$1.00 each, or \$2.50 for all four courses. Also available is The AT & T Case and Affirmative Action, a teaching module designed to provide instructors with a case study and critical analysis of the moral issues involved in reverse discrimination (\$2.50). To order, see page 15.*

## Teaching Philosophy and Public Policy: A Summer Workshop

The Center for Philosophy and Public Policy announces a workshop for teachers interested in applying philosophical methods and perspectives to vital public policy controversies. The three-day workshop will be held in Washington, D.C. at Trinity College, June 23-25. Daniel Callahan, Director of the Hastings Center, will be keynote speaker. Center staff with extensive experience teaching a wide range of policy-oriented philosophical courses will conduct seminars and discussions on teaching about military conscription, human rights and foreign policy, professional ethics, and the rights of future generations to natural resources. Emphasis will be placed on strategies for effective teaching about the underlying philosophical issues.

### Workshop Arrangements

#### Workshop Fee:

\$60.00 per person. A \$30.00 deposit is required with advance registration. The \$30.00 balance, along with room and meals charges, is due at registration on June 23, 1982. (Please make checks payable to the University of Maryland Foundation.) The deposit is refundable if registration is cancelled prior to June 1, 1982.

#### Accommodations:

Housing will be in modern air-conditioned college dormitory accommodations. Cafeteria-style meal service will be provided for Wednesday dinner through Friday lunch. The charge for a single room (Wednesday and Thursday evenings) and meals is \$60.00. The charge for a double-occupancy room and meals is \$56.00 per person. A meals-only plan is available for local participants for \$28.00.

#### For further information contact:

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