No dea(r)th of philosophy

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Philosophy has had a long line of sceptics going as far back as Socrates’ jailers. As the central question of this volume asks, what has philosophy done for and in public life? Although it claims to think deeply about morality, ethics, justice and injustice, what change has philosophy actually made?

Yet the idea that philosophy has had little to offer public life and done little to make change in the world relies on a specific — and I would argue, much too narrow — view of what counts as philosophy. Once we appreciate how ubiquitous philosophical thinking and argumentation are in our social and political life, it becomes impossible to maintain that it has done little for public life. And it also becomes possible to better appreciate the importance of the academic or professional practice of philosophy.

Let’s start by making a distinction between academic or professional philosophy and public philosophy. Academic philosophers work in universities and research institutions, publish their work in peer-reviewed books and journals aimed mostly at other colleagues, and teach philosophy in an institutional setting. Ideally, they are afforded the resources and time to engage in close examination of concepts and ideas through writing and debate, sharpening understandings of competing conceptions and their moral and political implications. What I’m loosely calling public philosophers, on the other hand, consist of a broad category of political actors whose primary role is to push for and/or enact change in the world, whether through organising social movements to shed light on neglected problems and to demand change, or through leading a government, proposing and passing new laws and policies, reforming existing institutions, and so on.

The narrow view of philosophy would hold that only what academic philosophers do counts as philosophy. While it would be hard to find someone who explicitly defends this claim, the

claim is implicit in the oft-repeated idea that political philosophy was largely dead in the 1960s until the publication of John Rawls’s *Theory of Justice*. As I argue below, such a claim ignores the many works published during that time, works that do not follow the conventional mould of academic philosophy and which are not written by academic philosophers, but nonetheless can and ought to be read as philosophy. The narrow view is also implicit in the longstanding neglect of these types of work in the curricula or ‘canon’ of academic philosophy and ‘analytic’ political theory, a trend that is only now starting to change due to pressure from students as well as recent political developments outside of the academy, most notably the Movement for Black Lives.

I think the narrow view of philosophy can obscure the indispensable role that moral and ethical theorising has always played in real world change.

To demonstrate this, let’s look at some examples of public philosophy. At the same time in the 1960s that political philosophy was pronounced ‘dead’, a book titled *The Wretched of the Earth* was published. The author was Frantz Fanon, who is famous today as a figurehead for activists and social movements, especially those engaging in racial justice struggles. Although *The Wretched of the Earth* is based on Fanon’s experiences as an activist for the Front de Libération Nationale in the Algerian War of Independence, it would be a mistake to read it as a historical narrative or political manifesto rather than a work of critical and normative philosophy.

From diagnosing the structures and practices of oppression at work in the colony, to proposing a theory of revolution that identifies progressive and reactionary agents, and finally, proposing a vision for a decolonised world in which the humanity of the colonial subject and the coloniser is restored, the book contains important arguments. The arguments cover the nature of justice and injustice, the moral justifiability of violent means of resistance, the role and nature of good political leadership, and the sociopolitical conditions for human liberation.

While these arguments are not couched in the language of (academic) moral and political philosophy — such as rights, duties, principles of justice, etc — they are nonetheless philosophical arguments. These include discussion *about* what rights people have, and which are unjustly denied in the colonial situation; what is owed between coloniser and colonised (for example, reparations) and between the formerly colonised (for example,

democratic participation in state-building); and principles that ought to guide the transition to a just, decolonised world (for example, ‘the last shall be first’). To be sure, reconstructing these moral claims is a complex task that involves textual and contextual interpretation, and there is often more than one way to read the text. Yet the same is true of any work of philosophy.

Another book published in the mid-1960s was Kwame Nkrumah’s *Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*. As the first prime minister of Ghana who had just been deposed in a CIA-assisted military coup, Nkrumah wrote Neo-colonialism to investigate and expose the relations of global political domination and economic exploitation that persisted beyond formal colonialism, or colonialism in which the coloniser takes control of the colonised territory. Although much of the book consists of detailed empirical analysis of the specific players — such as investment banks, mining companies, etc — who were at the frontline of exploiting the postcolony in Nkrumah’s time, there is also a theory of neo-colonialism that runs through the book. This theory understands ideas such as self-determination, popular sovereignty, exploitation etc, in particular ways. These understandings were hugely influential among pan-African leaders and thinkers debating what genuine freedom after formal empire meant, and how it might be attained.

We do not need to look only at historically influential figures. We could equally look at contemporary social movements — take climate activism as an example. Embedded in the political action and programmes of groups like Just Stop Oil and Extinction Rebellion are arguments about the nature of climate injustice, who is responsible for the climate crisis, the moral justifiability of resistance strategies that impose costs on others, and so on. These arguments are not always explicitly articulated in words but expressed through the kinds of actions taken and the targets chosen for those actions. And yet they remain moral-philosophical arguments with specific premises, reasoning, and conclusions about justice and injustice.

Once we take on a broader view of what (moral and political) philosophy is, it becomes apparent that it has always played a significant role in public life. As I noted above, *The Wretched of the Earth* became widely influential among racial justice activists, especially in the era of the Black Power and civil rights movements in the US (whose leaders and participants, it should be noted, were also producing works in the 1960s that can be read as philosophy, such as Kwame Ture and Charles Hamilton’s 1967 *Black Power: the*

Politics of Liberation in America). *The Wretched of the Earth* remains widely read amongst activists who see themselves as engaging in anticolonial struggles today.

Neo-colonialism also became a major influence, especially among African anti-imperialist writers and Latin American economists thinking about the problem of dependency. Indeed, the book was considered such a danger to the US that the State Department famously withdrew aid for Ghana following its publication. Finally, the arguments that climate activists are making today — through public dialogue, social media posts and political action — are shifting society’s focus from the previous emphasis on individual behavioural change to tackle climate change, towards centring the role of fossil fuel corporations and other business interests in perpetuating the crisis.

Yet not all these political actors will recognise that what they are doing is a form of philosophy; indeed, many may even recoil at the description and reject it. Activists, for one, may think that describing their manifestos and appeals to the public as a kind of political and moral philosophy is abstracting away from the real-world concerns that motivate their actions. In the narrow understanding of philosophy I have argued against, the enterprise appears to be far removed from the on-the-street actions of obstructing roads and blocking access to government buildings. Some activists may disdain words and emphasise the importance of immediate action, following the oft-cited claim from Marx that the point is not to interpret the world but to change it.

What’s more, political activism requires practices and dispositions that may not always align with the open-ended truth-seeking attitude that many of us associate with philosophy. To motivate and mobilise participants, activists need to carefully design their communications to highlight the issues that foster and direct public anger to what they see as the causes of injustice. While this is not necessarily incompatible with the spirit of open inquiry, when the issue at hand is pressing and the need for action is urgent, activists may have no choice but to suspend further debate and opt for action.

Finally, activists do not always lay out all the relevant moral and ethical considerations for participants to engage with and may instead see their jobs as guiding the latter towards the conclusions they endorse.

Politicians and policymakers, on the other hand, may want to deny that underlying their policies and programmes are specific claims about right and wrong, fairness and unfairness, justice and injustice. Instead, it is common for these political actors to disguise (whether intentionally or not) what are in fact value judgements in seemingly value neutral language such as efficiency, growth, law and legality, public safety, social harmony, and so on. Even when values such as democracy, freedom and equality are invoked, as they inevitably are during election season, politicians often do so without defining these concepts and instead assume a shared understanding. Shying away from explicit moral argumentation appears to avoid controversy or at least glosses over divisions. And in an age where distrust of politicians is already at an all-time high, politicians are aware that attempting to advise voters on morality and ethics is unlikely to be well received.

In short, if philosophy can be found everywhere in public life, it isn’t because real-world policymakers clamour for the title of public philosopher — far from it. Rather, it is because through their political rhetoric and political actions, these figures will inevitably make normative claims and promote particular ideas of justice and injustice, and their influence in the world makes it particularly important to recognise and evaluate them.

This is where academic philosophers can and ought to come in. Academic philosophers are trained to detect arguments about morality and value more broadly, even when they are implicit — indeed, even when those making the claims are unaware of their own moral or ethical reasoning. Academic philosophers are experienced in reconstructing the logic behind justifications for a particular action or policy, and in subjecting that reasoning to closer scrutiny. Even though, as I have argued, philosophy is not the exclusive purview of academic philosophers, they have the time and resources to hone their critical and analytic thinking skills. And, some of us also benefit from secure, paid positions that allow us to critique the flawed arguments of the powerful and lend support to the justified claims of the less powerful.

It seems to me, then, that this is one of the key contributions of academic philosophy in relation to public life: drawing out, reconstructing and scrutinising existing moral arguments that are already informing significant political work. This requires academic philosophers to relinquish any remaining notion that moral and political philosophy exists solely in the work we produce, and, until very recently, have almost exclusively studied. Instead, when proponents of widely used philosophical arguments choose not to acknowledge or take

ownership of them, those arguments may be hidden or exist in inchoate forms. Often, these arguments will come in language and formats considered ‘unconventional’ by academic philosophy’s standards, such as pamphlets, manifestos, texts that appear as historical narratives or propaganda, social media posts, and so on.

Academic philosophers should also train future citizens in this exercise. When philosophy students learn to identify moral arguments in a text like Nkrumah’s *Neocolonialism* and to subject these arguments to scrutiny, they may be better at recognising and scrutinising real-world philosophical arguments. When students are taught that the ideas of justice put forth in Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* are, just like any other ideas of justice in a philosophical text, up for debate, they may be better at critically engaging with the discourse of those whose political positions they may otherwise agree with. Rather than treating these texts as mere propaganda or situated narratives that should not be questioned, our young citizens would be alert to the public philosophy that is embedded in our social life. *And* they would be sensitive to the sophisticated moral-philosophical arguments presented by those who are too-often dismissed as ‘just politically motivated’.

I’ve argued in this essay that philosophy, especially moral and political philosophy, has always played indispensable roles in public life and in real-world change. A central task of the academic philosopher is to use her position and skills to engage in critical dialogue with public philosophers, and to train future citizens to do the same. Doing so does not require denying the worth of academic philosophy, nor does it require setting up stark distinctions between us, the professional theorists, and them, the public who needs to be persuaded by our theories of justice. Instead, it simply requires an openness and curiosity toward the philosophy and practices that have shaped our world, and continue to do so, for better or for worse.