

"The point is to change it"

Call the midwife

Professor Roger Crisp, The Uehiro Oxford Institute

Professor Katrien Devolder, The Uehiro Oxford Institute

Dr Jonathan Pugh, The Uehiro Oxford Institute

Call the midwife

Professor Roger Crisp, The Uehiro Oxford Institute

Professor Katrien Devolder, The Uehiro Oxford Institute

Dr Jonathan Pugh, The Uehiro Oxford Institute

Who was the first philosopher? Most people would say Socrates, and there is no doubt that he, and the character named after him in the dialogues of Plato, have played a huge role in the development of philosophy over the last two-and-a-half millennia. Socrates, then, in a sense gave birth to philosophy. But how could that be, given his frequent claims to knowing nothing except his own ignorance? Partly because those claims can easily be read as ironic, but also because his dialectical way of doing philosophy enabled others to put forward and develop their own ideas. Indeed, one of Socrates's most famous images is that of himself as a midwife. In this paper, we shall suggest that modern philosophers might be seen, and see themselves, in the same way, using the resources of philosophy to help others give birth to their own ideas.

At least as he appears in the evidence available to us, Socrates was a truly public philosopher. He believed he had a divine mission to interrogate everyone he encountered on fundamental moral issues, and through exposing their ignorance put them in a position to live more virtuous lives. His methods contrast with those of modern academic philosophers. He sought to discuss philosophy with all, not only his students or fellow philosophers. He did not see philosophy as a profession and indeed would take no payment from his interlocutors. Nor did he publish, believing that the only way to make progress in philosophy is to discuss it with real people. He argued that the written word cannot defend itself or be questioned and cannot teach the truth effectively.

Academic philosophy as we know it, then, might be said to have begun with the work of Socrates's most famous discussant, Plato, who founded a famous school for philosophy in Athens (the Academy), wrote down his views, and disseminated them. And when we consider the history of philosophy from the time of Socrates and Plato until now, it is hard to think that Plato's decision to record his thoughts was a mistake.

But someone might suggest academic debate in philosophy is pointless since there has been so little agreement, even on fundamental issues such as truth, the criteria of personhood, or ethical principles. Here it is worth remembering that philosophy is, probably, still at an early stage of its development: we often forget that we may well be living at the very beginning of an extraordinarily long intellectual history. Further, philosophy, including philosophical ethics, has made a good deal of progress. By the end of the 20th century, for example, the differences between various consequentialist and deontological positions were significantly clearer than they had been at the end of the previous century. And, through successful public engagement on a large scale, several philosophers have in recent years greatly advanced the understanding of ethics among the general public. These include, for example, Kwame Anthony Appiah in his *New York Times* column ‘The Ethicist’; Mary Warnock in her work on bioethical issues; Michael Sandel, in many television programmes and online courses; and Toby Ord, in his work on existential threats.

In addition, philosophers have, partly through their publishing, contributed to important ethical advances. For example: the abolition of slavery — Adam Smith; equality for women — Mary Wollstonecraft and J.S. Mill; education reform — John Dewey; the decriminalisation of homosexuality — H.L.A. Hart; the global distribution of healthcare resources — Larry Temkin; attitudes to global poverty and the treatment of non-human animals — Peter Singer; and human rights and economic development — Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen.

Philosophy, then, can change things, and work in practical ethics can sometimes have quite revisionary implications for the world of policymaking. This should not surprise us. Professional moral philosophy champions the rigorous scrutiny of even the most widely and deeply held beliefs and values, and some of its best work can substantially change our understanding of these beliefs and values, or what they might entail.

This willingness to challenge existing precepts and frameworks is in many ways a virtue of the field, and this sort of work in philosophy can of course sometimes have real world effects on policymaking. Yet this willingness can also sometimes be a limitation when it comes to thinking about the potential of philosophy to impact real-world policy. It is one thing to convince an academic colleague of a philosophical argument to change the world and change their current understanding of a practical problem; it is quite another thing to argue that it would be politically feasible or expedient for those in the policymaking sphere to follow suit.

At any rate, philosophy *can* assist with progress. Further, this is something we should expect (both expect to happen and *expect* from philosophers). But there is no doubt that a lot more could be done. One problem is that the explosion in professional applied or practical ethics happened during the 1970s, when publication had already become the primary mode of assessment of philosophical reputation, and hence the driver for academic activity. In the UK, for example, there have been eight major national research assessments since 1986, and only in 2014 was 'impact' considered (and then only in the form of somewhat artificial 'impact cases', rather than the direct engagement of individual academics with the public through publication, the media, committee work and so on).

Philosophers themselves have tended not to object to the focus on academic output, primarily because they like doing philosophy, and having their ideas taken seriously by their peers in the discipline. The result is that it would be difficult to significantly lengthen the list of 'engaged' philosophers given above. But philosophers should not be blamed for this, nor should members of the public for their ignorance of what philosophy is and how it might play a much larger part in public life. Both sides are the products of their times. If a finger is to be pointed anywhere, it might perhaps be towards Kenneth Baker, the education secretary in the Thatcher government, for not including philosophy in the 1988 national curriculum. Had the public become more aware of philosophy, there would have been more opportunities to benefit from interaction with professional philosophers, an interaction which would almost certainly have benefited professional philosophy as well as individual philosophers.

Let us operate on the assumption that clarity, understanding of arguments and their logic, and perspective are, in general, valuable in public life. Philosophers, then, because of the peculiar focus on argument in their training, have a huge amount to contribute, but they are not called upon as often as they might be. The current situation is in some ways analogous to a programme in which medical researchers are hired to make progress on treatments for various illnesses, and merely to publish their papers in journals, which are known to be read mainly by other medics. (Medics, of course, do get kudos from the success of their research, though the drivers behind their success often arise from the interest of drug companies. Philosophy is equally in the public interest, but not marketised.)

All, or at least most, philosophers, then, should be required by their employers to take part in public life. (This would of course require a national strategy, imposed by the Department of

Education.) This includes non-ethicists: they have much to contribute merely through their philosophical expertise. Further, for ethics in particular, 'ethical consultancy' programmes should be instituted, analogous in some ways to existing business ethics consultancies. Though they should, wherever possible, be non-profit, and their focus should not be restricted to the culture of the organisation that uses their services. Their function should not be seen as in any way moralistic or protreptic. The aim would be to help others to think through the issues they are facing with a more self-conscious focus on clarity and rigour.

It might be objected that these changes will slow down progress in academic philosophy. But, one might respond, the current situation may be inefficient, and fewer papers would not necessarily lead to slower progress in philosophy. And, through greater interaction, the philosophy that is published, especially on practical issues, would be more informed and helpful. Philosophy does move forward slowly, that is, carefully, and maybe things are better that way. And, even if the objection is correct, the advantages to the public of greater engagement by philosophers outweigh the drawbacks. Nor need we expect every philosopher (even the very best) to be required to spend the same amount of time on public engagement. Further, public engagement should be understood broadly. Some philosophers are better at, or more inclined to, working with the media, while others may prefer to serve on committees, publish accessible papers, or to work with organisations such as the Public Philosophy Network.

Earlier, we mentioned the potential for philosophy to lead to radical or revisionary conclusions. But it needn't do that, and in fact moral philosophy can also play a quite different, and arguably more powerful role in this sphere. Rather than using the tools of moral philosophy just to develop theoretical arguments supporting change (as do Appiah and the 'public intellectuals' listed above), the philosopher in the public sphere can also seek to use these tools to enhance understanding of the practical options that are on the policymaking table.

This is where philosophical obstetrics comes in. Let us return to ethical consultancy. The University of Oxford and some other leading universities have focused on 'research-led' teaching, that is, the teaching of undergraduates, in particular, who then go on to make a great contribution to their country (in most cases — politics may be an exception ...). Ethical consultancy is analogous to that, but it extends the net to include the public at large. As we noted, this already happens in certain businesses, and when it is done properly, rather than as a form of 'ethics-washing', it can improve corporate governance as well as the lives of

employees and other stakeholders. Here at the Uehiro Oxford Institute, we and many of our colleagues have been involved in work with government, both national and local, the NHS, schools, the police and prison service, as well as a wide range of other institutions through our Master of Studies (MSt) in Practical Ethics (University of Oxford, 2025), Bitesize Ethics (University of Oxford, 2024) series, and other programmes.

The consultancy role is perhaps of most use in areas of public debate in which there are a variety of conflicting moral considerations supporting mutually exclusive policy choices. This is particularly so when the public debate on the topic has become politicised in a manner that precludes different sides of the issue from acknowledging any weakness in their own position, or any strength in their opponent's. In such circumstances, progress can be extremely difficult, and the stalemate in the public and political debate may even lead to a kind of policy paralysis.

This is one important area in which the skills of the philosopher — not just the moral philosopher, but also the logician, the metaphysician, the epistemologist, if they have the right communication skills — can help to enable progress. By clarifying concepts, analysing the structure of the arguments that are employed to support different policy options, and pointing out where their different strengths and weaknesses may be, the public philosopher can help the policymaker to chart and navigate the different value trade-offs that they will unavoidably have to make in developing coherent policy on highly contested issues.

The benefit of philosophical input here is not that the philosopher can ‘solve’ the moral problem facing policymakers; unfortunately such neat solutions are rarely available in either politics or philosophy. Instead, it is to help ensure that the policy response to an issue with moral dimensions is well reasoned and systematically considers a wide range of morally relevant factors. Ultimately, then, philosophical input can help to ensure that policy provides moral justification to those affected by the policy. After all, to retain their legitimacy, it is crucial that policymakers can offer this group a reasonable answer to the question, ‘Why did you decide that this was the best course of action?’

It might be objected that this is all well and good, but that philosophy as an academic discipline will suffer because its practitioners are spending time on public engagement rather than academic research. This objection cannot be dismissed out of hand. But it is worth noting, first, that a great deal of philosophical research is funded by the public, who might not unreasonably expect philosophers to be prepared (indeed required),

like real midwives trained at public expense, to directly contribute to the public good. Further, to some extent, the value of research diminishes marginally, and it may be also that philosophers’ ability to think and to express their own views will be advanced through communication with non-specialists, with a focus on accessibility, avoiding jargon, and so on.

One example of putting this kind of vision of philosophy’s role in public life into practice is the Uehiro Oxford Institute’s Decision Aid for the Restitution of Cultural Artefacts (DARCA). The question of whether cultural institutions (like museums) ought to return certain items within their collections has been subject to increasing debate in recent years. There are two broad competing moral obligations that largely shape the debate in this sphere. On one hand, it is sometimes claimed that cultural institutions have a moral obligation to the publics they serve to preserve and showcase valuable cultural artefacts, because these items manifest important parts of humankind’s shared cultural heritage. Conversely, however, these same institutions are sometimes understood to be under a moral obligation to return certain artefacts because another party has a plausible moral claim to that item, perhaps because its return would constitute an appropriate form of reparation for a historical injustice involved in the object’s transfer of ownership. In view of this conflict, DARCA was developed to enable those facing the practical policy challenges of cultural restitution to adopt coherent and justifiable policy responses on a case-by-case basis.

DARCA was developed in close partnership with an interdisciplinary group of stakeholders. Across two workshops, and following a review of existing sector guidance, law, policy, and academic moral philosophy, the DARCA team identified a range of moral considerations that can be understood to affect the relative strength of these two moral obligations. Following iterated consultation with experts in the field, the team aimed to synthesise this body of work into an approachable and accessible tool that can enable individuals to think systematically through various considerations relevant to ethical questions about cultural restitution. To do so, the team developed a series of questions that can be used to assess how these factors might arise and interact in a particular case of cultural restitution. These questions form the theoretical basis of DARCA, and users answering these questions are invited to reflect on some of the philosophical complexities of each of the questions raised with carefully curated guidance notes. Upon completing DARCA, the user is provided with a summary of their answers, any further written justification they may have given for those answers, an overall assessment of the comparative strength of the argument for restitution, and an explanation of that assessment.

DARCA cannot solve the moral issue of cultural restitution, and that is not its intended goal. Indeed, it is intended to guide and supplement the user’s own moral reflection on this complex area of policy, rather than to replace it. However, after using DARCA, the user should have a better sense of where the moral arguments appear to lead in their case, why they do so, and what moral factors have made a difference. The role of philosophers in developing DARCA, then, has not been to provide policymakers with the ‘right’ answer; it has instead been to help them reach their own answer in a manner that is systematic, well-informed, and philosophically grounded. The role of the engaged practical philosopher, then, is primarily not to persuade, but to provide assistance to others in reaching their own, reasoned conclusions.

References:

- University of Oxford (2024). *Bitesize ethics 2024*. [online] Available at: <https://www.practicaethics.ox.ac.uk/event/bitesize-ethics-summer-programme> [Accessed 21 Feb. 2025].
- University of Oxford (2025). *MSt in Practical Ethics*. [online] Available at: <https://www.practicaethics.ox.ac.uk/mst-in-practical-ethics> [Accessed 21 Feb. 2025].