Public philosophy for gremlins

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A friend of my dad's used to have a saying which we may call, in his honour, the 'Julius Principle'. The Julius Principle holds that around 95% of all professionals are utterly hopeless at the thing they are professionals at. Teachers, doctors, plumbers, lawyers, officials of various kinds — you name it: useless bunch, whether because of lack of aptitude or because they are out for themselves, motivated more by their own advancement or convenience than by service to others, or because of some combination of the above. To find that the teacher is a poor communicator and has no affinity with kids, or that the doctor makes the wrong diagnosis, or that the plumber fixes one leak and creates another, should not be the surprising thing. What is surprising is the happy case where the professional actually knows what he or she is doing and does *not* screw it up.

The Julius Principle is somewhat similar to the more famous 'Peter Principle', which holds that every employee in an organisation 'tends to rise to his level of incompetence' (Peter and Hull, 1969). People who are good at their jobs will tend to be promoted based on their competence at that role or level, but this will not necessarily translate into competence at a higher level (for example, a competent educator may not be a good manager). If they *are* good at their new role, they will be promoted again. In the end, anyone who is any good at anything will end up doing something they are bad at. By contrast, the 'Dilbert Principle' proposed by Scott Adams (Adams, 1996) observes that people who are particularly *in*competent at their jobs are often promoted into management roles, basically to get them out of the way. In the sage words of Dogbert (Dilbert's dog): 'leadership is nature's way of removing morons from the productive flow.' Sadly (as any academic can tell you), this does not remove the power of managers to wreak destruction on the working lives of others.

The Julius Principle differs from these others mainly in that it is stronger and more sweeping: the *vast majority* is condemned as useless. This might seem, at first sight, like a pretty

obnoxious sort of sentiment. Not only is it insulting to all the hard-working professionals out there, we might think, but it’s simply not true. It might sometimes *seem* like everyone we encounter is an idiot or a crook and that things are always going wrong, but this is just a kind of Eeyore-ish cognitive bias. Things do go wrong, for sure, but those are just the times we’re more likely to remember: we take for granted or do not even notice all the times when they work as they should. After all, if it were really the case that almost everyone is terrible at their job, then society would come to a screeching halt — lorries would crash into each other, surgeons would remove the wrong organs, bartenders would try to pour pints into the wrong end of the glass. Of course, all of the above have been known to happen. But mercifully, they are the exception rather than the rule.

Still, this only refutes an extreme and rather crude version of the Julius Principle. Competence and incompetence are relative concepts, after all (as is corruption or malevolence). This might seem only to raise another problem: relative to what? Almost by definition, most people can’t be *below average* at what they do. Thus the suspicion may arise that this is really no more than a bit of snootiness: a way of saying, ‘Other people are not as good as *me*.’ Whether true in a given case or not, this is not a terribly attractive posture to adopt. In any case, it is merely a statement about the speaker’s individual superiority, which (whether real or not) has no obvious wider significance or interest. I often think this about a widespread habit of thought and speech which lays the blame for this or that problem with ‘people’ *simpliciter*. You hear it all the time: ‘people are so stupid’, or ‘people are selfish’ — and *that* is why we can’t have nice things. Such statements are ultimately conservative or authoritarian in character, it seems to me. If the problem is simply (other) *people*, then what is the solution? Dissolve the people and elect another?[1]

But while we have reason to be wary of the hidden politics behind clichéd statements of casual misanthropy, it’s equally important not to fall for a kind of dogmatic ‘moderate’-ism that regards any wide-scope or far-reaching criticism as suspect by default. For one thing, maybe the philosopher and ‘critical theorist’ Theodor Adorno had a point when he said something that would strike most people as obviously false: that only exaggerations are true.[2] That is, sometimes what is technically an overstatement (and in that sense false) conveys an intended meaning or truth better — and hence more *truly* — than a more caveat-laden, round-the-houses version which would be more strictly accurate. Take a statement like: ‘Tory politicians have no empathy for people in poverty.’ Probably, at least some of them do, in a way, at least a tiny bit. Maybe they feel a little twinge of humanity now and again, on the rare occasions

when the suffering of the people in question is forced on their attention, for instance when they encounter a suitably sympathetic and presentable poor person (and maybe that’s why they prefer to keep such encounters to a minimum). But a revised statement acknowledging all this — for example, ‘Most Tory politicians, most of the time, have very little empathy for the poor’ — would, I think, do a worse job of conveying the reality. In other words, it would be *less true*. And even if you don’t accept that, there is the consideration that apparently extreme or sweeping statements might not always be exaggerated at all. What if the truth *is* extreme?

We can make pretty good pre-theoretical sense, I think, of the difference between seeing the contemporary social world as one in which things basically tick along okay (albeit with a few glitches here and there), and seeing it instead as basically dysfunctional. This dysfunctionality may not necessarily be relative to any other past or present society, but relative to how it *might* or *could* or *should* be, as well as relative to what it *claims* to be — societies invariably find ways to present themselves in a flattering light and to disguise their uglier features. From the perspective of this second position, the Julius Principle makes a great deal of sense. For all sorts of reasons, we might take the view that the way our institutions are designed, the forces to which they are responsive (profit, for instance, rather than the imperatives of human need or public good), and the ways in which their personnel are selected and trained, are not conducive to producing even a narrow or minimal competence. Let alone faring well in a more substantial sense relative to those institutions’ stated or widely presumed functions (the Julius Principle as I’ve formulated it is ambiguous between these somewhat different claims). It might be thought that only the second of these suggestions is respectable. While institutions and their practitioners may not do what they ‘say on the tin’ (so to speak), surely they are competent in the first, more minimal sense. For example, a journalist will at least know how to write correct sentences, and to deal with editors, and to consult sources, and so on, but may nevertheless be bad at their job in the sense that they are hopeless at thinking critically and holding the powerful to account (the function central to journalism’s self-conception). But even this strikes me as an overly optimistic (or what Adorno called ‘affirmative’) assessment. Moreover, it’s not possible cleanly to extricate a thin sense of ‘competence’ from the more loaded idea of doing a job either in the way we think it should be done, or in a way which lives up to its self-professed standards and rationale. It may be, for example, that journalists often can’t write properly and don’t bother to check facts because of such factors as the rampant nepotism and elitism of that profession, and the fact that their work is in practice not held to account in the sense of having to be accurate, but only in the sense of flattering or leaving undisturbed the relevant vested interests.[3]

To put it another way, something like the Julius Principle seems to fit well within — and indeed to be logically dictated by — a ‘critical theory’ of society, in the sense espoused by thinkers such as Adorno. The conviction of this strand of social theory is (to put it in the crudest terms) that things are both very bad, and bad in ways that are *systematic* as opposed to local and isolable. From that point of view, there would be an incongruity involved in being too ‘affirmative’ of any portion of social reality. How can you say (as critical theorists of the Frankfurt School do) that society ‘as a totality’ is the problem — that it is rotten to the core, not just in need of a little reform here and there — and then go on in the same breath to say that what the teacher training colleges do is jolly good and that most teachers do a sterling job? It doesn’t really make sense. There is a strong inhibition against noticing this tension, however, which may have a lot to do with a desire not to be seen as elitist or ‘anti-worker’. Especially on the political left, it’s almost a compulsive tic to say, even when drawing attention to some systemic failing or pervasive abuse, that (‘of course’) the vast majority of teachers (for example) are excellent and dedicated people doing a vital job. There are some respectable reasons for this, no doubt. You don’t want to make blanket statements where they are not true (for example, that all teachers are paedophiles). You don’t want to blame individuals for what are really structural problems. But that doesn’t remove the fact that individuals are not neatly detachable from structures: individuals are formed by structures and work within them. It doesn’t make it true, for instance, that most teachers do a great or even competent job for the kids — nice as this would be. That, in my experience anyway, is not the case (and I don’t think I’m alone here: it’s telling that when people opine about how great teachers are, they often seem to have in mind some abstract *idea* of teachers, not the actual ones they remember being taught by themselves). The good teachers were the exceptions: 5% sounds about right to me.[4] Generous, even.

Which brings me, at last, to philosophy. Philosophers — more, I think, than members of many other professions or disciplines, for whom this sort of question either seems misplaced or the answer obvious — periodically ask themselves about the nature of their proper role and distinctive contribution relative to wider society of ‘public life’. This, in my view, is a good and necessary thing to ask about. But the ways in which many philosophers ask and try to answer the question of the relationship between philosophy and the wider world, it has always seemed to me, encode a heavy bias towards the status quo. If, for example, we identify this question with that of how philosophers might influence policymakers, we reveal what I would consider an unduly optimistic estimation of the receptiveness of those in positions of power to being influenced in a positive direction (or indeed, to being influenced by argument at all). More fundamentally, to frame the issue in this way takes for granted the

existing structures of power and decision-making which are precisely what need to be called into question.[5] But I have a still more basic worry that is less often voiced (maybe because voicing it would involve coming uncomfortably close to calling your colleagues a load of idiots or lickspittles — which is never likely to go down well). The worry, bluntly put, is that philosophers might not actually be very fit agents to bring about a positive influence or to make a 'contribution' to public life that amounts to more than an ideological greasing of the wheels of the political and social status quo. What if — as in the well-known comedy sketch — we're the baddies (or the fools, or some combination of the two)?

This might seem like a perverse as well as a rude thing to say. Even if philosophy and philosophers are so terrible at doing what they purport to be doing — that is, contributing clear-eyed and principled understanding that is unafraid to go against power's grain — then isn't that all the more reason to ask how we might do better? In one sense, the answer to this is obviously 'yes'. Setting out and pursuing an idea of how philosophy might be done in a different and better way, one geared towards the end of emancipation from oppression rather than the reproduction of the status quo, is after all central to the project of critical theory.[6]

The source of the confusion here, it seems to me, is that the question of what role philosophy should play relative to politics and public life is crucially ambiguous. On one reading, it is simply equivalent to the question of what is a good way to do philosophy, if you are interested both in interpreting the world and also in changing it. And according to the sort of answer associated with critical theory, at any rate, the way to do that is resoundingly *not* to try to think of ways to be 'helpful', that is, to try to make the system as it exists work better. The social status quo is so deeply and systematically dysfunctional that is cannot be made to work by a few reforms — and is in any case so thoroughly corrupted that for it to 'work' might actually mean something still more horrifying than our social world already is. The only decent response, in that case, is to try to be like a gremlin in the machinery: to aim to intervene in the social world in ways that disrupt its smooth action, that gum up its gears — or, if that is impossible, to stand back from it and refuse to be drawn into the meat-grinder.

On the other reading, by contrast, the question is about what overall role philosophers in general, or academic philosophy as an institution, might feasibly and desirably play in relation to the social world as it currently exists. Though superficially similar, this is a quite different question, one that presupposes a view of either or both the social world in general

and the institution of academic philosophy in particular such that the latter might feasibly come to play a desirable (even a desirably transformative) role vis-à-vis the former. Only on a basically affirmative assumption of this kind is it possible to conflate the two questions.

In other words, many discussions of the relationship between philosophy and public life suffer from a failure of realism when it comes to the way the agent of possible intervention — in this case, philosophy — is thought about. This failure mirrors the way in which people often contemplate the question of ‘humanitarian intervention’ by liberal states (as if these are entities that can realistically be expected to intervene in the rest of the world in ways that are remotely ‘humane’). Even those who cast themselves as radical critics of society are not always so critical when it comes to the institution of philosophy. But the basic problem with the question of what philosophers can do for public life is that philosophers — or at least, about 95% of us, 95% of the time — are awful. You can aspire to be a gremlin in the system, but then you must also expect to be a gremlin in the department.

There are exceptions, of course: philosophers who try to do something other than interpret the world, even if actually changing it seems to be ever further out of reach. But the point is that within the institution of philosophy in society as it is presently constituted, it is no accident that these will be the exceptions rather than the rule. Why is such a pessimistic view of philosophy in order? The long way round in terms of answering that question would be to do a comprehensive critique of the state of philosophy. But the shorter way is just to point out that, if you take a dim enough view of the social world in general, then a rosy view of anything in it — certainly anything as large and as embedded within the ‘establishment’ as the academic field of philosophy — makes questionable sense. If you really think that society as a whole is the problem, that the rot goes deep, then there is at the very least a strong presumption in favour of the expectation that philosophy — most of it, anyway, most of the time — will be no exception, but more of the same. The most we can do is to strive to be, as far and as often as possible, among the exceptions.

Notes:

1 The phrase comes from Brecht’s satirical poem of 1953, ‘The Solution’ (*Die Lösung*); see Thomson (2006: 239).

2 Adorno makes versions of this point on a number of occasions; see, e.g., aphorisms 29 and 82 of his *Minima Moralia* (Adorno [1951] 2005).

3 Of course, there is also a third possible sense of being ‘good’ or ‘competent’ at a job, which is related to what we might take to the be the *real* (as opposed to the official or stated) social function of the institution or role in question — for example, we may judge that the real function of journalism is to prop up existing power structures and to ‘manufacture consent’ for them (cf. Chomsky & Herman 1988), and that most journalists perform this function quite effectively.

4 Again, it might be that teachers are quite effective at doing what they are *really* there to do: to contain, subdue and browbeat children into submission until they are ready to be released into the workforce. I leave this question open.

5 I have developed this point at greater length elsewhere (Finlayson 2015).

6 Cf. Raymond Geuss’s (1981: 58) description of the characteristic aspiration of critical theory as to be ‘the self-consciousness of a successful process of enlightenment and emancipation.’

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