

"The point is to change it"

Philosophy matters

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I find the question 'does philosophy matter to public life?' puzzling. On one hand, I think, how could anyone believe that ideas and methods from philosophy do not matter to our individual and collective lives? Our world has been rocked by claims about values — from the claims of human equality to those involved in the birth of liberalism to debates about the appropriate role of religion in public life. Philosophical reflection addresses questions about values and has helped guide human culture as societies (and individuals) have grappled with such issues.

On the other hand, the charge that 'the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it' goes back to Marx (1845) and, indeed, much further back than that. Today's political realists have added to that charge, claiming that abstract philosophical ideas, by themselves, change nothing (Geuss, 2008). And in a world where too often it is those in power who claim a monopoly on what is right, my students worry that philosophy is only talk.

Many people, therefore, do not find the question puzzling. Some reject the kinds of questions contemporary philosophers ask; some bemoan the professionalisation and specialisation which turned many people away from asking big questions; some think the focus on 'ideal norms' and 'abstract arguments is pointless; and some think that without an army, philosophy departments might as well devote themselves to the self-address of the eternal (for all it matters). These are not baseless concerns. But they do not state that different philosophical ideas about values — about what matters, about what we ought to do, and about how we should live together — have not played a large role in public life. Here, I will argue that such ideas are not mere talk but have given shape to human aspirations and channelled individuals' and societies' energies in particular directions.

I'll point to two broad examples to make my case about the importance of philosophical ideas for public life; list a shorter selection of specific examples from contemporary philosophy; and in the light of this, revisit the question.

The birth of liberalism

Modern liberalism emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth century in the aftermath of the religious wars in Europe and amid challenges to the divine right of kings. Rather than privileging the idea of a natural corporate social order based on status, liberals argued for the equality and freedom of individuals. But as soon as they emerged, liberal ideas were subjected to at least three pointed attacks.

The first line of attack argued that liberal individualism was incompatible with social order. Early modern European societies were held together by bonds of status which assigned differential rights and duties to groups, and by widely shared religious doctrines. In the absence of such shared beliefs, and without a given social hierarchy, how could a society of individuals be stable? Why would equal and free individuals obey the law?

Starting with Thomas Hobbes — who argued against the view that individuals were the king’s property and therefore must give allegiance — and running through such thinkers as Locke, Rousseau and Rawls, philosophers developed a set of answers to this challenge. They argued that under conditions of scarcity, rational individuals will find it in their interest to form a society with rules and to empower a sovereign — the Leviathan — to enforce those rules. Of course, these thinkers differed on the extent of the powers of the sovereign, the nature of the rules that would be agreed to, and the set of alternatives that should be considered. But they each argued that a political state is justified and will be stable to the extent that it improves individuals’ well-being against some set of alternatives while preserving their freedom and equality. They emphasised the importance of liberalism to rule of law, decentralised market exchange, and widely distributed property.

The second line of attack argued that liberalism was incoherent. Liberalism asks people with strong personal convictions to refrain from using state institutions to further those convictions. It does so out of a commitment to a principle of neutrality, the idea that the state should be neutral between different conceptions of the good. But isn’t liberalism itself such a conception of the good? If so, then why should non-liberals accept liberalism? Many philosophers during liberalism’s rise responded to this line of attack.

And John Rawls more recently provided a strong argument (Rawls, 1971). He argues that because under conditions of freedom, people will not converge on a shared view about

what is a good life, we should not use such conceptions to allocate social resources such as money, power and opportunity. We should instead derive principles of justice that treat all individuals fairly. Liberalism should be neutral between individual views of value and meaning. Of course, liberalism cannot be neutral to its own presuppositions, in particular, its claim that all individuals are free and equal. However, Rawls also argued that even those who do not support such neutrality towards conceptions of the good life on liberal grounds — because they believe there is one truth given to us by God — may subscribe to such neutrality on other bases. For example, appealing to pragmatic grounds, or if the conclusions of such neutral reasoning are compatible with their religious precepts, etc.

The third line of attack was that inequalities between individuals are naturally produced and are inevitable in a free society. Here too, political philosophers explored the ways that equality and liberty could be reconciled. From Locke's view that all are entitled to 'equal freedom', to Rousseau's idea that natural differences by themselves do not entitle some to more than others, philosophers hammered out different views of what freedom and equality actually amount to. It is critical to remember that in pre-Lockean Europe natural hierarchy was the 'common sense' of the time (although there were critics) and it took a concerted philosophical attack to articulate and defend a coherent alternative.

Liberal philosophers alone, of course, did not make liberalism. But they strengthened the alternative to the 'common sense' of the old social order and connected with popular aspirations and social movements. Just think about some of the policies that came out of liberal thought: the extension of the franchise to women, propertyless men and former slaves; the rise of a social safety net to protect citizens from certain kinds of risk; and the creation of a private sphere of life.

Neoliberalism

Philosophical ideas also shaped the doctrine of neoliberalism which rose to prominence in the decades after the second world war. The term neoliberalism, of course, has been used in many ways. It is sometimes described as an empirical doctrine, positing a relationship between markets and growth and contrasting that to the inferior relationship between government and growth. But its early champions were quite explicit about the *philosophical* commitments of their theory. Indeed, the success of neoliberalism arguably depended on

the integration of its economic model with a moral framework (Bowles and Carlin, 2021). That framework privileged ‘freedom from’ government coercion along with a view of human beings as primarily, although not only, self-interested. This latter assumption of self-interest applied not only to the owners of companies but also to government representatives and functionaries. Moreover, according to neoliberalism, these government agents held much greater centralised power than mere capitalists.

Given these two moral/political commitments it is not surprising that neoliberals sought to reduce the scope of government and empower individuals. Indeed, neoliberals were suspicious of most forms of collective action. They thought that governments should play a much smaller role in capitalist economies than it had during the mid-twentieth century and that markets offered far better means of achieving not only economic growth but individual freedom. They also sought to articulate and defend a theory of the proper role of government.

Hayek’s *The Road to Serfdom* (1944) was written during the second world war, at a time when fascism and a totalitarian socialism seemed likely to push out liberal democracies. Hayek was especially worried about centralised government regulation and planning which he believed was not only inefficient but a threat to freedom. Governments do not have access to the essential information that individuals have about what they want and what is good for them — although Hayek and Friedman worried that all of us are remarkably ignorant about what is good for us. Instead, experimentation, choice and decentralisation are the best means we have of learning. Hayek launched a major attack on socialist thought that shaped much mid-twentieth century thinking.

Although Hayek was trained as an economist, his writings are also works of political theory; the same is true of James Buchanan and, to some extent, of Milton Friedman. And the doctrine of neoliberalism succeeded not simply because it centred on an economic theory (‘free’ markets), but because it articulated a plausible theory of human behaviour, a view of the proper role of government, a set of emblematic policies, and an attractive (if controversial) view of individual freedom (Burgin, 2012). Friedman was especially good at popularising this vision of freedom and helped successfully deploy it to convince Richard Nixon to end the military draft and institute a volunteer army (Appelbaum, 2019). Friedman later recalled his role in Nixon’s decision as his ‘most important’ policy achievement (Friedman, 1995, p. 38).

Both liberalism and neoliberalism, in my view, give testimony to the power of ideas. Moreover, these ideas were debated, tested and transformed in ways that are familiar to philosophers.

No philosophy in public life?

Of course, there are a host of other areas where philosophers and legal scholars have recently played important roles in shaping public policy debates: animal welfare; disability accommodation; drug policy; punishment; effective altruism; universal basic income; tax policy; freedom of speech; healthcare ethics; and campaign finance law. But to say they have played important roles does not mean that their views prevailed or that they won over most of the public. Or that their views were even correct.

Conclusion

Given the outsized roles of philosophical ideas and argumentation in the rise of liberalism and in the articulation of neoliberalism, and the examples of other areas where philosophers have made contributions, why is there so much scepticism? Why is the role of philosophy in public life even a question? I can think of three reasons.

First, it is undoubtedly true that it is not by the public's reading of philosophical arguments in professional journals that philosophers make their mark. Instead, philosophical ideas are spun out in classrooms, law schools, policy arenas and places where people get together and try to reason about what to do. There is a continuum between what everyone does and what philosophers do — we try and consider and make sense of our options and evaluate them. Where philosophers excel is in the business of argument and counterargument, logical inference, drawing connections, and making distinctions.

Second, while I have suggested that ideas influence society, it is of course true that society and social conditions influence ideas. But the claim that ideas don't matter at all — that the causality goes in only one direction is implausible: societies with roughly similar social conditions have taken markedly different trajectories driven in part by ideas — including religious ideas about the world. Max Weber's famous formulation states: 'Not ideas, but material and ideal interests directly govern man's conduct. Yet frequently the "world images"

which have been created by "ideas" have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interests.' (in Gerth and Mills, 1958, p. 280). Weber's key example was the rise of capitalism in the Protestant west and not in the more advanced civilization of China.

Third, although ideas matter, how best to implement ideas is not the core provenance of philosophy. You cannot make one move from Kantian or utilitarian theory to conclude how best to regulate the internet, or how healthcare should be allocated or whether to legalise marijuana. Philosophers have something to contribute to the assessment of alternatives and can help clarify the multiple and sometimes conflicting values at stake in our options. But we need to work with others with other kinds of expertise if we want to contribute to policy — and narrow graduate training and professionalisation don't make such collaboration easy. Such collaboration is, in my view, quite important, if we are to help develop a compelling alternative to neoliberalism.

To clarify — I don't think the only two ways of contributing to policy are top down or bottom up. Even bottom-up approaches will find it helpful to sometimes employ abstract reasoning to clarify a conflict and to help guide us. And there is a place for 'ideal' theorising that stretches the limits of our sense of possibility. Who thought, after all, in the late eighteenth century that slavery was wrong and should be abolished everywhere? As Adam Hochschild describes it in his wonderful book *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire's Slaves* (Hochschild, 2006), the idea seemed 'totally utopian, crackpot, wildly too optimistic'. So too did the equality of women when Mary Wollstonecraft argued the case in 1792. But such ideas have helped shape the arc of the moral universe. And reflection on these and other ideas is also part of philosophy.

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