The marketplace of ideas: who’s buying?

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Much philosophical writing is in principle relevant to decision-making in the public sphere, but in practice has absolutely no effect on the day-to-day concerns of policymakers. Only a tiny percentage of philosophical writing is explicitly addressed to practical problems of a kind that policymakers need to solve, and even where it is, it is often written in a way that is too technical for those without graduate-level training in philosophy to understand. And when philosophers aim to say something helpful about live policy problems, they often misunderstand relevant contextual features, and recommend simple solutions that, if adopted, might make the real-world problem worse.

Why is this, and what should be done about it? The deepest difference between philosophers and policymakers is in their prevailing assumptions about the role and usefulness of theory. Policymaking is fast-paced and focused on making improvements in a context in which many factors are beyond the policymaker’s control. As a result, policymakers are most interested in what will work here and now, where ‘working’ involves only making an improvement according to some baseline, rather than completely solving the problem.

Philosophy works at a rather slower pace. Philosophers usually take their discipline’s problems to be abstract and highly idealised. In approaching problems, they often deliberately ignore many factors such as context, history and how the problem interacts in practice with others. This idealisation shapes philosophers’ sense of what a good theory would look like. Philosophers tend to assume that a theory cannot be correct if someone can produce a successful counterexample to it, and in exploring potential counterexamples,

they are drawn to conceptually interesting edge cases that often involve outlandish scenarios. While focusing most philosophers' analytical firepower on highly contrived cases might provide the best way of determining whether any philosophical theories can be defended against all possible counterexamples, it has the unfortunate result that philosophers often largely ignore the common cases which are the bread and butter of public policy.

It is easy to point to celebrated historical examples of philosophers' influence on policymaking — such as Mary Warnock's official inquiry and report that led to the establishment of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990 — but it is rather more difficult to identify similar contemporary examples of policy influence. While a generation ago it seemed natural for politicians to look to prominent philosophers like Mary Warnock, Anthony Quinton, Bernard Williams or Stewart Sutherland to provide wise counsel, they now seek advice elsewhere. Twenty-five years ago, there were four philosophers in the House of Lords, but Onora O'Neill is now the sole remaining philosopher, and will retire soon.

Growing numbers of philosophers now see it as a problem that the discipline punches below its weight in its contributions to public policy, and this has coincided with increased financial incentives from research funders to demonstrate the impact of research. Recent years have seen increased emphasis by philosophers on demonstrating how philosophical expertise can improve the conceptualisation, framing, understanding, and weighing of options around matters of public concern. This has included writing academic articles, newspaper commentaries, media interviews, writing commissioned reports, and working with public bodies to help solve problems as part of a multidisciplinary team. The REF 2021 Impact Case database (REF 2021, 2023) provides a good sense of the range of activity.

What has been missing so far is a rigorous and realistic account of how policymakers view the involvement of philosophers in the conceptualisation, framing, analysis and weighing of policy options. Do they think that there is something significant missing from democratic decision-making without the input of philosophers, or do they think that philosophers' usefulness is rather more marginal? And if policymakers do not find philosophy useful for their purposes, what should philosophers do about this?

There are sharp differences in how policymakers use scientific and philosophical insights. Scientific knowledge is descriptive rather than normative, and facilitates new or different means of attaining whatever goals a community has. Therefore, the same body of scientific

knowledge can be useful to individuals or governments with widely differing political goals. While scientific and technological advances sometimes lead to profound social shifts (such as the smartphone) and these may also reshape social values, the desirability of such social changes is a matter for general political discussion, rather than something on which scientists are uniquely qualified to pronounce. Conversely, philosophical literature in ethics and political philosophy is overwhelmingly normative, rather than descriptive. Philosophers’ aims are not usually to provide tools that can be used better to pursue whatever goals a political community already has, but to make arguments about the principles and the goals that determine what societies ought to do.

The defining feature of democracy is that it is an open-ended project in which the people, and their elected representatives, set its direction. Such fundamental commitments are difficult to reconcile with the idea that philosophers (or any other group) have a special kind of insight into core ethical values, and should be deferred to on this basis. As a result, not even philosophers themselves claim that they best placed to dictate the values that should inform public policy. Philosophers are of course just as entitled as any other citizen to intervene in public debates, and to contribute to a public conversation, whether via newspaper articles, media appearances or political activity, but it is not the case that others should defer to them because they are philosophers on matters relating to values.

How can philosophers influence public policy in a way that is not only responsible but also effective? A basic quest for philosophers is to ascertain what other sources of policy advice they are in competition with. Are the contributions of philosophers in competition only with those of other philosophers, or with a wide range of other potential sources of advice? As philosophers, it is tempting for us to think that what we can provide is unique and can only be provided by those with philosophical expertise. However, this is to mistake the nature of the policy environment.

On each particular policy issue, there are many interested parties who want to shape the policy landscape and the detail of what is implemented. These include other government departments, executive agencies, arms length bodies, industry bodies, think tanks, trade unions, individual businesses, non-governmental organisations, pressure groups and private citizens. Though some may attempt to steer government decision-making in a way that seems regressive or self-serving, most will draw on values and considerations that have wide currency within society.

Policymakers' central challenge is how to sift through this surfeit of information, advice and lobbying about what should be done. Policy advice is thus a market, in which what philosophers offer may be in competition with a wide range of non-philosophical offerings. How to categorise philosophically informed policy advice, and how much to value it in comparison to other sources of advice, will be determined by policymakers rather than philosophers. As in any market, what matters is not whether the seller thinks that there is something uniquely valuable about their product, but whether buyers agree.

We can think of the market for philosophically informed policy-relevant advice from both the supply side and the demand side. From the supply side, questions we can ask are: What sorts of public-policy-relevant philosophy is being produced, on what topics, and how much of it? How much effort is it for policymakers to transform philosophical outputs into something that is useful for their purposes? And how does this differ according to the kind of output that the philosopher produces? For example, a complex journal article will be much more difficult to assimilate than a well-targeted briefing. On the demand side, basic questions are: How many policymakers want philosophically informed advice? How will they use it? How much do they want it? And what other goods that, from the perspective of the policymaker, will substitute for it?

Reflecting on these supply and demand features encourages a more realistic view of philosophy's competitors as sources of advice to policymakers, and helps us understand the costs that the policy system will need to be willing to pay if it is to make different kinds of philosophical insights usable for its purposes. These costs include time to research relevant philosophical material; resource to transform materials into practical products; and effort to change plans or structures in response to learnings and insights.

As has been thoroughly explored within innovation research, generating new knowledge through university research makes little difference to the economy unless governments or businesses can transform the research into practical tools and resources. Cohen and Levinthal called this quality 'absorptive capacity', and defined it as the 'ability to recognize the value of new information, assimilate it, and apply it' (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990).

A government department may wish to learn from scientific findings, but lack the time or expertise to be able to assimilate the research, and explore its relevance and how it could improve responses to policy problems. Scientists' ideas are more likely to be implemented if

they are accessible, for example if they provide a summary paper and a well-written report with realistic recommendations. What philosophers think policymakers need, in terms of philosophical input, may not align with what is required. Philosophers need to produce philosophy that maps on to policymakers’ problems — and that aligns with policymakers’ absorptive capacity.

Suppose I want a fish finger sandwich. There are several ways of achieving this, depending on my culinary skill and the time I am willing to invest. I could make my own bread from scratch, and fashion fillets of fish into breadcrumb covered fingers; I could buy bread and read-made fish fingers, and assemble the meal myself; or I could order the sandwich from a local takeaway. If philosophers are in effect selling sourdough starter kits and fresh fish, while others are selling the complete sandwich, it is easy to see why their potential contributions are often overlooked by busy policymakers with tight deadlines.

The absorptive capacity for philosophical research in the UK is weak. While there is significant government infrastructure devoted to making science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) useful for government policy, there is hardly any for the humanities, and none specifically for philosophy. To give just a few examples, the UK government currently has 25 Chief Scientific Advisers (GOV.UK, 2016), each based in different government departments and agencies, including the Government Chief Scientific Adviser who regularly briefs the prime minister. No government departments have a Chief Humanities Adviser (let alone a Chief Philosopher). There is a Government Office for Science, but not one for humanities. The Council on Science and Technology advises the prime minister, but there is no corresponding committee for humanities. There are of course individuals who studied philosophy (especially philosophy, politics and economics) at university who are employed as policymakers, but their role is not to facilitate the two-way translation of ideas between philosophy and government or the wider economy. It is reasonable, therefore, to assume that absorptive capacity for philosophy is currently very slight.

Philosophy’s lack of influence on public policy in the UK is unsurprising, given the lack of absorptive capacity within government. As a philosopher, it is natural to think that this lack of absorptive capacity is a problem not just for philosophers, but for society more broadly. But it is not straightforward to articulate either what the government is missing as a result, or how to fix the problem. One reason is that it is not clear that philosophy generates knowledge of a

kind that could, or should, be taken up via 'knowledge transfer', even if politicians wanted to. Given the level of profound and sustained disagreement among professional philosophers, it is rarely possible for policymakers to determine that one established philosophical view is more substantively correct than another, though policymakers may of course find some approaches more congenial than others. Therefore, the problem of weak absorptive capacity for new philosophical insights is, understandably, not treated with the same urgency as, for example, weak absorptive capacity for novel insights in AI or renewable energy.

Value inquiry — improving the ways a society pursues and reconciles its existing ends, and how it comes to change its ends — is crucial for well-functioning democracies. However, value inquiry is something to which all citizens need to contribute, rather than just an elite. While some philosophers may plausibly be described as experts in some aspects of value inquiry, it does not follow that philosophers should wield inflated influence over a democracy's goals and guiding principles.

The idea of the public interest provides important insights about what the role of philosophers in public policy should be, and about the ideal absorptive capacity for philosophy within government. Everyone has a right to have a say in the public sphere, but it is fundamental to a well-functioning democracy to distinguish between public and private roles. What may be done when someone is acting in a public role is constrained by a set of norms, which aim to ensure that such actions are guided by public rather than private interest. Documents, such as the UK government's Nolan Principles, Civil Service code, and Ministerial Code, articulate some of the responsibilities associated with different public roles. Thus, it is legitimate for a politician to aim to benefit their friends and family in their private life, but it will amount to corruption in public office if they use their public office to do so. Civil servants may disagree with government policy, or think it unethical, but their role requires them to help implement such policies, and to follow proper channels in reporting serious concerns they have about any particular policy. More broadly, public servants and elected officials should take account of arguments and representations only in so far as they are relevant to the pursuit of the public interest.

To be relevant for policymakers, experts — whether philosophers or those from any other discipline — need to frame their contributions in line with the requirements of policymaking. In particular, they need to articulate an understanding and analysis of the policy problem — and any related recommendations — from the perspective of the public interest rather

than their private perspective. In recent work with colleagues, we defined the role of the ‘critical friend’ as providing the best way of combining success in influencing government policy with democratic legitimacy. A critical friend provides advice and challenge to a public institution based on an accurate and sympathetic understanding of the kinds of constraints that an institution faces (Wilson et al., 2023). Acting as a critical friend requires humility: a willingness to work as an under-labourer within a broader process of democratic deliberation; accepting the broad framing of the problem as set by public servants; and if required, challenging this framing to ensure it is working in the public interest.

Philosophers who argue for policy positions based on ethical theories usually think of themselves as acting in a principled rather than self-interested manner. They might expect that what they are doing will fall squarely in line with the requirements of policymakers. But, unless a philosopher articulates their argument as a response to the problem, and recognises the relevant institutional constraints, their intervention will fall into the same category as those of lobbyists or advocates. If philosophers’ attempts to influence policy — without properly considering the public interest — are ineffective, this may be a sign that the system is working well rather than badly. That is, if the supply does not meet the demand, it should be rejected.

The most pressing question for further work, which should involve both philosophers and policymakers, is how philosophical expertise can help to improve the quality of a public deliberation and the design of value frameworks to ensure they effectively support government decision-making. I doubt that policymakers would say that what they value about philosophers is their expertise in uncovering what the uniquely correct normative principles are, or what should be done given these principles. What they are more likely to find useful is philosophers’ application of ethical theories to help frame and reframe policy problems, their capacity to articulate novel concepts that bring underrepresented experiences into focus, and their ability to spot and help resolve ambiguities and inconsistencies. Building absorptive capacity for these kinds of philosophical expertise should be a priority not just for philosophers, but for anyone interested in improving the functioning of our democracy.

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