

“The point is to change it”

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Many political philosophers happily recite *Thesis Eleven* of Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* (inscribed on his gravestone): 'Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.' This is an admirable sentiment. The motivation for many of us who work in moral and political philosophy is to help right the wrongs we perceive in the world. Yet we often find that the norms of professional academia encourage us to concentrate on more abstract matters. Our energies become devoted to such things as clarifying our positions in fine detail and showing how they differ in subtle ways from the existing literature, and much less on finding common cause with others to bring about change in the world. Hence a renewed concentration on making change seems very welcome. And now especially, when we suffer the twin threats of the arc of the moral universe (to use Martin Luther King Jr's evocative phrase) bending away from — rather than towards — justice; and the general disparagement of the humanities — philosophy among them — as marginal or irrelevant to what is 'important' in the world.

Yet if we are to encourage philosophers to think about how they can contribute to making change, we also need to pay attention to the practicalities and processes of doing so. In other words, what is, or should be, our theory of change? How do we propose that change should be made, or at least how we can contribute to that process? Marx had a theory of change: proletariat revolution, and a conception of his own role as the theorist of that movement. But what theory of change is appropriate in current circumstances? In this article I will consider the potential for philosophy and philosophers to contribute to beneficial policy change.

Marx was, of course, by no means the first of the socialist thinkers to think about how to bring about a new society. Charles Fourier, for example, set out the details of utopian 'phalanxes', and while he made little progress in his native France, he inspired experimental, if short-lived, communities in the US. Robert Owen was able to try out his ideas in practice in the mill he

managed in New Lanark in Scotland, and is reputed, for example, to have introduced the first nursery school, among many other innovations. Ultimately disillusioned with the limits of New Lanark, which could only remain embedded within a voracious capitalist economy, Owen too tried to set up utopian communities in the US, although they never took root. Fourier and Owen can be understood as attempting to prompt social change through leadership by example. However, in terms of changing social structures, they did not get past what is, in effect, the pilot stage, albeit often very valuable in themselves, and in Owen's case inspiring lasting innovations.

This is not the age of revolution or small-scale socialist experiment — although some radicals still favour the former, and some religious groups have adopted something similar to the latter. Contemporary political philosophers naturally assume that social change must be consistent with the rule of law, and hence made through either the ballot box, or through legal challenge in courts of human rights. Within the democratic process two important vectors of influence are to appeal to voters to help determine who gets elected; or to appeal to politicians directly to try to influence their decision making. Much of what we do as philosophers — make arguments, write reports, assist think tanks — probably has the latter form, hoping to influence the decisions of policymakers simply by the quality of and the rationale for our ideas. This, of course, is where our expertise tends to lie. But in reserving our activities for such spaces we are making some perhaps naive assumptions about how politics works: as if it is a Habermasian ideal speech situation — that is, a hypothetical situation when people have equal opportunity to participate in rational discourse without coercion or manipulation. This picture leaves out constraints of political pressure, crisis points, deal-making, receding timelines, and so forth. In other words, we shy away from realpolitik. Perhaps that is as it should be, and philosophers should stay in their lane. But it leaves us with a nagging question: what can we do to (help) to bring about change when democratic politics is too slow or not listening, or captured by bad-faith actors? I do not think that there is a single, special way, and that broadly we are doing the right things, given who we are and what we are capable of. But it is also possible to come to a better understanding of best practices, and in doing so also see how to focus our efforts more effectively.

Inspiring social change

The idea of wanting to bring about social change by influencing those in power has probably always been with us, and it is worth considering how this has been attempted by successful social movements. To return to Martin Luther King Jr as a leading example, we find the

suggestion that non-violent civil rights struggle is essentially a matter of progressively improving the oppressed group's negotiating position until the battle is won. He proposed that each wave of protest should go through four stages: collection of facts; negotiation; self-purification, in the sense of preparing for action; and direct action, to create crisis and tension to improve the negotiating position for the next round. The dignity of the struggle is essential to its success. It should be public, peaceful, and, to use John Rawls's language, addressed to the sense of justice of the majority. Protestors should be willing to accept legal punishment for any laws they have broken.

All elements of this picture can, of course, be challenged. James C Scott discussed the practices of informal, essentially private protest: sabotage, foot-dragging, evasion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, arson, dissimulation and slander. Yet these are methods of individual self-protection rather than social change. At the other end of the scale lies public violence. Some examples, as in the UK poll tax riots of 1990, or the more recent Black Lives Matter protests, which sometimes turned violent, are associated with the acceptance of the need for change, but in such cases typically take part alongside many other actions calling for the same measures. Violent protest without a scaffolding of non-violent activism seems much less likely to bring about change in modern democracies. Reason, reflection and argument seem unavoidable.

The potential of philosophy

And, of course, academics are naturally drawn to reason, reflection and argument, rather than protest or violence. Yet it is far from clear how these lead to change. One barrier is that academic philosophy is normally a solitary activity. Papers and books are typically published in the name of a single author (albeit often with wide acknowledgements) and although co-authored work is becoming more common it is still very much a minority activity and rarely extends to more than two or three collaborators, except in the case of commissioned reports. But social activism is a collective activity, requiring a powerful consensus and pragmatic compromise rather than the scrutiny and approval (or rejection) of every detail, as we are used to in academic scholarship. How then can we have any chance of influencing policy? At worst we seem to have assumed a theory of change that anticipates our papers in academic journals will somehow influence people in power. In more adventurous moments we supplement these with blog posts, podcasts or newspaper columns, but we typically fall far short of concerted effort.

But before we consider how to address this gap, it is worth reflecting on what we think our influence as philosophers should be. We are not policy experts, and even if we have strong arguments — for example, to reduce inequality, address poverty or welcome refugees — the practical application of these arguments requires knowledge and experience that we, as philosophers, simply do not have. What, then, should our aim be? It is all very well to say that we want to bring about change, but are we confident that we know, in detail, what changes are desirable and feasible for our societies?

These practical questions have not been an obstacle to the development of ideas of justice.

As I have mentioned, we tend to think that this is where our expertise lies, but as many have pointed out, the world is already rich in theories, and some have asked whether there is really any space or need for more. Indeed, this was a point made 150 years ago by Mikhail Bakunin: ‘During the last nine years more than enough ideas for the salvation of the world have been developed in the International (if the world can be saved by ideas) and I defy anyone to come up with a new one. This is the time not for ideas but for action, for deeds.’

While Bakunin is right that a huge array of theories and variations existed, even 150 years ago, it may be too pessimistic to assume that there is no room for any more. In recent decades, for example, the theory of universal basic income, especially as promoted in writings of Philippe van Parijs and colleagues, has gone from an eccentric academic fantasy to part of regular, mainstream discussion. Some will reply that this is not so much a new idea as a repackaging of an older one, and van Parijs himself is keen to identify earlier thinkers with similar ideas. This response, however, leads me to an observation made by political philosopher Margaret MacDonald in 1940. Often what a political philosopher does, even under the self-image of presenting an entirely new theory, is simply to draw attention to a value or idea that is currently relatively neglected. In other words, even if Bakunin is right that there is a vast storehouse of theories, it is necessary to apply effort to resurface these theories and propose them as solutions to current problems. Presenting a theory as new can contribute to its power.

Furthermore, even when new ideas are introduced, it is a mistake to think that the only form of innovation is confined to theories of justice. Here I draw on the distinction between ideal theory and non-ideal (or ‘real-world’) political philosophy. In most basic terms, ideal theory attempts

to produce theories of the just society, whereas real-world political philosophy recognises our actual, unjust society, and draws attention to existing injustices which can be unknown, underplayed or taken for granted as part of the natural order.

One exponent of this method is Amartya Sen who is in a unique position as an empirical and theoretical economist as well as a political philosopher. In one memorable example, Sen noted that the everyday policies of gender prejudice around the world mean that vast numbers of women are ‘missing’, a reference to the avoidable deaths of women and girls, especially in childhood through neglect of health or nutrition. Each case is treated as a tragic misfortune but adds up to a global pattern of extreme gender inequality. Another of Sen’s central contributions to non-ideal political philosophy is to argue that famines are a political failure that can be avoided under the right political conditions, rather than inevitable natural disasters. These arguments, of course, draw on his work as a social scientist, but when combined with his normative sensitivity present a powerful and persuasive case that those with power and influence need to think and act differently.

Sen did not, in these examples, present a new philosophical theory, but shifted perceptions, using existing language. But he is also responsible for conceptual innovation through his invention of the language of capabilities to describe human well-being and potential. Capability theory, either in Sen’s version or Martha Nussbaum’s development, has been taken up in a wide range of other fields to help develop measures and methods. Introduction of new vocabulary can itself be surprisingly powerful. Iris Marion Young, for example, has at least two contributions that have had wide traction. In *Justice and the Politics of Differences* she explains what she calls ‘five faces of oppression’: exploitation, powerlessness, marginalisation, violence, and cultural imperialism. And in *Responsibility for Injustice*, she puts the idea of structural injustice at the centre of analysis, and provides a powerful framework for others to make sense of and to address injustices in different spheres.

These examples of Sen and Young show a way of doing political philosophy which is distinct from the development of detailed theories. It is a matter of creating a vocabulary — naming things to bring them to consciousness — which can then be taken up by others. How this can work in detail is very well expressed in a passage by feminist political philosopher Alison Jaggar:

As a young woman ... I was unable to articulate many vague and confused feelings and perceptions because the language necessary to do so had not yet been invented. The vocabulary I needed included such terms as ‘gender’... ‘sex role’, ‘sexism’, ‘sexual harassment’, ‘the double day’, ‘sexual objectification’, ‘heterosexism’, ‘the male gaze’, ‘marital, acquaintance, and date rape’, ‘emotional work’, ‘stalking’, ‘hostile environment’, ‘displaced home-maker’ and ‘double standard of ageing’.

More recently a particularly striking example of the introduction of a new term has been Miranda Fricker’s concept of ‘epistemic injustice’. In one way what Fricker points to is nothing new. It has long been known that there are gender, class and racial biases regarding who will be listened to, taken seriously, or treated as an authority, often without any justification. But it was often taken for granted as part of a type of natural order of things, and those who complained were typically regarded as a nuisance or attention seeker. However, once we have the vocabulary of epistemic injustice — just as in Jaggar’s examples — there are at least three types of advantage. First, it can be studied as a systematic phenomenon, with wide application and several forms of variation. Second, it allows people to understand their own situation as an example of injustice. And third, it makes clear to other parties that it is not something we should simply accept as an unchangeable reality. Hence the mere naming creates a potential for change, in which the philosopher is part of a broader eco-system of activism.

The philosopher’s theory of change

Although some academics may have a double life as scholar and activist, this is not a route that many of us will feel equipped to take. We are reasoners. But the forms reason can take are many. Here I’ve suggested that among the ways in which moral and political philosophers can contribute to debates in public life include: the development of new theories; the promotion of theories that have been relatively neglected; the identification of ignored injustices; and the development of new vocabularies. Often these will go together: new vocabulary is a type of mini-theory, and it could bring prominence to something previously known but not given due weight, and it can help identify injustices that have simply seemed part of the moral furniture.

But our question is how to contribute to a process of change. Earlier, I rather unfairly suggested that many philosophers think they can somehow contribute to change by publishing their research behind a paywall, but of course there are already many alternative

routes to sharing ideas. We try to find ways to make our work available to the public and to policymakers. But I would suggest that another — indirect — model has in practice been more successful: the model of change by diffusion. The work of Sen, Nussbaum, Young and now Fricker, has been taken up by academics and thinkers in other fields including some who are themselves often more immediately involved in the policy process, and are looking for new ways of conceptualising problems and solutions. It does not happen in isolation, and requires us to overcome our diffidence about promoting and publicising our work, and working with others. It requires us to publish the same ideas in different venues, without worrying about ‘self-plagiarism’. It requires us to collaborate and to take the expertise of others — academics in other fields, activists, policymakers, journalists, civil servants — seriously, and to learn to see things from their perspective, as well as our own. Sometimes it requires us to tolerate simplification, other times to insist on rigour. It is a matter of doing our best work, looking for, and taking, opportunities, and welcoming wide engagement. For most of us, little if anything will change in the world as a result, however hard we try. Furthermore, each of us will feel much more comfortable at some stages of this process than others. Not every philosopher can be a philosopher-activist, and in fact very few have done so successfully. Even those with a reputation for activism have rarely done more than chair public committees or write for newspapers and periodicals. Many will feel that they can contribute best to the background work of simply trying to develop the best theoretical and conceptual material. But we should all remain heartened by the fact that we are part of a collective endeavour that has contributed — and will continue to contribute — to identifying and sometimes even mitigating suffering and injustice.