

"The point is to change it"

Did that answer your question?

Professor Clare Chambers, University of Cambridge

Did that answer your question?

Professor Clare Chambers, University of Cambridge

What have philosophers ever done for us?

Well, setting aside grandiose things like the Socratic method, the principles of logic, and the categorical imperative, we actually have evidence to answer this question. Since 2014, universities have had to show that their academics' research has impact outside the sector, through the Research Excellence Framework (REF). According to the impact case studies published for REF 2021, philosophy has had a wide range of influence, including: securing millions of dollars in charitable donations; shifting practice around end-of-life care; increasing public awareness regarding the risks of advanced AI; informing journalists and politicians on media ethics; affecting the design of smartphones; changing the way prisoners are educated; evidencing the interpretation of historical items in stately homes; inspiring artistic works on migration; shifting public perspectives on beauty; protecting cultural heritage in conflict situations; facilitating flood insurance; and encouraging computer game designers to pay more attention to historical accuracy (REF 2021, 2023). And this is just a small sample!

Philosophers can be found in the highest level of government and policy work, too: in the House of Lords, at the head of policy organisations and public bodies, chairing government-commissioned reports, and advising parliament. Our skills seem to be in demand.

Why, then, do we need to discuss the relevance of philosophy to public life? Isn't it self-evident?

Well, no. Despite all this public engagement and demonstrated impact, philosophy and the wider humanities are under threat. Government policy over recent decades has been to emphasise STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) subjects and insist

that all education, at school level and beyond, should be focused on career success. A career in philosophy somehow doesn't seem to count.

Perhaps that's not a niche view. When my son was about nine years old he had a philosophy lesson at school. My son told his school friends that his mum was a philosopher. They were not impressed. "She can't be!" one of them replied. "Philosophy isn't a real job!"

Philosophy is a real job, of course, and in this piece I'll show how at least some philosophy plays a vital role in public life. I write from a position of familiarity with the interplay between philosophers and policymakers, as my own work addresses issues of direct political importance. I'll give two examples.

First, my book *Against Marriage: An Egalitarian Defence of the Marriage-Free State* argues that state-recognised marriage is a violation of both liberty and equality. In place of marriage, I develop an alternative model for regulation of intimate relationships which protects the vulnerable. This work involved considerable engagement with academics and practitioners in law and politics as well as philosophy. My analysis contributed to the successful campaign and Supreme Court case for equal civil partnerships led by the trailblazers Rebecca Steinfeld and Charlie Keidan. The result is that different-sex couples may now have their relationships recognised as civil partnerships, without the gendered and religious associations of marriage.

Second, much of my work concerns a major public health issue: the overwhelming pressure to modify our bodies in pursuit of an ever-expanding expectation of physical perfection. I've developed the concept of 'the unmodified body', my term for *a body that is allowed to be good enough just as it is*. The unmodified body is a political idea and, I argue, a key principle of equality. Through examples ranging from bodybuilding to breast implants, make-up to male circumcision, I analyse the power structures and oppressive forces that demand we alter our bodies. Instead, I offer a vision of the human body that is equal without expectation: an unmodified body that is not an image of perfection or a goal to be attained, but a valued end in itself.

This work has had impact in several ways. Through publication of my book *Intact: A Defence of the Unmodified Body* (Chambers, 2022), and an extensive programme of public engagements, I work to raise public awareness and make a provocative intervention into public debate. Moreover, working with the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, I influenced

significant new legislation: the Botulinum Toxin and Cosmetic Fillers (Children) Act 2021 (UK), which makes cosmetic Botox and fillers unlawful for children under 18. In addition, through lectures to members of the Royal Society of Medicine and the British Association of Plastic, Reconstructive and Aesthetic Surgeons, I prompted many cosmetic surgeons to revise their practices. These are concrete ways in which work in philosophy can directly affect policy and practice.

But why should policymakers listen to philosophers specifically? Consider some perennial questions of political philosophy. Does freedom mean making your own choices, whatever they are, or can we sometimes be made more free by being guided towards more rational options? Does equality mean that everyone should be treated the same, or might it sometimes require treating people differently? Should people be held responsible for their choices even if that leaves them very badly-off? Does justice require taxing the rich to give to the poor? What is the difference between women and men, and what does that imply for how they should be treated?

These questions of political philosophy all make a considerable difference. Answering them one way or another has serious implications for many aspects of public life: what our laws should be, how we should punish criminals, who we should tax and how much, whether we should permit abortion or secure a right to maternity leave. But, a sceptic might ask, why should philosophers' answers to these questions be any better than anyone else's? Philosophers seem to lack both the technical knowledge of the scientific disciplines and the practical know-how of hands-on professions. Many philosophers devise new terminology and complex formalisations, but these hardly seem necessary for thinking about matters like fairness and the state. Political philosophers debate matters on which almost everyone has an opinion. We cannot claim a monopoly on thinking about questions of justice, and we are seldom awarded deference.

Philosophy matters to public life, though, because philosophers apply themselves to matters of profound significance using distinctive tools and for distinctive purposes. Our contribution lies in our ability to apply philosophical method in the pursuit of truth for its own sake. At our best, philosophers have a luxury denied to politicians: we can reason about politics without having to attend to politics. What I mean by this is that we do not fear the ballot-box; we are not constrained by being 'on the record'; we are accountable only as reasoners and not as representatives.

All of this means that philosophers do not have the power to implement our recommendations. We rely on our work inspiring others. That’s not a bug, it’s a feature. It allows us to consider political matters disinterestedly, without fear or favour. We can step back and view the bigger picture, zoom in and identify the founding principles, scan the horizon and identify contradictions and implications, and pass on the results to those with the democratic mandate to act.

What, then, is philosophical method? I’ll explore two types of philosophical methodology: reasoned argument; and careful attention to objections. Put this way, the principles don’t sound particularly distinctive to philosophy. But philosophy makes use of these methods in a way that politicians seldom can, with distinctive results that are a real contribution to public life.

Reasoned argument

Reasoned argument is the hallmark of philosophy. René Descartes employed this method to the extreme in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, where he wrote:

Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them. I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last (Descartes, 1641).

Descartes attempted to derive philosophy from the ground up, using reason alone. He concluded, famously, that the one thing he could be certain of was that he himself existed: ‘I think, therefore I am.’

This attempt to follow the argument where it leads is a hallmark of philosophy. Some philosophers go too far — if the argument leads you somewhere terrible, perhaps you’ve taken a wrong turn along the way — but the basic idea is sound: philosophers start without being sure of their destination. My own approach to philosophy takes this method of reason as a motivation. I choose topics that seem to have real-world importance — this much is essential to me — yet are deeply puzzling. Sometimes I philosophise when I’m not sure what I think but I

know the issue matters. Alternatively, I turn to philosophy when I know what I think but I'm not sure if my view stands up to questioning.

An example of the first type is my work on marriage. I began that work because I knew that opposition to traditional marriage was a core tenet of feminism, but I was unsure whether marriage could be redeemed by reforms such as equal spousal rights and the recognition of same-sex marriage. Through philosophy — reading, thinking, talking, and writing — I identified a puzzle. How could marriage be both oppressive to women and liberatory to lesbian and gay people? Why was it bad both to be married and to be denied marriage? This question became a decade of research, culminating in *Against Marriage*.

Politicians and policymakers cannot spend ten years reading, thinking, talking, and writing about a question such as this; nor can they do so in a way that follows reason rather than re-election. This is not to disparage members of parliament (MPs), many of whom develop significant expertise and discharge their various committee and legislative responsibilities with care and clarity. But even the most dedicated MPs cannot dedicate themselves to a question of policy over multiple years. They must follow the issues of the day, develop a position on a wide range of policy areas, and follow party discipline. Perhaps this is why philosophers are sometimes found in the House of Lords, one part of our democratic process not shaped by electoral pressures. We want our law and public policy to be based on rigorous, careful thinking — the combination of research and innovation. Philosophers do this work in a way that MPs cannot.

My second motivation for philosophy is when I know what I think about an issue but I'm not sure if my belief is justified. This is how my work on *Intact* began. I wrote that book because I had long had an intuition that there was something good about leaving your body alone: letting it be just as it is, without unnecessary interference. I have no piercings, not even in my ears; no tattoos; and I have dyed my hair only once, in my teens. When I started the project, many modification practices were deeply unappealing to me in a way that felt ethically significant.

But why did I feel that way? Was it just a preference, even a prejudice? Or was it the identification of something significant? Could it be resistance to a culture that corrupts and distorts our bodies, layering them with shame? I wanted to know if my unexamined feelings were justified, and the only way to do that was to examine them. I am no Descartes but, like him,

I embarked on an attempt to think about body modification that did not rely on my established, unexamined beliefs.

This time, the research process took only three years — short in philosophical terms, an inconceivable age in politics. I was fortunate to receive funding from the Leverhulme Trust, which gave me three years of research time uninterrupted by teaching and administrative duties. I could not have written that book without relief from the considerable workload that is now standard in academia: though we are expected to produce world-leading research, we are not routinely given the time to do it. During those three years I read countless books and articles, learned from clinicians and beauticians, went to bodybuilding competitions and cosmetic surgery conferences, and talked to many people about their feelings about their bodies. The result was *Intact*, an impassioned manifesto for the political relevance of the unmodified body and an indictment of a culture that tells all of us, all the time, that our bodies are never good enough. I did not know where *Intact* would take me when I started thinking about it; I only knew that the philosophical method would get me somewhere worthwhile.

Attention to objections

Philosophy is the pursuit of truth via the most difficult path possible.

Philosophy is never finished because we can never be sure that we have found the right answer. As before, this is not a bug; it's a feature. In philosophy we can never be sure we have found the right answer because we must always be searching for the strongest possible objections to our view. We must test our conclusions against our opponents. We must consider for ourselves how our opponents can demolish us, and we should regard that demolition not as mere destruction but as the necessary precursor to construction.

Another way of putting this is to say that philosophers employ the principle of charity. It is not philosophy if you assert without considering objections, and it is not philosophy if you consider only the weakest version of your opponent's views. Instead, the principle of charity instructs us to interpret our opponents in the strongest possible light and to create the most damning objections to our own positions.

We address objections to our own position either by hearing them from others or by creating them ourselves. I once attended a seminar at University College London in which the renowned political theorist Cass Sunstein presented a paper. One student asked a question which, as always in philosophy, was framed as a critique of Sunstein's argument. (Philosophers don't ask the speaker for more information, no matter how eminent they are — we tell them they're wrong. You know you've given a good presentation when there are tons of questions and every one of them is an attempt to prove your error.)

The student's question was not particularly challenging, and Sunstein had an easy answer. But he did not end the exchange there. 'Now,' Sunstein said, 'if you change your question slightly, so that you ask me this instead' — here he set out a connected but different objection — 'oh wow! Now I'm really stuck! Now you've got me! Great question.' Sunstein helped the student to be a more effective critic, not merely as an act of pedagogy and kindness, but because philosophers like objections more than praise, and we like difficult objections most of all.¹

Unlike a commitment to reason, which is shared to some extent by all scholarly disciplines, the method and extent of seeking objections is quite distinctive in philosophy. We have a disciplinary reputation for toughness. At best this toughness is our strength; at worst it can descend into machismo. Other academics can interpret philosophical debate as aggression, as I learned when the anthropologist chair of a discussion at an interdisciplinary conference on marriage asked me to rein in my line of questioning because 'things were getting heated'. From my point of view — and, I'm pretty sure, that of the lawyers I was asking — the discussion was just starting to get interesting.

The urge to subject one's work to objections is in stark contrast to debate in political life, where the ultimate task of a politician often seems to be to prove that she is right and her opponent wrong — preferably by painting the opponent in as poor a light as possible. Adversarial politics and the electoral system mean that point scoring and misrepresentation are often rewarded. Point scoring for the sake of it can happen in philosophy too, of course, but when it does I regard it as a failure of the discipline; as having moved from philosophy to something else.

Another key distinction between philosophical combat and adversarial politics is the role of listening and answering. In philosophy it is essential to listen carefully to the challenge being put, because only then can one answer it precisely. In politics, in contrast, listening seems unimportant because politicians seldom attempt to answer questions. Instead, they seek

to deflect them. Politics elevates winning above being right; cares little about compromise if conquest is an option; subordinates truth to power. In a good philosophy seminar, the speaker asks the questioner 'did that answer your question?' If not, or if the answer brings up new problems, the questioner has another go. Public life could benefit enormously if its participants paid greater attention to the questions they are asked and were more careful to ensure they answered them.

The mark of a philosopher, then is that she *always* asks herself 'What if I'm wrong?' More demanding, she asks herself '*How* might I be wrong?' A question I routinely ask my students, and I apply it to my own work, is this: 'What is the strongest objection to your argument?' Next question: 'How would you answer that objection?' Next question: 'And what is the strongest argument against your answer?' When we go through this process we see not only that we have developed a stronger position of our own, but also we are aware of its limitations. We see when nuance lies. We see where ambiguity rests. We see how others could think differently, and we see what opponents might have in common. We understand that, although in philosophy nothing is ever settled, emphasising uncertainty brings us closer to truth.

So, what can philosophers bring to public life? We bring time and space to address the most complex questions, including political questions, away from political imperatives. We bring a commitment to the method of reason as a contrast to received opinion or ideological loyalty. And we bring a deep tolerance of disagreement and difficulty. In philosophy, conflict does not mean animosity, nor does it mean that one side is disreputable and must be silenced. It means that the question is a good one, and we should keep trying to answer it.

Notes:

- 1 At least, objections are what we like as philosophers. As humans we like praise, too.

References:

- Chambers, C. (2019) *Against Marriage: An Egalitarian Defence of the Marriage-Free State*. Oxford University Press.
- Chambers, C. (2022) *Intact: A defence of the unmodified body*. London: Penguin Books.
- Descartes, R. (1641). *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- REF 2021 (2023). *Impact database : Results and submissions: REF 2021*. [online]
Available at: <https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact>. (Accessed 7 February 2025)