THE SOCIAL RELEVANCE OF PHILOSOPHY

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What is the social relevance of philosophy? Any answer to this question must involve at least three elements. First, we need to understand how philosophy has brought about social change in the past. Second, to dig into the question more deeply, we need to see how the definition of philosophy can be opened up. Thirdly, we need to critically examine and challenge some of the assumptions that might be hidden in the question. Once we have done all this, we can try to answer the question.

Part 1: Some Quiet Revolutions

Philosophy can instigate revolutions. These revolutions are sometimes slow and profound and, for this reason, they can be difficult to perceive and appreciate. For example, consider the transformation of thinking about nature in the 17th century. Galileo, Descartes and other thinkers invented physics, and thereby made science as a unity possible. Prior to this quiet revolution, the world was conceived as consisting of four elements: earth, water, air and fire. Physical changes were usually explained in terms of the natural tendencies of these elements and in terms of the purposes of God. The intellectual uprising consisted in the discovery and the invention of the modern notion of matter, the concept of physical laws and the idea of describing physical changes mathematically. Along with these concepts, philosopher-scientists developed the empirical method of science, of making controlled, repeatable observations, and separated this from both *a priori* deduction and the citation of authority.

This was an incredibly productive set of ideas and practices. By the end of the 17th century, it already had many practical applications and socio-political effects. There were a host of inventions that were precursors to the industrial revolution of the late 18th century. The initial discovery and creation of these fundamental concepts and methods of investigation was a philosophical revolution because it was not merely a question of encountering new empirical information. It also involved crucially the molding of new concepts, and finding new ways of thinking.

Consider another important conceptual revolution. Locke portrayed society as a social contract among equals in a way that explained how it was sometimes legitimate for a people to overthrow the government. His political thought became enshrined in the U.S. constitution and, because of this and the work of other thinkers, the idea of a right became common political currency in the 20th century. Many of today's political movements could not exist without this notion. Usually, we take the concept of a right for granted, as part of our everyday political vocabulary, but a little reflection shows us that it had to be built and, probably, that it can be improved and refined. These are theoretical and philosophical tasks.

Here is a third example. The 19th century saw a revolution in our thinking about logic and the foundations of mathematics. The idea of a formal system became possible because of the theoretical work done at this time in mathematics and logic, which broke two thousand years

of domination by Aristotle's syllogistic logic. In turn, the idea of a purely formal system made the development of pure computational processes possible together with the computer in the 20th century. As in the previous examples, the development of new concepts opened up new areas of research, which in turn permitted new technology and social institutions.

These three examples illustrate how philosophical revolutions can occur quietly on a grand scale. They also suggest how they can function in a more modest way. For example, in the 1960s, there was a fundamental change in the philosophy of mind, which went hand in hand with a transformation in psychology. This consisted in the realization that, to avoid ontological mind/body dualism, one does not have to espouse behaviorism. In other words, the study of cognitive processes can be scientific and, in part as a result of this conceptual insight, cognitive science was born (*cf.* Gardiner 1987).

Consider another example. In the 1970s, the philosopher and economist Amartya Sen, along with other political theorists, challenged the standard view of development as economic growth and, in the 1980s, Sen developed new ways to measure the well-being of individuals and communities based on the kinds of capabilities that people need to have in order to be able to live well, and which includes many non-economic factors (*cf.* Sen 2001). This work was part of a conceptual revolution that overthrew the conception of development as merely economic growth, which was prevalent in the 1950s. As a result of this change, non-governmental organizations and, to a lesser extent, governments have altered the ways in which they give aid. Once again, a conceptual change brings, as well as reflecting, new kinds of practices.

Part ii: The Conception of Philosophy

A more complete answer to the original question requires that we reconstruct the concept of philosophy itself. We should not assume that philosophy is an activity performed exclusively by university professors who work in philosophy departments. Such a definition excludes, for example, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke and Hume who never taught in a university. Moreover, it also excludes a lot of today's exciting philosophical thinking that occurs outside philosophy departments and academia.

We should conceive of philosophy as a way of thinking rather than as an academic institution. Put simply, it is critical thought about concepts and ways of thinking. It is thought that involves the analysis or clarification of concepts and the uncovering of meanings, and which is normally supported by arguments (*cf.* Thomson 2003 Chapter 1). Perhaps, this seems an overly generous or wide characterization of philosophy, but narrower definitions end up excluding aspects of what is normally considered as a part of philosophy. Anyone who asks questions about concepts, seeks clarifications and distinctions, and opens up new conceptual space and gives some argumentation to support his or her claims, thereby engages in philosophy. Academic philosophers tend to have certain styles of practicing these arts; they tend to focus on the most abstract questions and often emphasize rigor as against innovation. However, there is no uniform philosophical method or pre-defined set of philosophical problems that could make a hard and fast distinction between academic philosophy and conceptual thinking outside academia.

The main purpose of this broad definition is to contrast philosophy as conceptual inquiry with empirical investigations that attempt to discover facts. Such empirical investigations form an important part, but not the whole of, the natural sciences, the social sciences and some of the humanities, such as history. In contrast, philosophy is concerned with clarifying, expanding and creating concepts and meanings.

This does not imply that we can separate sharply empirical research from conceptual innovation and clarification. Such a distinction is, for example, difficult to apply to the historical development of quantum mechanics and relativity. Furthermore, the invention of new concepts always takes place in the context of a background of empirical knowledge and of investigative and other practices. Consider the work of the pioneering economist and philosopher Adam Smith. Smith observed the division of labor in the manufacture of pins in small factories in his native Scotland and applied this idea to international trade. Locke's political philosophy did not occur in a vacuum. The ideas that he expressed explicitly and systematically were becoming part of the political atmosphere of 17th century England, where there had been a long power struggle between parliament and various kings.

Also, this view of philosophy does not mean that empirical facts are irrelevant to philosophical thinking. For example, the philosophy of physics would be concerned with questions such as "what would count as an elementary particle?"; to give a satisfactory answer to this kind of question, one needs to know a lot of physics. Finding answers to questions in the philosophy of economics requires a good knowledge of economics. Furthermore, in any field, formulating new conceptual questions in a way that opens up space for innovation requires empirical knowledge.

The important overall point that emerges from this discussion is that academic philosophers are not the only practitioners of the art of critical thinking about concepts. For example, biologists who try to answer conceptual questions regarding their area of research are practicing philosophy. Educational theorists and teachers who try to rethink the basic principles of curriculum development are also engaging in philosophy.

As a consequence of this broad view of philosophy, there are philosophical questions and problems in all areas of human inquiry and practice. Moreover, almost every person has practiced the art of conceptual thinking at some time. For instance, many people ask questions like these: "what would count as an improvement in the quality of my life?" or "what sort of work would be good for me?". In part, these questions are philosophical because they seek a definition or clarification of an idea, in addition to empirical, psychological information about oneself. They request the relevant criteria.

To return to the original question, the expanded conception of philosophy implies that philosophical thought is bound to have social relevance. Viewed in this way, philosophy is a human activity in much the same way that telling jokes is. Asking about its social relevance is a little like inquiring about the social relevance of talking. It is so much a part of the human condition that it hardly can be separated in the necessary way.

Part iii: Theory vs. Practice

Sometimes, questioning the social relevance of philosophy is motivated by a general worry about the usefulness of theoretical thinking in general. Theory is often opposed to practice, and the term "practice" apparently implies something practical and useful. In this way, theory becomes regarded as something that is, almost by definition, useless and impractical. According to this view, theory is for ivory towers and practice is for everyday life. I shall try to meet these concerns, which are based on a method of contrasting theory and practice that is flawed in at least two respects.

First, theory and practice inform each other because necessarily they are bound to each other. On the one hand, theory builds on existing practices. We have already noted the examples of Smith and Locke. In fact, Smith's idea of the specialization of labor, which he applied to international trade, had many consequences that he could not have foreseen. For example, it led to the idea of the automated factory and, eventually, had an impact on computer science. In effect, theorizing itself is a practice that takes place within a context of other practices.

On the other hand, all of our social practices and individual activities are expressions of understanding. Actions are caused by beliefs and desires, which are framed and limited by our concepts. Therefore, practice necessarily has an implicit theoretical aspect, and we can improve practice by improving theory.

Of course, there are also other more direct ways to enhance practice. Not all improvements in practice require conceptual change. Furthermore, we do not want to fall into the trap of imagining that, by resolving a problem in thought, we solve it in practice. Theory is only useful insofar as it is actually used, even when the way it is employed is not predictable.

Second, this way of contrasting theory and practice tends to be traditionalist; it silently tends to oppose change. This is because the usefulness and practicality of something always assumes an end. "X is useful" and "Y is practical" are incomplete expressions in that they do not specify any relevant objective. Something useful is merely a means, a hopefully dispensable instrument to some goal. If we take the aims implicitly for granted, then this signifies that they are not open for revision or explicit acceptance. This may not be very problematic, for instance, when we refer to some general instrument, such as a telephone or a bridge. However, when we refer to an activity as socially useful, we may have to consider important ends that are not so obvious. For example, does being educated count as an end? By this, I do not mean "is it socially useful that people are better educated?"; rather, I mean "does the improvement in people's education itself count as an end?". If it does, then an activity that leads to this result may well be socially relevant, even if it does not produce visible technological changes.

The examples of the use of philosophy that we examined in Part i of this chapter suffer from a defect. They were cases where conceptual change has resulted in obvious technological and social applications. For instance, we claimed that 19th century logic was necessary for the computer; 17th century philosophy of science was necessary for the industrial revolution and so on. These examples assume a standard of usefulness and try to show how philosophy has contributed to social development that accords with this standard. This gives us a relatively superficial understanding of how philosophy is socially relevant because it makes a narrow

assumption about what the appropriate ends are in order for something to count as socially relevant. We need to understand better the very idea of something being useful or socially relevant, and that is a philosophical question.

The original worry that may motivate one to contrast theory and practice can be reformulated to avoid these problems. The reformulation is: how, in fact, can theory and practice be better integrated? This question assumes that, ideally, theory and practice should not be divorced, but it implies that, in actuality, they often are. This reformulation is really a new and more interesting concern, which, when applied to philosophy, implies a criticism of the discipline as it is often practiced in academia, and also of those people who engage in practices but without reflecting philosophically about their meaning and presuppositions. For example, until quite recently, philosophers have stayed away from management science, and business managers have religiously tried to avoid the philosophical implications of their practices. In politics, in the hands of the practitioners, theory has tended to be considered as a tool for gaining votes and packaging preformed ideas rather than as a serious enterprise to deepen and refresh our understanding. And, in the minds of the theoreticians, political practice has tended to be regarded as a Darwinian struggle between parties, best left to those who do not mind having dirty hands or a soiled reputation rather than as an activity loaded with presuppositions that need to be articulated.

Part iv: Social Relevance

What is the social relevance of philosophy? From our brief discussions, we can answer this question, tentatively, in two ways.

a) Challenging the Question

The first way challenges the question rather than trying to answer it directly. The question has two major assumptions built into it, which may be disputed.

First, what counts as socially relevant? What are the social ends that we should have in mind? Without some specification of the appropriate ends, the question is incomplete and cannot be answered. As we have seen already, we should not merely assume the ends because this amounts to taking accepted social values for granted. A specification of such ends must be the result of a normative social analysis or discourse, which is part of the function of philosophy.

Second, the question suggests that philosophy ought to be socially relevant. Perhaps, philosophy ought to be more socially relevant than it is usually today. Nevertheless, even if we assume that this is true, we still should challenge the question by asking "should philosophy *always* be socially relevant?". There are two reasons for thinking that it ought not, and both relate to the idea that having social relevance as a primary goal can destroy important facets of the philosophical process.

First, the very general goal of philosophy is to improve the conceptual aspects of our understanding in any field. With this idea in mind, let us review some of our earlier conclusions. We have seen that there are conceptual aspects to all fields of knowledge, whether they appear socially useful or not. Also, we noted that dramatic conceptual revolutions have occurred slowly when groups of thinkers have pursued their work without having specific practical results in mind. The theoretical work undertaken in the 19th century concerning the foundations of

mathematics was not instigated in order to develop the computer. Galileo did not foresee the industrial revolution; he wanted to understand the mechanics of motion and overthrow the medieval conception of physical explanation. Furthermore, we have seen also that practice always presupposes theory, or ways of understanding and concepts. Better theory can lead to better practice, but not necessarily in ways that are predictable. Given these three points, the anti-answer to the question "what is the social relevance of philosophy?" is that philosophy should not always aim to be socially relevant because, by so aiming, it may undermine the conditions that allow it to be fertile and transformational.

Second, the philosophical process is sometimes comparable to artistic creation, not in the sense that it results in conclusions that should be aesthetically appreciated rather than critically assessed, but rather in the sense that philosophers often struggle with expressing insights that nag them. A similar creative process occurs in much investigation. Additionally, much philosophical thinking can be likened also to exploration, motivated by curiosity and love for an area of knowledge. A thinker fascinated by the conceptual implications of the theory of evolution will explore this area of knowledge without trying to justify it in terms of its usefulness. Of course, the person's love for the area may lead him or her to praise it as one of the most important fields of contemporary research, but that is a different point. The investigation is motivated mainly by the love of the subject matter and by the desire for greater understanding, and not primarily by the idea that it will have useful results.

For these reasons, philosophical activity cannot be compared always appropriately to our usual models of the socially useful. For example, consider the building of a hospital, the search for a new pharmaceutical drug and various forms of social and political activism. These are exemplary socially useful actions. Such actions are motivated by goals that are perceived to be useful for society in a way that artistic creation and exploration are not. Consequently, insofar as the philosophical process is like artistic creation and exploration, we should not expect it always to follow our typical paradigms of socially useful actions.

However, once again, this point does not negate the claim that philosophy should be more socially relevant. Nevertheless, it warns us not to assimilate all forms of the philosophical quest to our usual models of actions that are socially useful.

In summary, the question "is philosophy socially relevant?" is loaded with some unspecified conception of social relevance and with the assumption that philosophical thinking should be directed towards being useful, which may destroy the creative and exploratory facets of such thought. It might be better to ask "how can philosophy be socially relevant?".

b) Answering the Question

We can answer this new question as follows. To counter-act narrow-mindedness, we need to understand better the idea of being socially useful. Something useful is merely a means to some goal. The concept of the useful is not especially problematic when the ends in question are obvious. However, when we refer to something as socially useful, we may have in mind, for example, an idea that promotes important ends that are not obvious and that require either redefinition or invention.

For example, without doubt, the global community will face increasing natural resource shortages during this new century and, while part of the solution to this problem will be technical, we will also have to change our ways of thinking. For instance, economics will have to become more ecological, as well as more human. Of course, we do not know how this should happen because this is exactly the problem. We need to discover and invent new ways of thinking economically, and we do not know yet what these are. In a densely populated world, our conception of design will have to change because more aspects of our environment will have to be designed. The question "how should it change?" is precisely the problem. Here is another example. The political changes we have seen happening in the world these last twenty or so years almost certainly indicate the need for a reformulation of the concept of democracy. For, while regions affirm their need for more autonomy, at the same time global problems indicate the future need for better management and more democracy at the international level. Meanwhile, the traditional debate between the left and the right has lost steam in many parts of the world. All of this points to the need for new political thought.

These examples illustrate two important general lessons. First, that it is a mistake to place theory and practice in a sharp dichotomy. Theory and practice, like thought and action, always influence each other. Furthermore, thought itself is an action, and every practice embodies a theory. Think of Adam Smith. Practice breeds theory, which breeds new practice. Second, conceptual thought is suited to the solving and clarifying of what we can call open and basic normative questions, which cannot be answered by empirical investigation alone. Questions, such as "how should we conceive democracy?" and "how should morality be defined?" are a request for the redefinition of ends and intrinsic values and, in this way, they are quite different from technical questions, which seek more efficient means to a given set of ends.

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