

# The Role of Philosophers in Public Affairs

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## **Abstract**

*In the popular imagination, Philosophers are a group of pedantic eggheads who, comfortably ensconced in the security of the ivory towers, speculate about metaphysical and abstract entities that have little or no relevance to practical concerns. In reality, however, philosophy can and do grapple with real life concerns. Indeed certain branches or sub-branches of philosophy such as “Applied ethics”, “Political philosophy” and “Existentialism” are eminently concerned with practical human problems and public issues. Yet there is a paradoxical paucity of reflections about what exactly is the role of philosophers in public affairs. It is against this backdrop that this paper seeks to articulate and examine the actual, as well as the potential role of public-spirited philosophers in their respective societies. The paper submits that, among other functions, philosophers provide the requisite analysis, critique and vision articulation required in the public sphere.*

**Key Words:** Philosophy, public affairs, public sphere, deliberation

## **Introduction**

It is sometimes argued that there is no point in studying philosophy as all philosophers ever do is sit around quibbling over the meaning of words. They never seem to reach any conclusions of any importance and their contribution to society is virtually non-existent...philosophy does not seem to change anything; philosophy leaves everything as it is...what is the value for studying philosophy at all? Indeed, the caricature of a philosopher is of someone who is brilliant at dealing with very abstract thought

in the comfort of an armchair in an Oxford or Cambridge common room, but is hopeless at dealing with the practicalities of life: someone who can explain the most complicated passages of Hegel's philosophy but can't work out how to boil an egg. (Warburton 1993:3-4)

In the popular imagination, Philosophers are a group of pedantic eggheads who, comfortably ensconced in the security of the ivory towers, speculate about metaphysical and abstract entities that have little or no relevance to practical concerns. In reality, however, philosophy can and do grapple with real life concerns. Indeed certain branches or sub-branches of philosophy such as "Applied ethics", "Political philosophy" "Existentialism" and "Pragmatism" are eminently concerned with practical human problems and public issues. Yet there is a paradoxical paucity of reflections about what exactly is the role of philosophers in public affairs. The state of affairs may not be unconnected to the influence of a dominant school, ie, the 20<sup>th</sup> century analytic movement which narrowly considers the task of philosophy as one which concerns eliminating linguistic confusions (Winch, 1990:5). This paper does not share the position that philosophy's task begins and ends with conceptual clarification. Instead it contends that beyond the pedagogic environment of the classroom, the philosopher could and does play a vital role in invigorating the discourse in the public sphere with the ultimate aim of promoting the *summun bonum*.

To systematically establish our central claim, this paper is structured in three parts. The first seeks to clarify the notion of public affairs as well as the distinction between the public and the private sphere. The second briefly examines the debate about the appropriate conception or self-understanding of philosophy as a discipline; while the third outlines and discusses the key functions of philosophers in the public sphere.

### **Conceptual Considerations**

Two key concepts at the center of this discourse stand in need of clarification, namely "philosophy" and "public affairs". Philosophy is

the paradigm case of an “essentially contested concept” (Gaille,1964). Philosophers are never in complete agreement about the nature of the subject they are supposed to be studying and teaching. Thus, the literature is replete with divergent conceptualization of Philosophy. For this discussion to proceed, however, it is necessary that we adopt a working definition. George Graham (1993: 2) defines philosophy as “the subject or academic discipline which attempts to comprehensively and systematically understand the most fundamental areas of human experience”. This definition is of particular interest because it hints at two important features of the discipline, namely, systematicity and comprehensiveness.

“Public affairs” can be understood by deconstructing the words in the phrase. The word “public”, according to the *New Penguin Dictionary of English* (2000), refers to anything relating to or “affecting all the people or the whole area of a nation or state”. Accordingly, we could speak of public law, public policies, public interest, etc. “Affair” on the other hand, generally points to event, action, or any matter of concern (Ibid.). If we put the two words together, we arrive at a definition that reads: Public affairs are events, actions or any matter that affects the general public. Sapru (2004:3) hints at the idea of public affairs when he identifies it as “an area or domain of life which is not private or purely individual, but held in common”. From the above discussion, we may surmise that public affairs relate to actions, policies, and issues whose consequences go beyond the private sphere.

### **The Private-Public Sphere Distinction**

Implicated in our conceptualization of public affairs above is the public-private sphere distinction. In what follows we will make the distinction between the public and private sphere explicit. The public-private divide dates back to the pre-Socratic period when Aristotle articulated the distinction between the *polis* and the *oikos*. The *polis* designates the body politic while *oikos* refers to the household or the familial terrain. The *polis* was the domain where citizens could exercise their civic responsibilities and actively participate in the political process with the view of constructing a polity that ultimately guarantees the good life. In contrast, the *oikos* or the household, bereft

of the politics that takes place in the polis, was concerned with mundane issues of life (Aristotle, 1983:61).

One principle that is implicit in the Aristotelian public-private split is that while politics takes place in the public, it is completely absent in the private realm. This certainly corresponds to the conventional distinction between the state and the society. Hall (1993:20) captures the distinction thus: “the state is associated with public affairs-*res publica*:- society, especially in the liberal tradition, is linked with the private”

For feminist theorist, the public sphere refers to the area of social life and institutions such as religion, politics and economy, which are generally seen as the province of men. On the other hand, the private sphere is seen as modes of activity that take place solely in domestic settings, and which is generally held to be the place of women (Gavison, 1992).

From this brief, albeit incomplete survey of the diverse accounts of the public-private divide, we can discern that the idea of the public and private shifts in meaning and significance across perspectives and between thinkers. For the purposes of this discourse, however, we simply conceive the public sphere as that arena where actions and decisions tend to have effect on more than a person or family whereas the private sphere would be that arena where decisions and actions only have effect on the private setting.

### **On the Nature of Philosophy**

One fundamental question often asked by those studying philosophy, or others who are curious about the subject is “What is the value of philosophy”, or what is the relevance of philosophy? Or what is the role of philosophy in public affairs? Given the nature of the humanities, these questions invite different answers. One way to answer the third question is to state that if philosophy has no lasting value, moderns will not be studying the classical writings of Plato and Aristotle whose works date back to the B.C epoch. But then we are still left with the task of making clear the exact role of the philosopher in public policy.

Like most questions in philosophy, there is no single authoritative definitive or universally accepted conception of the role of the philosopher in public affairs. Indeed, it appears that any conception of the role of the philosopher in public affairs is dependent on our conception of the nature of philosophy itself. And as Serequeberhan (1991) has insightfully observed, any discourse of philosophy necessarily implicates a preconceived notion of philosophy. The discourse here is not an exception. In fact, we already made allusions to our conception of the philosophical enterprise in the introduction. In this section we want to make more explicit the idea of philosophy that underpins our position in contradistinction with the analytic school that is wont to argue that the role of the philosopher in public affairs, if she has any, is limited to the clarification of concepts. We proceed by shedding more light on the latter.

In opposition to our view about the task of philosophy is a school of thought who has been described as twentieth century analytic philosophers (Popkin, 1999). According to this school, philosophy is nothing but the clarification of concepts in order to eliminate conceptual confusions that often arise in everyday debates and discourse. Thus, for the analytic philosopher, beyond clarification of concepts, the philosopher cannot engage in substantive and normative argument with regards to the issues or the problems of public affairs. Wittgenstein, a leading protagonist of language philosopher succinctly captures the point in these words:

Philosophy aims at the logical clarification of thoughts.  
Philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity...  
Philosophy does not results in ‘philosophical proposition’, but rather in the ‘clarification of propositions. (1974)

While we agree with Wittgenstein that analysis is aimed at clarification of thought and language is central to philosophy, it is very clear that, if limited to such role, philosophy would not only be shallow and unfruitful, it will have little or no impact beyond the four walls of the university. The emphasis on analysis entails the proposition that philosophers are “forbidden from formulating theories and making pronouncements” (Unah, 1998:30). Our historically

informed understanding of philosophy may be described as Socratic or even Platonic. These Philosophers no doubt engaged in language analysis and clarification of concepts but only as prelude to applying their philosophy to the Athenian society. On this reading, a philosopher ought and must apply his knowledge to deal with practical life and existential problems.

### **Philosophers and Public Affairs**

In outlining the roles of philosophers in public affairs, we would leave the arguments about the appropriate conception of philosophy aside and attempt to describe the contributions of philosophers to the improvement and development of public affairs. We could identify at least four major functions of philosophers with regard to public affairs. These are: (1) the analytic function, (2) the critique function, (3) the vision articulation function and (4) the deliberative function. We discuss them in turn.

### **The Analytic Function**

As we have hinted above the Analytic school in philosophy holds that the task of the philosopher is to critically analyze issues raised by any problem with the view to clarifying the concepts involved. Analysis is a process of breaking complex issues, beliefs, or experiences into smaller parts for better comprehension. It provides insights into existing problems. Indeed, the analytical approach enables the philosopher to break problems down into their very simple elements and to point out their implications for better understanding and adequate response.

In dealing with issues, philosophers, for instance, engage in analysis of concepts in which the problems are codified. This is important because without such conceptual analysis, the problem may further be muddled in wooliness and confusion. Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* (1974) and his first post-*Tractatus* paper, "Some Remarks on Logical Form" (1929), were apt to maintain that philosophers have the function of clearing linguistic confusions and perplexities through their analysis. Wittgenstein believes that everyday language disguises thought by concealing true logical form. Philosophers therefore strip away the disguise, and illuminate the form such that linguistic analysis

dissolves them. As Irele (1998) puts it, it is the philosopher's task to clear conceptual confusions and to point the way to reasonable courses of action.

Irele's statement implies that conceptual analysis is important in identifying the direction to follow in resolving issues. The views of Hirst and Peters further underscore the purpose of conceptual analysis when they opine that it helps to:

See through the words, to get a better grasp of the similarities and differences that are possible to pick out. And these are important in the context of other questions which we cannot answer without such preliminary analysis. (1970:8)

It should be clear then that analysis is not a trifling philosophical concern. It is important for an access to the veiled assumptions that underlie most uncongenial problems. It therefore helps to make logical connections in the attempt to resolve social problems that bedevil public affairs.

It needs to be noted that the analytic function is not an end in itself. Analysis helps to clear confusions and ambiguities for philosophers' clear understanding of issues in order to be in a better position to evaluate and critically assess possible designated implications. This implies that analysis is rather an important task for other relevant functions of philosophical activity, mainly, critique function.

### **The Critique Function**

Beyond performing the analytic function philosophers also critically scrutinize the principles and values behind actions and inactive decisions and indecisions that impact on public affairs. This critique function is central to philosophy. Affirming this importance, Oladipo (2008:35-35) argues that through rigorous, rational and impartial appraisal of claims, beliefs and values philosophy beams its search light on all aspects of human life, including morality, religion, social and political life, law, history, and even the natural sciences. The purpose is to enable us see things in a new light or develop a new perspective about them as a means of encouraging us to reform our

beliefs and modify our values when they are found wanting on the scale of reason. Cicero, a prominent and renowned stoic, consistently and largely criticized the Roman law through his notion of natural law. This criticism led to the transformation and modification of Roman law and raised to prominence the idea of *Jus gentium*.

Indeed, philosophers challenge existing arrangements in order to persuade other citizens to view society in a different light which may ultimately lead to positive transformation. In this regard, the role of the philosopher is akin to that of a social critic who helps to put societies on their toes. Philosophers like Locke heavily criticized monarchical absolutism until it was overthrown in Europe. Rand refers to this activity of philosophy as philosophical detection (Rand 1982), in which philosophers detect inconsistencies, anomalies and misconceptions that are embedded in issues of importance in public affairs. Therefore, in public affairs, philosophers are like the watch dogs, which see beyond the crowd to identify rational values that make for social cohesion and progress.

The analysis of the critique function shows that philosophers' investigation does not terminate at critical appraisal, it goes beyond this to articulating rationally perceived ideals as measures for social change.

### **The Vision Articulation Function**

Apart from challenging conventional understandings of issues of public affairs, speculative philosophers could point alternative visions of the future for their societies. They could literally create utopias or ideals which become alternative paths that could be charted by societies.

In fact, this vision articulation by philosophers is an expression of a quintessential philosophical task. The value of analytic and critique function are fully realized in the rational formation of values and alternative standards for transmogrification of public affairs. In "Philosophy and Social Purpose", Onyeaghalaji (2012), consistently argues that philosophy has a social purpose through its prognostic character. In this sense, the philosopher does not only differentiate the



underlining presuppositions, she generates theories as explanatory schemes that both illuminates the existential problems in varying degrees and serves as alternative model for social actions. The philosophical utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill did not only challenge the socio-political economy of British society, it formed a social, moral and political ideal that influenced and directed British public affairs over the years. Again, J. S Mill's philosophical idea about women suffrage expounded in his *Subjection of Women* (1869) radically challenged the social denigration of women in the society and it is now seen as a classic statement of liberal feminism, which has changed the attitude towards women over the years.

Thus, in its prognostic function, philosophers, according to Oladipo (1994) offer society and mankind some alternatives to its current mode of being. Plato's *Republic*, for instance, was a utopia that did not only in a sense criticize the society of his days, but was an alternative vision to which it could aspire.

### **The Deliberation Function**

The public sphere represents an arena of discourse in which professional philosophers as well as the general public can deliberate on issues of general concern within society be they economic, political or social problems. Some of the issues that come up for discussion here may include the questions of the relation between governmental authority and individual autonomy; how to reconcile public interest with individual interest; what is the best distributive principle for a just society, etc. In tackling these questions, philosophy brings analytical tools of logic, ethics and metaphysics to bear and help to deepen and enlighten the public forum for the discussion of the issues of public affairs.

Philosophers are grounded in the art of deliberation and dialogue, which is enriched by their knowledge of principles of logical reasoning and morals. By leading the course of deliberation with these tools philosophers could help the public to arrive at rational agreement on which course to direct public affairs. In his analysis of deliberative public sphere and the life world, Martin Morris (2006) analyses Derrida's and Harbemas' emphasis on the importance of

deliberation in the public space. Jurgen Habermas maintains that deliberation and communication are important in forming social agreements on critical issues in the public sphere. He goes further to affirm the importance of deliberation by stating that the “institutionalization of the corresponding procedures and conditions of communication, as well as on the interplay of institutionalized processes” (Habermas 1996:298) are important for success of deliberative politics.

In all of these, that is, in performing all the functions highlighted above, philosophers do not pretend that they have the final answers. They only raise the questions, analyze the issues, and prescribe solutions as well as establish general principles with which such problems and issues could be addressed.

### **Conclusion**

In the foregoing discourse, we have demonstrated that philosophical rumination is not an exercise in futility and the philosophers’ role is not limited to conceptual analysis, as the analytic tradition posits. In this regard, philosophers have a role in public affairs, as a self-conscious critic of the way society is organized, particularly its underlying principles and the ideas that people live by. The objective is to articulate pragmatic ideas and conscientize the public for social change. The public affair is characterized by complexities and problems of social existence. These complexities and social problematic have potentials to undermine or aid social growth depending on the extent to which the inherent potentials are critically deciphered and harnessed. Focusing on its ability to drag the hidden potentials and assumptions into the light of reason, we maintain that through the combined analytic, critique, vision articulation and deliberative function, philosophers provide theoretical conditions and ethical views necessary for reconstruction of the society.

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