Philosophers and Public Policy

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My thesis, as the title of this essay suggests, is that some philosophers have skills or capabilities which can be used to explore and sometimes to clarify important public policy issues. Insofar as this activity serves the function of making relatively informed public policy choices possible, it is of value in democratic society. By illustrating some of what philosophical analysis has to offer to the public policy-making process, I hope to advance Abraham Kaplan's plea for restoration of the social relevance of philosophy.

However, the argument goes further than this, for an assertion that philosophy has social relevance involves a question of what philosophy is at base? This is an extremely complicated question which is difficult if not impossible to answer. One is thus tempted to follow Sydney Hook's lead and argue that a concern with public affairs is simply one distinct kind of philosophical activity among many. However ill advised, I argue that philosophical involvement in public policy issues is an activity rooted in and consistent with the distinguishing characteristic of Western civilization, that is the search for knowledge of both "the true" and "the good" to guide human action.[1] If this is the case, then philosophical involvement in public policy issues is more than a simple outlet for the energy of certain philosophers; rather, such activity is intrinsically associated with and fundamental to the maintenance and further development of Western culture.

Within the limits of this paper it is not feasible to discuss the empirical nature of the public policy-making process in any detail; rather, I take it for granted that opportunities for philosophers to make input into the policy-making process do in fact exist.[2] Many, perhaps most, of these opportunities lie at the interface of human values and social issues. By uncovering and helping to formulate value choices entailed by alternative policies, philosophers can contribute to the democratic process. Many philosophers have discussed the kind of contribution philosophers might make, and the work of Abraham Kaplan, Nicholas Rescher, and Kurt Baier is exemplary.

In his somewhat inappropriately titled book, *Introduction to Value Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969), Rescher points out that the normative evaluation of values "is one of the tasks, *characteristic of their discipline*, to which philosophers have addressed themselves *throughout the ages*" [emphasis added] (p. 128). This point is of no little importance, and I return to it in the concluding part of my argument.

From this point, Rescher proceeds to develop a method of cost/benefit analysis for the implementation of values. By using this method in public policy analysis, philosophers can provide a kind of "balance sheet," as it were, allowing the public to see the costs and benefits associated with an attempt to implement a particular value. In other words, such analysis makes it possible to determine whether an expenditure of resources necessary to implement a particular value is worthwhile. Philosophical analysis can help to make clear whether a particular value is "oversubscribed" (i.e., more costs than benefits warrant), "undersubscribed" (i.e., less investment of resources than warranted by benefits), or "functional" (i.e., costs and benefits balanced in a manner conducive to the highest level of social welfare.[3]

Kurt Baier is another philosopher who recognizes the contributions philosophers might make to public policy analysis. Of particular importance is Baier's discussion of meliorative knowledge in a book he co-edited with Rescher, entitled *Values and the Future* (New York: The Free Press, 1969). As Baier puts it, the values of a group "are those settled habits of, and attitudes towards, resource allocations which are *essentially appraisal-dependent*. . . : the community is ready to modify these habits and attitudes in the face of what they would themselves recognize as very strong evidence to the effect that these resource allocations do not confer the expected benefits" (pp. 56-57). Although we can not dwell on the argument, Baier's point is that meliorative knowledge is essential to civilized existence; that is, if meliorative change is to be other than accidental, then the public requires knowledge of both those values which are beneficial to man–knowledge of "the good"–and of those things which *cause* us to reach or fail to reach our desired ends–knowledge of "the true" (cf. pp. 41-50, and especially pp. 54-55).[4] Without the normative evaluation of values the public will make policy choices; but they will do so without knowledge of whether the values these policies seek to realize are themselves sound or unsound.

Finally, as one last illustration of what philosophers might add to policy analysis, let us consider Abraham Kaplan's insightful (and barbed) comment in his book, *American Ethics and Public Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963). He notes that, "In America policy makers worry too much about philosophy, while philosophers do not worry enough about policy" (p. 91). Among philosophers concerned with value questions, as Kaplan observes, "There is virtually exclusive preoccupation with the analysis of the justification for judgments of value. For two decades our philosophical journals have been filled with interminable discussions of whether value judgments are factual or only express the

attitudes of the judger" (p. 100). By default, policy analysis has been handed over to those of "pragmatic" temperament who reduce policy decisions to "value free" technical and economic considerations, justified solely in the name of efficiency and success (cf. pp. 38-39). As Kaplan observes, such a mode of policy analysis is "efficient only if we do not count the cost" of other values foregone, and "successful only in attaining the values we have fixed upon beforehand, not those in fact implicated by our actions" (p. 39). Philosophers thus have a significant contribution to make to the policy-making process, if for no other reason than sensitizing the public to the fact that in a complex value economy the merits of implementing one specific value can only be determined in a context of alternative investments and benefits.

Assuming, then, on the basis of the foregoing, that philosophers have both method and reason enough to engage themselves with public policy issues, let me turn to a further question. Namely, is the kind of endeavor outlined above simply one kind of philosophy, or is it an activity more intimately associated with whatever philosophy is at base? This is a most complex and difficult question, especially since among philosophers, as Bontempo and Odell point out in *The Owl of Minerva* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), "there is no consensus on how their subject is best understood and on what relevance their work has to our lives and our institutions, to our personal choices and hopes, and to our public policies and goals" (p. 1). However, the question is undeniably important for, on the one hand, if policy analysis is simply one kind of philosophy, then it will likely be perceived as a legitimate but not especially important area of endeavor (as Kaplan makes clear); on the other hand, if policy analysis is more intimately associated with whatever philosophy is at base, then it will more likely be perceived as an area of vital interest to our profession.

Sidney Hook, in his essay "Philosophy and Public Policy" (reprinted in *The Owl of Minerva*), deals with the issue at some length, and eschews the idea that we can make any claim for the social relevance of philosophy by asserting that philosophy is first and foremost concerned with the nature of the good in man or society or history (cf. pp. 76-80). As Hook points out, an obvious difficulty with this view of philosophy is that normative considerations appear unrelated to other kinds of philosophical concern, such as epistemology and metaphysics, which for many philosophers are the heart of the discipline. Of course one might try to overcome this difficulty by claiming that these "perennial problems of philosophy" are intrinsically associated with value questions; but Hook correctly finds this an untenable defense of the social relevance of philosophy. He notes, for example, that "The speculative and broadly hypothetical phases of

scientific thought can be considered philosophical independently of their bearing on the pursuit of wisdom or human values" (p. 80). Furthermore, Hook continues, there is "a kind of music of ideas" or philosophy for the fun of it, which appeals to philosophers completely independent of any social utility. Thus, Hook wisely opts for defending some philosophers' concern with public policy on the basis that this is simply one philosophical task among many, but not the philosophical task.

Perhaps it is foolish, in light of Hook's analysis, to claim that any connection between philosophy and public affairs is more than just one kind of job that some philosophers do. However, it is my contention that the connection between philosophy and public policy is founded in a historical commitment of Western civilization to reason as guide for human conduct. A complete account of this "turn to reason" goes beyond the scope of this essay. However, the so-called "Jaynes-Taylor hypothesis" might briefly be considered as indicative of the outlines of a more adequate explanatory narrative.

Julian Jaynes argues, in *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1976), that civilizations without conscious human life are more than mere possibilities; they were in fact the actualities of human history until approximately 3,000 years ago. At this time reflective human consciousness emerged, and the left cerebral hemisphere (for right-handed people) became a primary agent of control for human behavior. Theretofore, the right cerebral hemisphere had been the locus of control over human behavior, telling people what to do when forced to act in novel situations (i.e., situations not governed by habituated patterns of response). This ancient mentality, termed by Jaynes "the bicameral mind," governed human behavior through auditory hallucinations, which were interpreted by the ancients as the voices of the gods or spirits. However, as the left cerebral hemisphere began to assume control over man's conscious life and behavior, the right brain became relatively subdued. Man now began to deliberate, to reflect, to think critically and self-consciously before he acted.

Taylor's thesis, in his book *Socrates* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1953), is that Socrates, with his explicit doctrine or concept of *psyche* (soul), created both the intellectual and moral tradition which has governed Western (European) civilization (cf. p. 132). One may recall that apparently Socrates himself had truck with the gods or, in Jaynes terms, experienced auditory hallucinations. This fact is, however, consistent with the Jaynes-Taylor hypothesis, since Socrates can be seen as a transition figure, who had one foot in the ancient world, where the bicameral mind

governed, and one foot in the modern world, where reflective consciousness comes to the forefront. Socrates' primary allegiance, as we see repeatedly in the Socratic dialogues, is to reason as the guide for human conduct, epitomized in the idea that "For man, the unexamined life is not worth living."

The passage from the "turn to reason" to the present day is by way of a long and twisting path, and thus any relation between the Socrates of ancient Greece and Twentieth-century philosophers engaging in public policy analysis may be dimly perceived (and controversial) at best. But is there not an unmistakable relationship between Socrates' fundamental insight into *psyche* and philosophical analysis of public policy, indeed, as Taylor suggests, between *psyche* and "the beginnings of a theory both of science and of moral conduct" (p. 140). As Taylor argues, in Socrates' concept of the soul lies a common denominator for both ethics and epistemology: 'To 'make the soul as good as possible' would be on the one side to attain the knowledge of existence as it really is, on the other to base one's moral conduct on a true knowledge of 'moral values.' In both spheres the one thing to be overcome is the putting of 'opinion,' 'fancy' (*doxa*), assumptions which cannot be justified as true in the place of knowledge. As science is ruined by the confusion of fancy with fact, so practical life is spoiled by a false estimate of good" (p. 140).

Hook's caution in refusing to claim that philosophy's concern with public affairs is anything more than one distinct kind of philosophical endeavor is understandable. Yet the Jaynes-Taylor hypothesis holds new promise for the argument that the normative evaluation of values is not only an appropriate area of philosophical concern, but is not unrelated to the more recondite and technical metaphysical and epistemological questions with which other philosophers deal. As Kaplan argues, for example, the scholarly philosophical debate over the epistemological problem of the justification of value is not unimportant; but our profession has "focused so closely on the logical foundations [of value judgments] that we are in danger of losing sight of the cultural superstructure which makes the foundations important" (p. 100). *Mutatis mutandis*, the same line of argument applies to at least some philosophical work in metaphysics (consider, for example, the cultural implications of A. N. Whitehead's *The Function of Reason*), epistemology (cf. Karl Popper's work), and so on.

The Jaynes-Taylor hypothesis implies that normative ethics, epistemology, metaphysics and other areas of philosophical inquiry have grown out of and remain rooted in reflective consciousness, and that there is, therefore, a fundamental affinity among these distinct activities. Policy analysis itself is not *the* philosophical task, from this point of view, but it

is more than just *a* task in which philosophers engage since it has an affinity with other kinds of philosophical inquiry. Furthermore, it appears to be the case that in public policy analysis there is a coming together of those diverse human interests in knowledge of both "the true" and "the good." To the extent that the Jaynes-Taylor hypothesis is credible, then likewise it seems that the relationship between philosophy and public policy is more than just circumstantial or accidental, more than just one task among the many that philosophers do.

Rather, as I have suggested, such activity is intrinsically involved with our most central and distinguishing cultural tradition. One will recall Rescher's remark that the normative evaluation of values is a task to which philosophers have addressed themselves throughout the ages; Hook too notes that "The most comprehensive as well as the most adequate conception of philosophy that emerges from the history of philosophy is that it is the normative consideration of human values" (p. 77). (And others might also be mentioned in this regard.) Thus, by engaging in policy analysis along the lines outlined in the first part of this paper, it appears that philosophers are also contributing to *an attempt* to further Western civilization itself–however gradiose that might sound–since the goal of their analysis is meliorative knowledge. That is, to reiterate, policy analysis seeks both knowledge of those values which are beneficial to man, and knowledge of those things which cause us to reach or fail to reach our desired ends.

It may, of course, be immediately objected that no philosophers possess the kind of interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary talents required to engage in such a task (or at least that no sane philosopher would claim to have such abilities). I can not adequately meet this objection in the remaining space. However, the point is well taken that a philosopher qua philosopher possesses no knowledge qualifying him to make causal judgments. But, as Hook notes, we must expect that those who do engage in policy analysis will master the facts in the cases they seek to analyze. Philosophical policy analysis seems to be, then, a single mode of inquiry which seeks to integrate knowlege of "the true" with the knowledge of "the good."

Both philosophers and scientists alike have taken notice of a search for meliorative knowledge as being intrinsically associated with and fundamental to the maintenance and further development of Western civilization. As the biologist-philosopher Jacques Monod argues in his book, *Chance and Necessity* (New York: Random House, 1972), "The ethic of knowledge that created the modern world is the only ethic compatible with it, the only one capable, once understood and accepted, of guiding its

evolution" (p. 177). It is, as Monod sees, through a systematic confrontation between critical reason and experience that man learns to integrate knowledge of fact with judgments of value; and this knowledge is the very stuff out of which Western man must fashion the human future. Is this not, to conclude, the same point which Abraham Kaplan makes in his plea for the restoration of the social relevance of philosophy? "We must either leave science alone altogether and forego its transformation of means, or else integrate it with our moral aspirations and forego the fixity of traditional ends" (p. 103).

NOTES

1. I argue the point briefly in the latter portions of this paper. The thesis itself has been advanced by many thinkers, as for example by Robert M. Hutchins, in his book *The Great Conversation* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1952): "The goal toward which Western Society moves is the Civilization of the Dialogue." According to Hutchins, "No other civilization can claim that its defining characteristic is a dialogue of this sort" (p. 1).
2. For a more detailed discussion of this point, see my "Philosophers and the Making of a Humanistic Society: Some Implications of Recent Federal Legislation," *Philosophical Research and Analysis*, Vol. VI, No. 11, pp. 17-20.
3. See my "Human Values and Economic Policy-Making: A Path Toward an Analytic Alternative" in a forthcoming issue of *The Forum* (a journal of the Association for Social Economics) for an in-depth illustration of cost/benefit analysis of implementation of a value.
4. This conception of meliorative knowledge implies that interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary skills are required by philosophers engaging in policy analysis.

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