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The Roles of the Philosopher in Public Life

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In this paper I will discuss three related theses about the possible roles of the philosopher in public life: (1) He tries to make sense of the world; (2) he tries to educate people to appreciate true values; and (3) he criticizes his own time in light of ideals of practical reason.

I want to begin by stating two personal beliefs concerning philosophy. For me the philosopher is a thinker knowingly striving for the impossible, a wisdom or an understanding that matters to all people, but which is never given, never totally available. Anyone who is seriously engaged in philosophical reflection is thus trying to fulfill a task that goes beyond what he can actually achieve. This is the first belief.

The second is this: We live in a human world where there is a desperate need for the practice of philosophy, a world which is characterized by a metaphysical vacuum, which people are trying to fill with all kinds of ideas or beliefs without being truly satisfied and without being able to find guidance in matters of philosophical concern.

This is no news to you: Since the days of Socrates and Plato philosophers have been striving for the metaphysical wisdom that is so obviously lacking in our human world. But the situation and cultural conditions of human life have varied from one period to the next in the course of history. And in our times, when the world is heading towards what is called “internationalisation” or “globalisation”, people are asking more and more what they should believe about reality and about the ground upon which they can stand as thinking, responsible human beings. The actual crisis is making the questioning even more acute.

In this context the question about the role of the philosopher in public life becomes also more important. How shall we, who are engaged in philosophical activity of

reflection and conceptual analysis, conceive of our mission? What is or should be the task of philosophers in the puzzling times in which we live? How shall we speak about our mission, and how shall we accomplish it?

It goes without saying that I do not pretend to have any definite answers to these questions. But I think that they need to be raised and discussed. Of course, these discussions may only be theoretical and may not bring about any real change in the development of philosophy as an academic activity. But they may also be of great practical importance and may give a new meaning to the practice of philosophy, not only within the departments of philosophy in our universities or schools, but also in public debates where the great issues of our time are being discussed and decided.

As I see it, philosophy has to go public in a much wider sense than it has done so far. By this I mean both that people educated in philosophy should participate more actively in the public debates and that philosophical ideas and theories should be taken more into account when people are discussing matters of public interests. Philosophy should not only concern specialists in logic, ethics, epistemology, and metaphysics, but all people who seriously want to reflect upon the world as it reveals itself in the public domain – in the media, in the business community and, of course, on the political and legal scene, where every issue of human life can be brought to public awareness.

Why do I say this? Why do I have such a strong belief in the public function of philosophy? My answer is this: Anyone engaged in philosophy is trying to say something about the world that is of universal value and should matter to every thinking being. And this concerns also people participating in the public domain. They should be expressing themselves, as thinking human beings, building upon their own reason – not in the name of an established science or speciality. Of course, public discourse should take into account knowledge of all kinds, but its concern is the meaning of everything and the understanding of ourselves as individual thinking beings, facing the mysteries and the unresolved issues of human existence. And philosophy is directly concerned with this dimension of meaning by its effort of clarifying concepts and ideas. This is precisely what is most needed when the meaning and value of everything is put into

question and people are asking desperately for ideas that can guide them, or, if you like, for reasons to live by, reasons which enable them to be free and responsible for their own thoughts and decisions. They know that technology and the virtual reality which it generates continuously in our daily life does not provide us with reasons of this sort, that this strange “reality” is not “the meaning of life” in itself.

The question, of course, may arise whether it is not religion rather than philosophy that ought to provide guidance in dealing with the questions concerning the ultimate meaning of life. But the difference between religion and philosophy, from my present perspective, is rather obvious: Philosophy is a way of *seeking* answers about the meaning and grounds for our existence, it does not *provide* the answers as religions usually aspire to do. As it is, it is not answers that we need, but rather a way of escaping from the various purported answers to our ultimate questions in order to free ourselves to think and reflect about the world. In fact, the dominant technology of our age plays the role of an all-encompassing religion, telling us what matters and what does not. It tells us that there is nothing to worry about, if only we concentrate on doing what we can – instead of being critical and trying to think things out for ourselves.

There are several difficulties that have to be overcome if philosophy is to go public in the way I am suggesting – as a critical and reflective scrutiny of the reasons and grounds for our existence in order to make us more responsible and free in our decisions. These difficulties are all concerned with the public image of the philosopher. But let me tell you immediately that the difficulties I have in mind are all healthy for the prosperous development of philosophy. They are not a hindrance for philosophical thinking. Rather, they are a constant challenge for the philosophers who want to fulfill their mission.

For the remainder of this paper I shall be dealing with some aspects of this public image and some classical beliefs or prejudices that are attached to it.

Before I present my main argument, let us consider for a while the man who has contributed more than anybody else to the public image of the philosopher, namely

Socrates.¹ If one wants to know what it is to be a philosopher and what philosophers do, nothing is more appropriate than interpreting the image that history has preserved of him. I want to concentrate on three aspects of Socrates' life as a philosopher.

In the first place, Socrates' life was dedicated to the search for true wisdom – the wisdom which frees the soul from the bounds of ignorance and arrogance and shows the reality as it is, beyond whatever may seem to us in our contingent and insecure daily existence. Socrates believed in the reality of wisdom which can take us beyond our present situation and direct us towards a higher reality – a realm of greater meaning. But such wisdom is an ideal, a goal, perhaps a dream – certainly not a fact or a means to something else.

In the second place, Socrates developed a method with which to search for the understanding of concepts and to find reasons for our beliefs. This is the method of *critical dialogue* or *dialectics*, where one asks questions and gives answers only to get nearer to what is true and right. So understood, dialectic is the opposite of rhetoric where people argue in order to overcome an opponent and convince others that they are right, whether or not they have valid arguments to offer. The method of question and answer in a friendly dialogue has proved to be one of the most powerful educational means that has been discovered.

In the third place, Socrates shows us an attitude and a way of life that are characterised by *reflection*, *coherence* and *peace of mind*. Let us look more closely at these three characteristics.

We should reflect before believing or deciding anything. We should be coherent both in word and deed, and should face whatever happens with a calm mind. Reflection, coherence and peace of mind have been the criteria or characteristics of the philosopher's attitude towards life and reality since Socrates' time. But they are far from being established once and for all: Quite the contrary!

¹Jóhannes Geir: "You are becoming more and more like Socrates!"

Behind *reflection* lies a profound wonder about the world and about oneself, which pervades and dominates the mind. Philosophical reflection is an effort to orient oneself in a world of thought where wonder is the supreme ruler.

Behind *coherence* lies an awareness of the contradictions that make themselves continuously felt in speech, thought and action and, indeed, characterize all of human life: A permanent struggle is required in order to form consistent thoughts and meaningful forms of life.

Behind *peace of mind* lie insecurity and uncertainty about the destiny and what life may become in the end – an uncertainty which fills the mind with anguish and worry. Philosophical peace of mind is the art of being reconciled with incertitude: to let it stimulate us to a more developed consciousness concerning the puzzling aspects of reality which we have not yet grasped, and will perhaps never grasp.

With these observations in mind, we may say that the philosopher is the one who, by means of the critical dialogue, directs his steps with reflexion, calmness and coherence towards greater understanding and wisdom.

I shall now turn to the *public image* of the philosopher and see how he may fulfill his mission by acting in accordance with it. The argument will be as follows: I will make three statements about the role of the philosopher. To each of these statements I shall present a critical reaction in the spirit of common sense. I shall then discuss in which ways this critical reaction is misguided and how in fact philosophy may guide us along our insecure path towards the ultimate grounds of our existence and help us to solve the practical problems of life.

The statements are these: (1) The philosopher tries to make sense of the world; (2) he tries to educate people to appreciate the true values; and (3) he criticizes his own time in the light of ideals of practical reason.

It goes without saying that these statements do not describe everything that philosophers do. I believe that everybody who practices philosophy must describe in his own words what he or she is doing. Nevertheless, the person, who is doing philosophy,

is always saying to herself something like this: “I need to make it clear to myself whether it is possible to think and talk about the world in an orderly fashion.” Each philosopher reacts to this challenge in his or her own personal way and puts himself or herself on the line in this attempt.

My fictive philosopher – the one I am imagining in its public role or image – says to himself in the first place: *I want to make sense of reality and communicate my understanding of the world to others.* He says: “I want to think things out for myself and not let anybody else tell me what to believe, but find out with my own reflexion and discussions with others what, if anything, I should believe about reality. And this shall be my main preoccupation, because this is what truly matters: To find out what makes our human world as it is, why reality appears to us as it does, and why I am the being that I am or feel that I am. And I will live and act in accordance with what I find out. I may find out that there are things about the world which are worth believing, e.g. that there is an almighty God who rules everything, or that the world is made out of meaningless matter which has organised itself by chance into solar systems and conscious brains. And afterwards I will be a kind of dogmatic philosopher, trying to teach to others what I believe I have discovered about myself and about the world. *Or* I may find out that I really know nothing about the world except that it seems to exist independently of my mind, although I lack the means to prove that it does. And in that case I will become a kind of sceptic, trying to communicate to others how silly they are when they believe all kinds of nonsense about the world.”²

Let us ponder this speech of our public philosopher. He is in his own way trying to fulfill his mission of being true to himself in searching for the ultimate wisdom about the world, just like Socrates. He believes in such wisdom, whether or not he can find it: The truth of the sceptic is no less universal than the truth of the dogmatic – and Socrates, as we all know, vascilliated between the two. In both cases, truth is what

²La sagesse des modernes as an exemple!

matters, the truth about the world and what can be said or known about it. And in both cases, the philosopher – the one I am talking about – fails to convince us, ordinary people, that he has discovered, or will ever discover, a higher truth about the world.

Here we confront common sense: No philosopher – as far as I know as an ordinary human being – has discovered either the truth about the world or the truth about his own possibilities for discovering the truth. The very attempt to discover the truth about the world and the ground or basis of our knowledge is, in the end, like trying to carry sunshine in a bucket. Or perhaps it is even worse than that: a pure vanity, a pretense which is deceiving, if it is taken too seriously, as it often is. This pretense may even be analysed as a kind of sickness of rational thought, resulting from a confusion between different forms of thinking, generating words or concepts that have no clear meaning or reference, and thus giving birth to mysterious entities like substance, spirit, the will to power, subject, object, difference, being, and so on – entities which have no place in ordinary, rational discourse, but are produced, nonetheless, by men who are not considered to be actually insane.³

The conclusion is inevitable. The attempt of our philosopher, who wants to make sense of the world, is nothing but vanity. Common sense tells us that there are no definite conclusions to be drawn about the ultimate grounds of our existence, and that any attempt to discover such grounds is like a childish game which we ultimately outgrow, as Callikles pointed out to Socrates many years ago.⁴

How do we react to this presumptuous conclusion of common sense? I shall make three remarks:

³ My daughter, at the age of twelve, asked me: “What is philosophy?” And seeing me hesitate, responded to her own question by asking: “Is it not just a game with non-objective words, words that do not refer to anything we can see or touch or smell?” She was not being critical, only observant. Her answer has stayed with me as the best one I have so far discovered. She did not consider this to be a negative remark, and neither do I. But in our daily lives, where our dealings are with things we can perceive and nail down as being the definite objects of our thoughts, this observation gains a powerful critical function: Philosophy is *not* concerned with things that matter in our concrete, daily lives, where serious practical issues – even issues of life and death – are decided at every moment. Words like “truth”, “justice”, “freedom” – not to mention “transcendental”, or “metaphysical” – may simply sound empty and self-deceived.

⁴Gorgias s. 116-117.

(1) The effort “to make sense of the world” may indeed seem to be a vain enterprise, at least to those who are not seriously engaged in it. But it is this very same attempt that has produced scientific knowledge and organised the various sciences and practical disciplines into a systematic whole. And whenever the individual scientist is working at the edge of established scientific knowledge, he is in fact doing philosophical work, trying to make sense of phenomena he still does not understand but is desperately trying to grasp. And in doing so he is bound to produce new concepts and ideas which, at least at first, appear strange and perhaps even empty. This leads to my second remark.

(2) Philosophy as an effort to understanding the world and to find ultimate reasons for everything, has shaped and nourished common sense, providing it with all kinds of ideas, concepts and theories. Even these common words – idea, concept, theory – are filled with philosophical content, whether people realize it or not. The common-sense critique of philosophy is made possible by philosophy itself, as Aristotles pointed out some 2400 years ago. This leads to my third remark.

(3) The main role of philosophy in public life has, since the days of Socrates, been to preach the importance of critical thinking and to try to get people to practice it. To get them, in other words, to confront their own delusions, convictions, beliefs and ideas which they make use of without thinking about what they truly mean and why they should have them. Of course, common sense has always resisted this Socratic teaching because critical thinking requires an effort and a training which we do not necessarily desire; so there is always a lot for philosophers to do!

Let us now turn to the second statement: *The philosopher tries to educate people to see the true values.* I do not need to spend much time on this public image of the philosopher, because this is the familiar, basic message of Socrates. The practice of philosophy – the effort to discuss everything in a critical manner – is intended to educate us and to lead us to discover what truly matters. The practice of philosophy and its message are one and the same thing! We should not believe what we are told, without first trying to find out whether or not it is true. We must seek the truth, and be

honest and just, in all our thoughts and actions. The highest values in life are to be found in connection with understanding and justice and also the friendship that derives from participating in the attempt to create a better world, based upon knowledge of what is for the best.

Of course, this message has often been distorted by people who have believed they have found once and for all the correct way to live: people who have, in the name of philosophy, tried to impose their vision upon other people. For this reason, some brave philosophers have found the need to philosophize “with a hammer”, thus trying to break down ideological constructions which stand in the way of the effort to seek the truth and to learn what truly matters. But the message remains the same from Socrates to Spinoza and Sartre: In order to live a life worth living we must develop our own thinking about what truly matters in the world and urge others to do the same.

What is the view of common sense concerning this public role of the philosopher? It has always been and still is the same: People do not care about the ultimate values which the philosopher urges them to seek. What they care about are ordinary, worldly values, like money, fame and power. People want to be content, to enjoy life while they can and without too much effort, and not to worry about truth, justice and “higher things” which nobody really understands. And they want to form their own attitude without having to take part in any critical dialogue on the subject!

How shall we react to this classical rejection of the philosopher’s message? I will make three remarks:

(1) First of all – and this point can not be emphasized enough – the philosopher demonstrates to people that they are free to choose what they want. A person becomes a philosopher, if she does, by her *own* choice. By making her decision public she is revealing to people that they can make the same choice or a different one, that they are free to seek worldly values, like money, or that they can seek justice or truth or freedom or love or whatever.

(2) My second remark is this: Common sense knows – because philosophers have taught it for centuries and many religions have also been preaching this – that people

who seek only worldly values, and who do not care about justice or basic meaning, are not likely to be happy and content with their lives. The contention that people do care only about worldly values is dubious to say the least – and common sense knows this very well!

(3) This leads to my third remark. Many people who are totally engaged in the pursuit of money, fame and power know deep down – or even not so deep down – that this is not the life they want to lead. They realise that there are in fact external circumstances that force them to concentrate on those values instead of artistic, moral or spiritual values. These people quite often turn to philosophy for support when they begin to reflect upon their own condition and upon the condition of the world in which they live.

Here we come to the third statement about the role of the philosopher: *He criticizes his own time in the light of ideals of practical reason.* Once again we may turn to Socrates for guidance, since he did indeed criticize his own society and the ways in which it was run. And his pupil, Plato, was even more energetic in this respect. As he tells us in the Seventh letter, his reasons for turning to philosophy were directly concerned with the malfunctioning of his society and the need for a better understanding of how it could be governed in the interests of all and according to the principles of justice.

Of course, philosophers have had quite different views about society, the function of the state, the nature of public interests, and so on. But their basic message has been the same: Society needs to become more rational, and philosophy should help developing the criteria for a good society: one which will last and be worthy for handing down to future generations. Despite their differences, all the great philosophers of the past have been concerned with the ideals of practical reason – such as justice, freedom, dignity, peace, friendship and charity – and with the ways in which these ideals have been understood and implemented (or misunderstood and not implemented) in human

society. The old dream of Socrates and Plato, that wisdom should always be respected, continues to be the dream of the public philosopher.

How does common sense view this role of our philosopher? In short, as unrealistic and totally out of touch with reality. According to the critique of common sense, politics is not a friendly dialogue about the ideals of practical reason; it is a power game or power struggle, where the strongest wins in the end, as Callicles and Thrasimachus both maintained in their discussions with Socrates. And since the old days in Athens, when Socrates tried to reason with his fellow citizens, common sense has always given the same advice to philosophers: Don't mix with politics and do not interfere in the affairs of the *state (polis)*! You should limit yourself to reflection and thinking about ideals or whatever, but it is a great danger both to you and to society if you try to change the world according to philosophical prescriptions proclaiming how the world should be run. Then there is only a small step to totalitarianism.

How shall we react to this criticism? Before doing so directly, let me make three general remarks about the importance of philosophy for politics:

(1) Philosophers have made clear to people the main ideas about different rational forms of government and of types of state. They have played a vital role in defining basic laws and constitutions, as in the United States, and in defining basic human rights, as in the United Nations.

(2) My second point concerns the fact that each government needs to justify its actions to its citizens, and in doing so, it will inevitably make use of philosophical ideas and theories. Thus the exercise of power calls for philosophy, whether politicians are aware of this or not. Of course, this philosophy may be in the form of a bad ideology, which even rejects all critical dialogue and thus preclude the practice of democracy. But there has to be a certain amount of philosophical thought in the exercise of political power, if it is to make any sense at all.

(3) This leads to my third remark. Any sensible effort to run society and improve it rests, on the one hand, upon a vision – a dream or an ideal about a better world and how

society ought to be constituted for the benefit of its members, and, on the other hand, upon practical judgment and understanding of what can be done in order to realize the ideal in question, given our real situation and the economical, technical and political means at our disposal.

Let me end with a brief reflection upon the difference between political and social ideals and the means to realize them. As I see it, the basic role of philosophers in public life is to show us how the gap between what is and what should be, can be filled, in a way which will more fully humanize our world. Such an effort requires first of all a serious reflection on our common world, its meanings and values for all and every human being. The philosophical reflection has always lead to a *criticism* of the dominant ideology, which tries to block all critical thinking, and at the same time philosophy has always tried to describe a *vision* of the world as a place where the values of dignity, freedom and justice may be realized. Moreover, a philosophical reflection always requires the *practice of critical dialogue* which concentrates on the real conditions of our technological societies. Based upon a clear vision of how things should be, this dialogue must bring to public awareness the imperfections and serious mistakes that may be observed in the actual running of our political and legal institutions. But we should recognize the fact that the philosophical dialogue is never going to replace the political debate with its rhetorical strategy and various power games.

The main fault is always the same: Instead of recognizing our limitations and responsibilities, we rush forward to do things without being aware of what we are in fact doing and without trying to foresee the consequences of our actions. In a sense, we run blindfolded, not knowing what will happen in the end. But this blindness is no excuse for the arrogance and the violence that so often characterize our public and political institutions. On the contrary, it should make us all the more conscious of the need for caution in all of our judgements and decisions. Here there is still an important role for the philosopher in public life.

This does not mean that philosophical reflection, coherence and calmness of mind should stop us from trying to change the world and cause us to withdraw from taking part in public debates. It tells us rather that our role as philosophers is to appear in public space and to confront the ignorance, the contradictions and the insecurity that mark our real conditions. The mission of philosophy is to fight with the weapons of reason and reflection for a meaningful existence so that we can go on co-existing in this violent world, inspired by the dream of discovering the mysteries of the world we share with all other beings.

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