*Method in Philosophy and Public Policy: Applied Philosophy versus Engaged Philosophy*

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**The Attractions of Moral and Political Philosophy**

Many moral and political philosophers, I assume, became interested in their subject initially through a concern with particular ethical or political questions. I can remember, for example, as a teenager worrying about the justification of punishment. Later I became interested in questions of inequality and social justice, and the justification of authority. Moral and political philosophy, I hoped, would help me think about, perhaps even solve, some of these questions.

The experience of studying moral and political philosophy took me, though, in a different direction. Mainstream moral philosophy, when I was an undergraduate in the early 1980s, was concerned largely with questions about the metaphysics of value, making connections with epistemology and philosophy of language. Political philosophy was dominated by the study of the crisply formulated theories of justice of Rawls and Nozick, albeit elaborated in great, sometimes, laborious, detail. Essentially political philosophy, as it was taught to me (and it will have been different for others), was identified with the construction of abstract principles, and the provision of arguments for or (more often) against, primarily in the form of counter-examples. The options for a political philosopher were to defend or attack an existing grand theory, or, in a daunting flight of fancy, attempt to construct a new one. There was little attention to practical issues, with the exceptions of civil disobedience and freedom of speech, which were hangovers of the flurry of philosophical activity generated by the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This led to a type of anxiety regarding the role of political philosophers. While the injustice in the world around them attracted students to political philosophy, the state of the discipline meant that what made them successful was abandoning passion and protest, and replacing it with analytical precision and abstract thought. R.M. Hare captures this attitude by asserting that ‘If philosophers are going to do good rather than harm in politics they must value clarity and rigour above excitement’ (Hare 1989, p. 1). What mattered was pointing out that an important theorist had overlooked a distinction or was vulnerable to a counter-example. Papers of this nature filled the most prestigious journals. Yet, at the same time, there were counter-currents: rejections of the abstractions of political philosophy, such as to be found in the communitarian critics of liberalism who sometimes themselves fell short of doing much more than making criticisms, and thereby struggled to rise above the abstraction they opposed (Sandel 1982). But at least this work had the virtue of raising the question of how political philosophy can be brought into contact with the real world of public policy, and some communitarians also showed a rich understanding of history and politics (for example Walzer 1983).

Such criticisms reflected the feeling that the dominant voices in political philosophy had encouraged the pursuit of only one path out of many possibilities. A deep concern with the injustices of the world is displaced or hijacked into a professionalised discourse that has become removed from those initial motivations. But is there an alternative?

**Applied Political Philosophy and Its Discontents**

One, apparently plausible, answer, is to address real world problems by working out how to solve them by ‘applying’ a moral or political theory, thereby providing ‘philosophical foundations’ for social and public policy. I shall call this the ‘applied philosophy’ approach. So, for example, those convinced by Rawls’ theory of justice would seek to formulate policies that would move the basic structure of society closer to his principles of justice: equal basic liberties for all, fair equality of opportunity, and the difference principle, making the worst off as well off as possible. Laws would need to change, and taxes raised and redistributed, to bring us closer to Rawls’ conception of a just society (Rawls, 1971, 1999). Similarly, those inspired by Nozick’s libertarianism would set out steps that would strengthen property rights, reduce the sphere of government action, and lower taxes, again in the hope of moving society in a libertarian direction (Nozick 1974). These, however, are largely aspirational projects, as far as philosophers are concerned, for notably Rawls and Nozick said very little about how their theories can be applied to current circumstance. Indeed, setting out the connective tissue between theory and policy has rarely been done in detail, at least in relation to the topic of distributive justice. Even a book with such a title as *Realizing Rawls* (Pogge 1989) delivers little by way of concrete policy recommendation. This is not to say that there is no role for such work (I will return to this) but rather that something else is also needed.

There are, however, philosophers who attempt to show in detail how their abstract philosophical theories can resolve particular policy issues. For example, in a series of volumes, Hare drew on his utilitarian moral theory to explore topics such as education, terrorism, slavery, punishment and the environment (Hare, 1972, 1989, 1996, 1998). These writings exemplify the idea of applied moral and political philosophy as the process of applying a theory to policy. This appears a reasonable, even obvious, way of proceeding. Yet there are difficulties.

The first is the most obvious; the apparent *dogmatism* of such an approach. Policy proposals derived from a particular moral or political theory are no more firmly based than the premises. Those who doubt the starting point will not be convinced. What happens next? Do we need to provide arguments for a philosophical theory as part of the policy debate? What are those arguments? Hare does not shirk this challenge, claiming that utilitarianism can be derived from an analysis of the logic of the moral concepts citing his other works where he has argued the point in detail. But, first, his arguments have convinced only a small number of other philosophers (Seanor and Fotion 1988), and second, even if sound need to be conveyed to people within the public policy process in a manner they understand. Yet if Hare’s arguments are not strong enough to bring about a consensus within philosophy what hope is there of convincing all relevant decision-makers in the policy process? (cf MacIntyre 1981). Without compelling arguments, Hare is arguing from his own authority, or perhaps the authority of a tradition, and one of the first lessons in philosophy is that arguments from authority have no weight other than to suggest promising lines of enquiry. Others such as William MacAskill have claimed to be arguing from an ‘ecumenical’ starting point, which in his case is a form of consequentialism that, he suggests, can make room for values such as freedom and equality, but still the framework remains a maximising consequentialist one, perhaps within constraints (MacAskill 2015, n 42.) And there are many who deny that this outlook encompasses all that is relevantly at stake (Srinivasan 2015).

I have assumed that it is possible to move directly from a theory to a policy recommendation. A second difficulty is that theories often *under-determine* policy outcomes. For example, John Rawls suggests that his theory of justice is compatible both with ‘property-owning democracy’ and ‘liberal socialism’. Hence those who agree on the philosophical theory can disagree about policy (Rawls 2001). In some cases disputes can be resolved by rejecting one approach on other grounds, such as what fits best with existing traditions, but not always. This leaves us unclear how to deal with remaining disagreements.

Even more significant, however, is the third problem of *implausibility of recommendations*. My first experience of policy work concerned a review of the law of gambling. Broadly, I had thought that I believed some version of John Stuart Mill’s ‘harm principle’, giving adults in possession of their normal reasoning capacities the right to act as they wish, provided that they do not harm others (Mill 2003 [1859]). The obvious application is that gambling should be regulated according to the harm principle, from which it follows that anything should be permitted between informed, consenting adults, provided there are no significant third-party effects. Yet gambling has never been regulated on this basis. To take a mundane example, in the USA a roulette wheel must have thirty-six numbers and two zeros (and hence the odds of winning any bet is 36/38) while in the UK and Europe a roulette wheel has thirty-six numbers and only one zero. A UK casino cannot try to compete by making the game more favourable to the customer by, say, having forty numbers and only one zero, even if it were to make this advantage very clear to every customer. The regulation is a type of paternalistic intervention to ensure that the odds can be relatively easily understood, to minimize the possibility of unfairness. Yet is arguable whether it is compatible with the harm principle, which would seem to call for a liberalisation of the games on offer, as long as there is full disclosure of odds. For perhaps a clearer example, in the UK you cannot play on a slot machine by inserting your credit card and repeating play until your credit card limit is reached. I doubt that anyone objects to this law, but again its justification seems paternalistic. Some may reply that extensive borrowing could harm third-parties, most notably dependents, but this is a general argument against credit cards, rather than specific to gambling. (For discussion, see Wolff 2011, pp. 37-60.) Hence, the harm principle, though widely supported and recited, is not a sound basis for policy on its own (see Feinberg 1984, 1985).

The problem, though, is not with the harm principle, but the goal of applied philosophy to formulate concise philosophical principles that can directly determine policy. For another example, when I was working on the policy question of how invasive experiments on animals should be regulated Peter Singer and Peter Carruthers were the most prominent voices in the philosophical debate. Singer, famously, on the Benthamite basis that sentience is a critical factor, argued for animal liberation (Singer 1995). Although in his book of that name he did not discuss experiments for critical medical research, the obvious conclusion of his argument is that we are no more justified in experimenting on animals than we would be on humans without consent. Carruthers, by contrast, argued that we owe animals a lower level of concern than humans because of their limited cognitive capacities (Carruthers 1992). Strictly, it seems, Singer’s view entails that no experiments on animals are permitted (unless they would also be permitted on humans), while Carruthers’ position suggests that there are minimal moral limits to what humans can do to animals. But in their extremes neither view has any prospect of being adopted by policy makers. Currently, experiments are permitted under licence for some purposes (human and animal health) on some animals (no great apes) under strict controls. The policy question is whether current regulations require adjustment, and suggestions of very radical change to fit a philosophical theory will make no impression (however, as I will argue later, philosophical theories are vital to the policy process on a longer arc).

The three problems for ‘applied philosophy’ mentioned so far are *dogmatism, under-determination,* and *implausibility of recommendations*. A fourth is that sometimes a theory requires several steps for implementation, but partial implementation could be worse than doing nothing. This is a version of the *theory of the second best*. Consider, for example, Ronald Dworkin’s theory of equality of resources (1981). For Dworkin the just society combines background equality in distribution with respect for individual choice and ambition. People should receive the benefits and burdens of their freely made choices. Suppose a government seeks to put this theory into practice. Equalising background resources will be a very long, politically arduous programme, likely to meet a great deal of resistance. Moving towards a system in which people reap the costs and benefits of their choices seems more straightforward, leading to reduction of taxes on incomes and profits, and reducing the benefits of those who could work but choose not to. Suppose this ‘responsibility for choice’ element is introduced before background conditions are equalised. Unfortunately, rather than half-way to equality of resources, we would find ourselves in something like the ‘everyday libertarianism’ encouraged by Margaret Thatcher; few restrictions on property transfers, but taking existing property ownership for granted (cf Murphy and Nagel 2002). Although there is no necessity that any theory is implemented as incompetently as described, it is natural to try to change the easy things first. Hence, at a minimum, it is something for which we should be on our guard.

The fifth problem is what we can call *blindspots*. This is well illustrated with Charles Mills’ criticism of Rawls (Rawls 1971, 1999, Pateman and Mills 2007). Suppose that US society transitions to become fully compliant with Rawls’ theory of justice. Everyone has equal basic liberties, fair equality of opportunity, and the worst off have as much as any worst off group could have. Mills asks whether we would, therefore, have eliminated race-based injustice. Perhaps surprisingly, he answers in the negative. The worst off in terms of income and wealth in the US are disproportionately Black and Hispanic. Suppose we greatly improve the fortunes of the worst off. Nevertheless, there is little reason to believe that the racial composition of the worst-off group would have changed. The worst off group is still likely to be overwhelmingly Black and Hispanic. Other policies of compensation and rectification will be needed to eliminate racial difference in life fortune in order to overcome racial injustice.

Finally, I need to mention the problem of *conceptual inadequacy*, which can be illustrated with the example of disability. Although there is important work making a conceptual bridge between the concerns of philosophers and activists (see, for example Silvers et al 1998, Kittay 1999, and Barnes 2016), on the whole the abstract concepts of justice employed by philosophers provided no, or poor, policy proposals for the area. John Rawls, notoriously, assumes the problem away, at the most fundamental level (Rawls, 1971, 1999, 1999b). Dworkin addressed disability by means ingenious hypothetical insurance market to set levels of redistribution (Dworkin 1981). However, this conceptualises the disadvantage experienced by people with disabilities in purely economic terms, with tax and transfer as the proposed solution. At a time when disability studies was gripped with the debate between the ‘medical’ model (repair the person) and the ‘social’ model (change the world so everyone can find their place), and, in other disciplines academics engaged in participatory research with people with disabilities to understand their concerns (Shakespeare 2000), the dominant philosophical traditions had nothing to contribute to the policy debates The reason for this is simply that the concepts in which the theories of justice were formulated did not map on to cutting edge policy questions as formulated by disabled people themselves, and activists on their behalf.

For another, more recent example, Amia Srinivasan has argued that William MacAskill’s widely noted and discussed effective altruism, in concentrating on individual, primarily charitable, action ‘does not address the deep sources of global misery – international trade and finance, debt, nationalism, imperialism, racial and gender­based subordination, war, environmental degradation, corruption, exploitation of labour – or the forces that ensure its reproduction. Effective altruism doesn’t try to understand how power works, except to better align itself with it’ (Srinivasan 2015). Effective altruism appears to be a classic example of applied philosophy in the sense of starting with a theory and looking for problems to which to apply it. But that leaves open whether the particular problems it treats are best addressed with the conceptual resources of that theory.

**Engaged Political Philosophy**

What is the alternative? One, simply, is to try to navigate around the difficulties. But dogmatism, and the associated issue of implausibility of recommendations, will be hard to handle. At bottom the problem is that policy is rarely made in pursuit of a single theory or value. Pluralism, pragmatism and compromise are the stuff of real life, and deducing policy conclusions from a philosophical theory can, at best, be just one input into the argument. The obvious alternative is to start at the other end: what is the problem in need of attention?[[2]](#footnote-2) Consider Iris Marion Young’s approach in *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, which attempts to ground political philosophy in the concerns of real social movements, rather than the philosopher’s imagination (Young 1990). Amartya Sen, similarly, has approached political questions in this style very often throughout his career (e.g. Sen 1981, 1990), as has Elizabeth Anderson especially in her most recent work (Anderson 2013 and 2017). Hence in considering any policy issue, the first question is why has (or should) this particular issue come to public attention right now? And what are the positions in the debate and what drives people apart? From here an alternative methodology can then unfold. I shall call it ‘engaged philosophy’. This methodology runs through a number of steps. In some cases the steps blur into each other, and in others one or more will not be needed, but schematically it will be helpful to set them out.

*Step 1: Identify the issue and current state of affairs*.

Sometimes an issue will have been rumbling on for a while, and then erupts to great public attention, and is therefore widely understood. Yet we should not naively assume that all policy dilemmas are easily graspable. In many cases, against backgrounds of established practice, it may take perception and skill to see, name, and explain a problem that should be of public concern even if it is not at the moment. An observation from Alison Jaggar brings this out beautifully:

As a young woman ... I was unable to articulate many vague and confused feelings and perceptions because the language necessary to do so had not yet been invented. The vocabulary I needed included such terms as “gender,”... “sex role,” “sexism,” “sexual harassment,” “the double day,” “sexual objectification,” “heterosexism,” “the male gaze,” “marital, acquaintance, and date rape,” “emotional work,” “stalking,” “hostile environment,” “displaced home-maker” and “double standard of ageing.” (Jaggar 2000, p. 238)

Jaggar talks of time when it was very difficult for women to express the many ways in which they experienced oppression and disadvantage. There is often work to be done – identification and articulation – to convert a situation that is taken for granted into a policy problem that needs to be addressed. Identification is typically the task of real movements and activists, including philosopher/activists.

However, even when a problem is well-known real understanding requires an appreciation of not just what is being publicised in the headlines, but the underlying position regarding law and regulations, as well as facts of behaviour. Journalists will often simplify complex issues to bring out striking messages. Wilful or not, this will sometimes misrepresent how the facts are, or make ill-advised recommendations, for example by calling for a law that already exists, or criticising a policy that doesn’t require what is alleged, or arguing for criminalising a practice that barely ever happens. Understanding relevant facts, and how the situation is currently regulated, is a painstaking task. But it is critical. For without this background work, it is impossible to know what does and does not need to change in order to carry through some policy reform, and to be able to estimate what its effects are likely to be. This complex information gathering exercise is also, of course, shot through with values, often partially revealed by what type of information is easily available and what is more difficult to access.

*Step 2: Identify the arguments and values*

Once the issue is clear, or at least clearer, it is then necessary to identify the arguments on both sides, although sometimes, especially with a newly identified issue, one side is so overwhelmingly strong that there is no real debate. For example, when Amartya Sen identified the problem of millions of ‘missing women’ in the world, and explained that it was due to the relative neglect of young girls around the world, compared to their brothers, I doubt that there was much attempt to defend such practices (Sen 1990). In these cases, and the identification of marital rape may be another, philosophically little argument is needed, and the question moves directly to policy: what, if anything, can be done to mitigate or remove these evils?

In other cases, there are likely to be two sides. Consider the regulation of gambling. Gambling has rarely, if ever, been accepted as an ordinary commercial activity like going to the cinema or even going to a bar. It is often regarded as somewhat disreputable, to be avoided (Chinn 2004). Even the young John Stuart Mill, in a letter to the medical journal *The Lancet*, claimed that it corrupted the human character (Mill 1986 [1832]) Corruption or not, it can lead to rapid loss of money, and sometimes to theft to pay off gambling debts, violence if they are not paid, imprisonment if theft is detected, and then divorce and even suicide. Such tragic stories are regularly reported in the press. Why, then, is gambling permitted? One answer is that in a country such as the UK, more than half the adult population gamble at some point in the year, if only to purchase a lottery ticket, and it brings excitement to many even when they lose. If there is anything to the idea that how you spend your money reveals your preferences then the amount of money spent on gambling each year shows that it yields a great deal of preference satisfaction, even if in some cases it is compulsive or immediately regretted. But it is also extremely difficult to suppress gambling, and so in practice our choice is between having a regulated legal industry, and an unregulated illegal one, with all the problems of crime, corruption and blackmail that it may bring with it (Chinn 2004).

Hence there are two, or more sides, to the issue and here the skills and training of a philosopher can be particularly helpful. Philosophers can ‘deepen the arguments and make them more rigorous, [and] question… assumptions’ (Hare 1972, pp. 5-6). The forensic skills of the philosopher should help to take the debate apart, to understand the values – autonomy, utility, paternalism, protection of the vulnerable, fairness etc. – that are relevant to the debate, and understand how they figure in arguments for different positions. Gaps in the arguments, false assumptions, false dilemmas, and so on, may all become exposed once the debate is dissected. This can be a lengthy and difficult task, and becomes even more difficult when inputs from social science are included. At this stage, however, the task is one of understanding, reconstruction and correction of false inferences or pre-supposition, rather than settling the issue by argument or fiat, unless it turns out that the great weight of argument is on one side.

*Step 3: History and comparisons*

The first step, then, was to set out the problem and gather facts about regulation, law and behaviour, and the second to draw out the underlying moral debate. It may seem that the natural next step could be to consider possible solutions, but this is often premature. It can be greatly facilitated by an intermediate phase of looking at examples of practice at other times and places. (And as the type of tasks involved multiply the advantages of multi-disciplinary team working become apparent.) To take the historical dimension first, it can be very important to understand how current policy came into being. Sometimes no explicit policy was ever formulated, or current policy was the first explicit attempt to do so. But sometimes a policy is introduced because of the failure of a previous policy. If that is not understood it may be that the next recommendation ends up repeating something has been tried and failed. Of course it is unsafe to conclude that because something failed once it will fail again. But nevertheless, those circumstances should be studied. Otherwise we risk destructive ‘policy cycles’ of the sort that have been observed in foreign aid (Riddell, 2007).

Seeking (negative) guidance from the past can usefully be combined with the experience of other jurisdictions. Most policy dilemmas have their counterpart elsewhere. Every country has to have a policy about gambling, or about animal experimentation, or about road safety, and seeking comparisons may help us see how limited our own national imagination has been.

*Step 4: Create a profile of possible solutions*

With the insight of history and international comparison we can begin to construct a menu of options, adding others proposed by activists or politicians, with room for creative proposals that could provide a new solution. However caution is needed. Policy change is always change from where we are. There is a very powerful, unavoidable, status quo bias in policy. First, if we don’t agree a change we remain where we are. (Hence those who wish to defend the status quo may find their energies best spent in dividing the opposition rather than providing more direct support for the current situation.) Second, there is truth in the conservative position, articulated by Roger Scruton, that institutions take a great deal of time to establish, but can be destroyed very rapidly, and hence the burden of proof should be on those wishing to make a change (e.g. Scruton ND). Philosophically this status quo bias has been said to be unsupportable, and that all options should be appraised fairly and independently (Husak 1989). But in policy terms, some apparent options are simply out of reach, at least for the time being, and all we can aim at is incremental change. I will return to this later, as it may seem a disappointingly restrictive condition for philosophical engagement with the policy process.

*Step 5. Evaluation of options*

At this point, with our menu of potentially reachable options, we arrive at the fifth, and most challenging, stage: how to decide which option to pursue. In some cases, it will be easy to eliminate options as being too restrictive of individual liberty, or being inferior to other options on key criteria, but very often we will be left with a variety of options supported by different value systems, with no obvious way of adjudication. It is in these difficult cases where it may seem that the ‘applied philosophy’ methodology, which I have rejected, seems strongest. For where there is disagreement on policy the appeal to a firm set of principles, established by a theory, promises a way out, and a form of resolution. But this is a false promise. Theories differ and what impartial method is there for determining which theory is right? Choice of methodology is just as disputed as choice of theory. Hence, we have returned to the problem of dogmatism in a new form: why accept the philosopher’s theory about how to choose a theory, especially if you reject the conclusions it leads to?

There is no magic solution to the problem of deep disagreement. However, it is possible that the second stage outlined above, where the real basis of disagreement, underneath the surface debate, is identified, can help. Consider the controversy about the morality of abortion. As Ronald Dworkin has helpfully pointed out, it is often posed as the clash between a woman’s right to choose and the foetus’s right to life. But Dworkin claims this is misleading. Few believe in a woman’s absolute right to choose, such as, for example, to choose to have an abortion just a few weeks before the baby is due. And relatively few people will insist on the foetus’s right to life when the life, or even the health, of the mother is threatened. Rather the great majority on both sides accept that both the mother and the foetus have legitimate interests and the question is how to balance these interests, which changes as the pregnancy advances (Dworkin 1993).

This type of reframing of the debate can be very helpful in that it means that some, potentially very controversial, questions can be left to one side. But to reframe a debate, or even to narrow the difference, is not necessarily to solve it. Dworkin’s argument does not tell us whether abortion should be permitted, and, if so, under what conditions. Indeed, some attempted reframings are little more than disguised attempts to win the debate by fiat.

However, as Daniel Weinstock has observed, it is very common at this point to try to solve a policy dilemma in a different way, by shifting away from explicitly moral argument, to the issues of ‘harm-reduction’ (Weinstock 2012). Recall the point that sometimes it is very difficult to enforce a particular regulation. Therefore we must always pay attention to ‘second round’ effects: how the world would react back to a new regulation. After all, many of us when confronted with a new regulation try to work out how we can carry on doing what we were doing before, with impunity. Sometimes we find a loophole, or carry on as before and hope either not to be detected, or not to be punished even if detected. My example earlier in this paper was gambling, where studies suggest that when off-track gambling in the UK was illegal, in the 1950s, in some towns a significant proportion of the adult population nevertheless illegally gambled on a regular basis (Chinn 2004). This led to a crisis in the criminal justice system with backlogs of cases, as well as blackmail, extortion, and theft, and corruption of the police. Eventually off-track gambling was legalised in a highly controlled way. The argument is that whether or not gambling is wrong in itself, banning gambling will lead to a series of harms that we would do better to avoid. Therefore, from the point of view of harm-reduction, it is better to control gambling than to ban it.

The first critical move in this argument is to accept the limited power of law and regulation to change behaviour. If we pass a law to solve a problem and people don’t obey the law, we now have two problems where once we had only one. Of course, restrictive policies do not always fail. People wear seatbelts in cars, helmets on motorbikes, and don’t smoke in pubs. But it would be wrong to generalise in either direction. Returning to the case of abortion, what would actually happen if we banned abortion in the UK? Wealthy women would find access to safe abortions. But the less wealthy may resort to very dangerous procedures, at risk to their lives. An abortion ban may well lead to some reduction in the number of abortions, but it is also likely to lead to a higher rate of maternal mortality. Hence a harm-reduction approach suggests permitting abortion under controlled circumstances. Note that even those who oppose abortion on moral grounds can believe that it would be an even greater moral wrong to have a law against abortion, given the likely consequences. And similar harm reduction arguments are regularly made with relation to gambling and the regulation of drugs.

Philosophically, the harm reduction argument bears examination. I presented it as, in essence, a way of cutting through moral debate. The thought is that if a particular moral position leads to a law that is likely to be regularly broken, with harmful effects, it is wrong to insist on that moral position. But what sort of ‘wrong’ is that? Is it morally wrong to advocate a policy that, while reflecting your own moral position, is likely to lead to serious harm? Some will believe, conversely, that it is morally wrong to compromise in the way the harm-reduction argument suggests, even if the effects of not compromising are problematic. After all, people can choose how they act. Or are we in some sort of ‘tragic’ position, where morality needs to be compromised for the sake of humanity?

Is the harm reduction argument a way of avoiding moral argument, or a way of substituting a different moral argument – one heavily weighted towards consequentialism – for those in dispute? And if it is the latter, how neutral is it between differing positions? Those who believe in religious or conservative moralities are likely to see their own position regularly ‘trumped’ by harm reduction arguments, and hence may reasonably suspect that harm reduction arguments are biased towards liberalism and individualism as well as consequentialism. The reply that harm reduction is simply humanitarianism in the light of predicted human behaviour may or may not convince. The most likely reply is that it is defeatist to take human behaviour for granted, and that law and regulation is a vitally important way of sending messages about what is, and is not, morally justified. This is especially so when government is trusted and held in high regard. Not even the harm-reduction argument, therefore, can function as a trump card in debate, even though it can often help us to make significant progress.

*Step 6: Policy recommendation*

Once the positions are evaluated a recommendation has to be made, even if it is to leave things as they are. The recommendation should also meet a number of conditions, including being supported by reasons that can be readily communicated. For if it is to have a chance of adoption it must be capable of becoming part of a general political debate, rather than being regarded as the possession of a charismatic thinker who can personally make a compelling presentation. But the task need not end here, for at this stage the philosopher can become an activist. As Terrell Carver has put it, the activist needs to garner an audience, unite a movement and proceed to a goal (Carver 2017). Who has the skills and appetite for this is another matter.

In the end, however, laws and regulations are enacted not by philosophers but by elected politicians. Philosophers can push their recommendations, but it will be for policy makers to decide whether to follow those recommendations. And at this point they are likely also to be influenced by the response of the media, the practicalities of what is possible within a parliamentary timetable, and, most decisively of all, perhaps, what effect they expect a new measure will have on their prospects of re-election. Much UK regulation regarding recreational drugs, for example, can be seen in this light.

**Conclusion: The Role of the Philosopher**

The ‘applied philosophy’ approach supposes that it is possible to give the philosopher a distinctive, even privileged role in the policy process, as the formulator of the theory that provides a moral foundation for public policy. My arguments here, however, suggest that this is myth. On my alternative ‘engaged’ model, there are no foundations in this sense. The philosopher identifies relevant values, in the context of a problem, current facts, past history and contemporary alternatives. There is a certain amount of sifting and balancing to articulate the moral dilemmas underlying the messy public debate, and then the identification and evaluation of possible solutions, before making recommendations, that may or may not have any effect on actual policy. I have also suggested that there is an inbuilt conservatism in the process, in that any proposals that are distant from the status quo are unlikely to be considered real possibilities, which also diminishes the role of the free-thinking philosopher.

At this point a certain concern may creep in that I am denying the philosopher any special role. After all, what I have described could be done by academics from many backgrounds, as well as civil servants and journalists. But I think this is just how things are. Insofar as philosophers have any competitive advantage in contributing to the direct policy process it is through the time and care they have spent informing themselves about the analysis of values and how to approach dilemmas, and how this has been done throughout the history of philosophy. We are stocked with an understanding of values, theories, and principles of inference. We are used to patterns and repertoires of arguments, making distinctions, and at least attempting to convey what we know clearly and simply. But if this is a difference to those in other specialisms or social roles, it is generally a difference of degree, not of kind.

Does this mean that the type of theory that is associated with the applied philosophy approach is useless? Not at all. I see at least three types of roles or functions for grand theory. First, and most obviously, these theories form part of the inherited intellectual stock of values and arguments. From the perspective of policy, the common mistake made by philosophers is to think they have the whole of the truth when they have just part of it. However, as Mill observed in relation to Bentham, intellectual progress probably needs ‘one-eyed’ philosophers who see one aspect in a level of detail and clarity that they would not have pursued if they thought it was only one consideration among many (Mill 1859).

A second role, however, is equally, or even more critical. I have said that there is a type of status quo bias in policy that favours incremental change over large change. This may seem disappointing. But it also may seem simply untrue. Surprising, large, changes do take place. Also, over a longer stretch of time we can end up in a place we would have never imagined earlier. Who would have predicted, even ten years ago, that same-sex marriage would be so widely accepted now? Going back two generations, the same thing may have been said about the decriminalisation of homosexuality, the abolition of the death penalty, the legalisation of abortion, and the end of capital punishment. All of these caused a significant rupture with the status quo.

I think this is an important challenge, but to answer it I would distinguish ‘status quo policy’ from ‘status quo public opinion’. It may be that there is an opportunity for substantial change when public opinion is out of balance with public policy, at which point significant reform has a chance of taking hold if it aligns with public opinion, or at least the opinion of those who are be in a position to object and protest. And here there is a highly significant role for the philosopher. It might, for example, be impossible to implement Peter Singer’s proposals for animal liberation, but Singer has contributed to a greater sense of awareness of animal suffering, and has helped shift public opinion so it was ready for, even demanded, more stringent welfare standards for animals. Although Singer’s ideas have not been implemented, arguably they have had an effect through absorption into public opinion, which then allows for more modest reform. In sum, while philosophers need to make concessions and compromises while directly contributing to the policy process, they need have no such compunction when trying to move public opinion in a direction that will welcome reform. Votes for women in the early twentieth century bear the hallmark of Wollstonecraft and Mill as does some of the liberal legislation of the 1960s.[[3]](#footnote-3) Philosophical contributions over the decades can slowly shift first journalistic and then public opinion. However, policy change can also lead opinion. Such policy leadership is most likely to happen when it involves the protection of third parties, as in smoking, or is relatively costless for the ordinary person, as in decriminalising homosexuality. In these cases it becomes harder to formulate and find a rationale for reasoned opposition.

I said there are three roles for grand theory. The first was to inform policy debate, and the second to influence public opinion over a longer term. The third is simply that political and moral philosophy are branches of philosophy, which is a valuable activity in its own right independent of its effects. If some philosophers can spend their lives contemplating the metaphysics of numbers, there seems no less reason why others should not consider the analysis of the concept of justice, for its own sake. Policy relevance does not exhaust the value of moral and political philosophy.[[4]](#footnote-4)

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1. I can remember seeing a ‘to-do’ note on my teacher, Jerry Cohen’s, desk saying ‘SUS’. I was excited that he was going to bring his considerable intellectual power to criticise what was then known as the ‘Sus Law’, which gave police the power to stop and search ‘suspicious’ people, and was generally regarded as being used in a racially discriminatory fashion. But I soon realised that this note was a reminder for him to update his lectures on Engels’ text *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For related discussion see Poama x and Howard x. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Although Mill himself as an MP spoke in favour of capital punishment and his arguments were cited in the debates in parliament in the 1950s (House of Commons, 1956). Mill’s speech is reprinted in Wolff 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For immensely helpful comments on this paper I’d like to thank I would also like to thank Andrei Poama, Annabelle Lever and Sarah Richmond. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)