

Of What Service (if any) are Philosophers to Society?

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For all of their argumentative skills in room discussions, sometimes intelligible only to those familiar with their technical jargon, philosophers should be able to make the case for their own value in society in ways understandable to all.



Pelligrino Tibaldi's Allegory of Philosophy, El Escorial Library, Madrid, Spain

According to MacIntyre^[1], today's professional philosopher often "appears strange and unintelligible to the plain person"; an "irrelevant, oddly useless figure of obscure utterance." Professional philosophers, he goes on, are "carrying further a kind of questioning that is also of importance to those whose work is farming or fishing or making steel. We do so as ourselves plain persons on behalf of other plain persons, contributing to the common good by our work, just as do farmers or fishermen or steel workers by theirs." Now the usefulness of what a steel worker, a fisherman or a farmer do is evident. So is that of a nurse, a personal assistant or a school teacher. But a philosopher?

To this question there should be a very clear answer; one that any of us, "plain persons" could understand. Philosophy students and philosophy departments cost tax-payer money to the state. For all of their

argumentative skills in room discussions, sometimes intelligible only to those familiar with their technical jargon, philosophers should be able to make the case for their own value in society in ways understandable to all. The cost that society incurs in forming philosophers and sustaining their research should be justified by the service they provide.

It could be argued that explaining philosophy to a plain person would be like pretending that anyone can understand economics or medicine. The plain person knows as much of identity across possible worlds, as of equilibrium in game-theory, or Alzheimer. Yet, presumably anyone could understand how an economist serves society—devising ways for it to create and maintain prosperity or combat poverty, for instance. Likewise in the case of the medical doctor: we may not completely grasp her technical explanation of melanoma or arthritis, but we all certainly see that she serves society by helping people to overcome sickness or maintain health. But the philosopher?

In MacIntyre's view the philosopher's task is "to articulate and to pursue answers to questions posed by human beings in general, and not only by professional philosophers." As human beings we desire to know and to understand and so we "set ourselves the achievement of truth as a goal." The meaning of life, suffering and death, and the truth about the human good—both individual and political are some of such questions. Also, if philosophical activity is to be more than "a set of intellectually engaging puzzles", it should show how different branches of knowledge relate to each other from a global vision of things, a systematic perspective under which "the philosophical questions posed by plain persons" are to be answered.

MacIntyre's is one approach among many to explain what philosophy ought to be. For Pieper, just to cite another one,^[2] "to engage in philosophy means to reflect on the totality of things we encounter, in view of their ultimate" or fundamental truth. And there are others. But my interest here is to explore the circumstances under which philosophers could claim a place in society due to a service they provide, as valuable as that of a mechanical engineer in a factory, a waiter in a hotel or a pilot on an airplane. The circumstances, this is, which would make society see philosophers not (or not only) as oddly useless figures addressing intellectually engaging puzzles and uttering obscure conclusions, but as valuable contributors to the common good.

From the ideas presented above, it would seem that philosophers, by doing what they do, can contribute to society in at least three ways:

First, they can help articulate those questions that most of us have but that we find difficult to express. Fundamental, radical questions about life, love, suffering, death; good and evil; right and wrong; materiality and immateriality; culture and nature; and so on. The kind of question that come to us at certain extraordinary moments in life: the death of a close relative; a serious accident; falling in love. What am I doing here? What are the important things in life? Do we need to have a State at all? And others of that sort.

Second, they can show us ways in which we can integrate the numerous bits of knowledge that we constantly receive—even more in the age of internet—from different sources and disciplines, in order to see their connections with each other and together as a whole. They can show us how each piece of knowledge makes sense in the larger picture. Philosophy means love, affection, proclivity towards wisdom. And wisdom is not equivalent to specialised knowledge like the one of the sciences, but rather a capacity to order and find the place of each discipline and aspect of reality in relation to others from a holistic perspective. How do I conciliate contradictory proposals that economists and environmentalists make? What do findings about the universe affect (or not) claims about the existence of God? Can freedom of speech and right to privacy coexist? And so forth.

Third, philosophers can point for us what the fundamental questions, in view of the whole of reality, imply for us as individuals and communities. They can enrich us with reflections about how we ought to live. Again, they may not necessarily have the answers, but they certainly could provide guidelines for the discussion and serious thought about the options.

Fortunately, highly professional and “socially responsible” philosophers do exist. Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor are two of the most renowned examples internationally. We need to see more.

[1] A.C. MacIntyre, *The Tasks of Philosophy*, vol. 1 (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 180-81. All quotations have the same source.

[2] J. Pieper, *In Defense of Philosophy: Classical Wisdom Stands up to Modern Challenges* (Ignatius Press, 1992), 12.

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