

Commentary

Veering Philosophy Towards Its Public Role

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The public role of philosophy is, in itself, both a deeply philosophical and a highly public matter. In this paper, the author argues for a stronger engagement of philosophy in social life, acknowledging that there is no straightforward or immediate solution to achieving this goal. The proposed approach focuses on exploring the internal tensions within philosophical thinking and writing, offering suggestions for adjustments to facilitate greater engagement.

The main tensions analysed in the paper include: neutrality versus engagement, abstractness versus life-world relevance, finality versus openness, independence versus interdisciplinarity, jargon versus triviality, and philosophy for specialists versus philosophy for an engaged public.

The paper concludes with a call for a more active role of philosophy in public life. This can be achieved by rethinking the value and importance of philosophical thinking. In this context, engaging in reflection on the public role of philosophy – its challenges, limitations and potential – is an important step toward veering philosophy toward a more engaged and socially relevant role.

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Contemporary philosophy seems to be too often engaged in discussions about very detailed issues important mostly for the engaged disputants. While various disasters and dangers, inequalities and ongoing wars are taking their toll, philosophers discuss whether killing your uncle for 900 dollars of his inheritance in order to buy a very rare stamp is a worthy realisation of self-interest or not¹. It's not.

Understandably reflections about the general frameworks of our thinking, international relations, economy, are much more difficult to engage. However, in the opinion of the author of this paper, they shall all the same remain the main task of philosophy. In other words philosophy shall engage the public in order to foster debate, self-reflection and interest in the most burning issues of the contemporary

world. In order to achieve that there is a need for rethinking the public role of philosophy, search for the sources of its malaise and the ideas that could be helpful in reinvigorating its public role.

For over a century philosophy seems to lack a positive image in the public sphere, at least in many parts of the world. Self-critical reflection and doubts about its own value expressed by many central philosophical figures of the twentieth century have left a mark on its public image. The instrumentalisation of philosophical ideas in totalitarian and authoritarian regimes have also been destructive for the public image and role of philosophy.

In my text I would like to point out some tensions, which are important for understanding the contemporary challenges of philosophy. It is probably impossible to find a final resolution of them. Rather there is a need for searching the path of philosophical thinking which would be conscious of the dangers connected with philosophising. Final answers to philosophical questions would mean the end of philosophy. Accordingly, the main thesis of my paper is that the public role of philosophy shall be understood as fostering thinking, writing, reading and discussing important topics, while being conscious of their philosophical dimensions. Pointing out important philosophical controversies would be then important in itself, as a way to promote the role of philosophy in public life. At the same time philosophers shall be more concerned with igniting philosophical attitudes towards reality, morality and society, than in a search for final victory in a long tradition of philosophical inquiries.

Veering means that the described shifts and changes shall not be understood as a constructive model depicting the best practices in philosophizing. The author is not trying to engineer the enclosed space in which philosophy could flourish. The task is rather to propose models of thinking that enable an understanding of philosophy as a shared search for better concepts, an openness for dialogue, and a recognition of the unfinished character of philosophical discussions. In this context, commitment to the public role of philosophy relies on endorsing the value of philosophical reflection, conceptualization and language, allowing for its cultivation, creation, and crafting.

In the following paragraphs I analyse the tension: 1) between neutrality and engagement of philosophical thinking; 2) between philosophy as the most abstract of inquiries and its connection to the most concrete daily life problems; 3) between the search for final answers and open ended character of philosophical discussions, which also involves the possibility of teaching how and why it is worthwhile to ask questions; 4) and the relationship between philosophy and other branches of knowledge; 5) between simply and complicated concepts, as well as the temptation to write in technical philosophical jargon; 6) between writing philosophy for specialists and engaging the broader public.

1. Neutrality versus Engagement

Widespread metaphorical associations of philosophy include figures of: absent-minded university professor, someone overthinking everything, culture wars warrior, a person interested in unimportant abstractions, as well as sharp minded ideologue etc. The tension visible in those images relies on the opposition between abstractness of philosophy and fierceness of cultural engagement. The opposition, which was already present in Max Weber's famous lecture entitled "Science as a Vocation"², where he proposed the ideal of science freed from social and political engagement. As if social scientists, and in our case philosophers, have only two options: either lecturing from the height of the ivory tower of neutrality or ideologically engaging in politics and by this engagement resigning from their role as scientists.

In the case of philosophy the tension seems to be ever more dangerous. Abstractness and objectivity of philosophy, when it poses to be just one among the sciences or a specific form of metascience (as it is the case with understanding philosophy's main task as a conceptual clarification of scientific discoveries) leads into an issue with self-understanding. Without the connection with social life such scientific or metascientific philosophy does not interest almost anyone outside of the field.

Philosophy, understood as one of the sciences, is facing the impossibility of answering most of the philosophical questions of the past, as they can not be answered with a similar methodological and conceptual rigour as questions in physics, biology or chemistry. Scientific philosophy leads to a self-denial of the importance of philosophical inquiries as it often ends in a dead end of: uninspiring doubt on the one side and tautological self-evidence on the other. For example, this problem is evident in Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*³, where he denies the public role of philosophy as it shall not attempt to speak about those aspects of reality which are impossible to describe as statements about facts.

Similarly, although for different reasons, Michel Foucault's⁴ concept of *episteme* suggests that each epoch is defined by its own scientific understanding of the world. As a result philosophy and philosophical anthropology - viewed as a branch of knowledge seeking to transcend historical circumstances, shall be abandoned. Richard Rorty's redefinition of philosophy as cultural politics⁵, along his critique of pursuit of agreement between truth and rationality⁶, lead to an analogous diminishment of the role of philosophy in public life. Positioned as just one narrative among many, philosophy, in this view, does not have too much to offer in comparison with other elements of culture.

Philosophy as a metascience seems to avoid above mentioned problems, but faces another trouble: what can a philosopher tell me as a metascientist if he/she is much less educated in physics, chemistry, biology, than physicists, chemists, biologists are. His/hers reflections end up in raising conceptual issues, asking methodological questions and reminding about the historical examples of mistakes in the history of science. Hardly useful from the perspective of getting grants, answering concrete scientific questions and further development of science. Especially that there is no trouble in simply ignoring what philosophers are writing about science and furthering research without their input. Maybe apart from a critical misinterpreting comment and a footnote to Jacques Derrida, Paul Feyerabend or Thomas Kuhn, as examples why it is good that philosophers are ignored in scientific inquiries. The same applies to the social influence of such philosophy - why not go directly to scientists for answers to scientific and philosophical questions, if the philosopher is just a person trying to clarify the language of science, in which task he/she is usually losing with eloquent scientists and journalists.

The tension between neutral and value-laden philosophy shall not be ignored, but rather openly addressed. One of the ways in order to achieve that would be consciously stating authors' values, thus denying the comfortable position of neutral observer, while not taking the role of a prophet, who discovered the only possible set of values. It is an uncomfortable position, open for attacks from both sides - objectivists and relativists, but this is the very tension in which public philosophical issues are playing themselves out. With many contemporary challenges - wars, energy systems, mitigation of environmental disasters, social organisation, the role of financial institutions, we face the very same dilemma. Namely how to preserve the perspective of someone engaged on the side of life, humanity, the good and not to replace those values with interests and power plays. The delusion of the neutral observer, that shall be the role of philosopher, makes philosophy obsolete. Public role of philosophy, in this context, shall be to engage in developing concepts and ideas, that would allow for expressing conflicting values and thus in the long term perspective to discuss and negotiate between them. Not to try to avoid discussion by stating philosophers' distance or prophetic knowledge.

This obviously endangers philosophers in becoming ideologues and fighters for the wrong causes, but the constant defence from the slightest danger of failure and promoting avoidance as the one and only way of interaction with public life seems to be even worse⁷. The ancient image of the circus, in which philosophers sit in the audience and innerly laugh at the engagement of others, underestimates the potential to influence the social fabric and renders them silent also when evil deeds unfold on the stage of life.

2. Abstractness versus Life-World Relevance

Philosophers are also co-responsible for the diminished role of philosophy. The abstractness of their inquiries often makes them difficult for non-specialists to understand. Obscure language often attracts the interest of other philosophers, who are lured in writing about the proper interpretation of grand figures of the past. Instead of clarifying their ideas, this often leads to further complication and makes such inquiries even more inaccessible. Abstractness of philosophical texts makes it hard, and sometimes impossible, to apply them to concrete dilemmas of daily life.

The meta- level of philosophical reflection is needed in some contexts and shall not be dismissed principally. The difficulty arises when metalevels are multiplied in order to achieve an effigy of sophistication, deepness and authenticity of reflection. The hall of mirrors – such as interpreting Heidegger through Derrida, using Ricoeur's hermeneutics, might give a lot of satisfaction to its authors. They can show off their erudition, intelligence and abilities to make inconspicuous connections between different important figures in the history of philosophy. However the question remains: does this kind of philosophical writing be able to be translated back to life-world situations? Maybe it is just another move in the game: whatever you do I can do it meta?⁸

Abstract character of philosophical inquiries shall not be a goal in itself, but rather constantly verified and reflected upon. If there is a way to make it less abstract it is worth trying. Making examples and applying philosophical reflection in more mundane contexts would also be a path worth taking.

In Jorge Borges short story "The Library of Babel"⁹ the infinite amount of books denies the access to knowledge and understanding. Each book might contain something important, but most of them are just gibberish, since they exhaust all the possibilities of signs. It would be probably too much to say that abstract philosophy is like those gibberish books in the library of Babel, but maybe it would be a good exercise in modesty and self-reflection: what is the meaning and importance of what I am writing? Will it just add to the flood of words? Imposing such self-limitations on writing philosophy could also be helpful in making its role in public life more prominent.

3. Finality versus Openness

Searching for final answers provides a worthy goal for philosophical thinking. However it avoids the possibility that human beings are not able to finally understand the reality around them. There are many arguments for such a limitation of human intellect, to give some examples: a) a huge difference between

human lifespan and the timespan of existence of reality; b) a huge difference between human lifespan and the timespan of existence of life; c) a possible discrepancy between intellectual and conceptual tools we use to understand and describe reality and its essential nature; d) biases and subjective experiences, which are limiting human mental capabilities; e) the role of language and used concepts, metaphors, which are providing us with specific filters of what we can understand from reality; f) enormous differentiation of provided answers concerning what reality really looks like, including quarrels between realists and nominalists, materialists and idealists etc.¹⁰

I do not want to suggest that searching for final answers is a wrong goal for philosophy, rather that it would be important for philosophers to moderate their expectations regarding the possibility of achieving finality in philosophical answers. By avoiding exaggerated claims, including those publicly expressed, philosophy could take a more important role in public life. Instead of providing final answers to unending philosophical discussions it could concentrate more on stating important questions, fostering critical thinking, doubting in claims of objectivity and neutrality. Not because of its own neutral or objective character, but rather because philosophical reflection makes oneself more conscious of historical contingencies, cultural influences, the influence of values and beliefs on ways of thinking, understanding rationality and proper argument in a debate.¹¹ At the same time the stakes of philosophical debates are hard to understand without philosophical preparation, which makes it also easier for philosophers to comprehend how serious consequences follow from different philosophical viewpoints.

The concentration on answering questions, providing justifications for those answers, as well as sharp and decisive arguments, changes philosophy. Instead of fostering reflection and thinking, philosophers seem to be mainly concerned with winning the quarrels with other philosophers. As if the goal of philosophy would be to finally finish philosophising, abolishing philosophical questions and replacing them with final answers or if that happens to be impossible with the acceptance of the impossibility of philosophy as such.

4. Balancing Independence and Interdisciplinarity

Treating philosophy seriously would be possible thanks to rethinking the relationship between philosophy and other disciplines. Philosophy separated from humanities, social sciences and science, would abstain from discussions about intellectual, social and political challenges of the contemporary

world and resign from the possibility of influencing reality. In the case of many branches of knowledge it is possible to show the connections between philosophical reflection and their discoveries.

From different perspectives, thinkers with such diverse views about philosophy were influenced by the reflection upon history, to name just some examples from the most famous: Georg Hegel, Friedrich Nietzsche, Wilhelm Dilthey. Sociology admits its own roots in the writings of Plato and Aristotle. At the same time with famous philosophers the distinction between philosophy and sociology blurs, as it is the case with Jürgen Habermas, Zygmunt Bauman and Anthony Giddens. In whose writings we can find a close interaction between sociological and philosophical reflections. Psychology and psychiatry are also influenced by philosophical reflection and influencing philosophy. Again just to name some examples the book by Jonathan Haidt and the promises of psychological experiments steered philosophical discussions. The monumental book¹² by Iain McGilchrist about the relationship between brains, minds, truth, knowledge and reality, could not be written without the philosophical input to psychological and psychiatric discussions. Linguistics and language studies rely on philosophy of language, which would be impossible without a deep understanding of linguistic knowledge, at the very least of one specific language. However, as Anna Wierzbicka's *Imprisoned in English*¹³ demonstrates, the interaction between linguistics and philosophy goes much deeper than that. Philosophers of science, for example Nicholas Maxwell¹⁴, are influenced by the discoveries in physics, as well as try their best to show why physicists would be also well advised to get engaged with philosophy.

In other words philosophy is neither just one among many branches of knowledge nor a distanced queen predestined to rule them all. In both cases the relationship with other branches of knowledge would be impaired. In the first case because it would seem that philosophy does not have anything interesting to say for non-philosophers. In the second case because it would try to preserve authority not anymore available for its inquiries. Constant dialogue and interaction with other disciplines seems to be the best answer to this issue. With philosophers engaged in reading and discussing writings of other disciplines and writing in such a way that their writing would be important for physicists, sociologists, historians etc.

5. Jargon versus Simplification and Triviality

The style of writing philosophy is crucial for redefining its public role. I have myself been struggling with avoiding philosophical technicalities in my writings (failed many times), as erudition in those is often seen as a sign of philosophical sophistication and wisdom. In other words philosophy shall be written for

intelligent and engaged readers, but not only for specialists in the history of philosophy, logic or any other branch of philosophy. That would also diminish the role of dichotomy between so called continental and analytic traditions, which both have developed their own idiom making their understanding harder not only for the public, but also for the members of the other philosophical traditions.

This topic connects with another pitfall lurking at philosophy, namely its trivialisation. If every philosophical idea were expressed in plain language (English, Polish, Chinese, Danish, etc.), what would distinguish philosophy from the casual musings of football players or other celebrities, whose fame grants them public recognition? At the same time, by confining itself to the cloisters of highly sophisticated thought, philosophy is already suffering from declining popularity, which, ironically, paves the way for its trivialization. The infotainment sphere and platforms like TikTok are far from ideal venues for philosophy, as the rules of popularity often distort and limit the kinds of philosophical thought that can reach a broader audience¹⁵.

Apart from discussing the public role of philosophy and engaging the topic among philosophers, we also need more active efforts in translating philosophy into the environment of new media. Graphic novels, podcasts, public talks, computer games, may seem far away from philosophy, but this distance can be bridged. Compromises and some losses of important aspects of philosophising are most probably inevitable, but without it we might face a situation of such a huge distance from the social world and culture that less and less people will be able to understand why philosophy is an important social practice¹⁶.

6. For Specialists versus for the Public

There is a saying that every writer has got its ideal reader, i.e. its future self, another person, community, which provides a point of concern and the direction of writing. For example, in the case of this text I am thinking about other philosophers reflecting upon the role of their discipline, as well as other engaged members of the public opinion, who might be interested in rethinking the place of philosophy in society. Thus I am making a lot of assumptions: that we (me and the idealised reader) share the language competence in English and will understand presented concepts in a more or less similar way. That we are interested in philosophy and its public role, thus that I do not need to spend too much time in explaining what philosophy is and that it is connected to public life, but rather can shift our attention to the aspects of understanding philosophy helpful in fostering its influence and in being a force for the good in social

life. That we want to be friendly towards each other, which means for the writer not to burden the reader with gibberish text good for nothing, for the reader to give the writer the benefit of the doubt that it is possible for him/her to tell something important.

I am afraid that it is often the case that the ideal reader in philosophical writings is understood as a professor in the evaluating committee, grant giver, reviewer during the next academic stage in a philosophical career. Of course this is also a part of philosophy, but it shall not overburden our thinking about the discipline as such. Especially that sooner or later we will be playing this other role and then we can try to diminish the distance between evaluating philosophical writing from the perspective of grant, academic career etc. and evaluating it as an important text for a member of society, person engaged in intellectual and public life. Thus moving the standards of our own discipline closer to the standards of importance of texts in public life.

7. Conclusion

All of the above might sound naive. It is just words, words, words, how could it influence anything. After all, deeds are what counts. Well, this is the very same misinterpretation of the metaphysical situation I try to discuss. Human beings are very complex beings and their ability to communicate, conceptualise and interpret the world allowed for spectacular deeds, but without language and philosophy science and technology would not develop in the way we know them. The same applies to the future development of humanity: without new ideas and reflection the evil deeds might seem the one and only unavoidable option¹⁷. Philosophy in public life could be helpful in opening our minds and assist in having courage to ask better questions, to doubt false prophets and be able to free ourselves from self-inflicted limitations.

Footnotes

¹ I'm not making a reference here to avoid further popularization of such backbreaking and arduous philosophy.

² [1].

³ [2].

⁴ [3].

⁵ [4].

⁶ See [\[5\]](#).

⁷ Cf. [\[6\]](#).

⁸ Cf. [\[7\]](#).

⁹ [\[8\]](#).

¹⁰ [\[9\]](#).

¹¹ Cf. [\[10\]](#).

¹² [\[9\]](#).

¹³ [\[11\]](#).

¹⁴ In many of his books, to name just one example: [\[12\]](#).

¹⁵ See [\[13\]](#).

¹⁶ Cf. [\[14\]](#).

¹⁷ [\[15\]](#).

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