

The Intrusion of Real Life Into Philosophy: The Pedagogical, Methodological, and Political Implications of Acknowledging we Have Other Stuff Going On

Introduction

How do socio-political realities shape philosophy, and how can we do philosophy in a way that is conscientious of and responsive to these realities?

Because philosophy is an activity, every work of philosophy is a call to action. Works of philosophy

- Think in its way
- Practice its method,
- Accept its practical proposals, or
- Simply keep reading (listening, watching, etc.).

Like all other calls to action, in order to be taken up it must fit into the lives of those it seeks to enlist.

- These circumstances of life, while seeming to be philosophically extraneous play a major role in determining which proposals are ultimately taken up, by whom, and how.

My presentation will go through four steps:

1. I will describe some of these **universal and unavoidable facts of life** into which philosophy must fit
2. I will set out what **criteria a philosophical method or proposal must meet** to fit in these facts of life
3. I will illustrate how we can use these criteria to **judge methods of political philosophy** by looking at the Straussian and Rawlsian methods
4. I will conclude with some observations of the **pedagogical, methodological, and political implications** of looking at philosophy this way

The Facts of Life: The Context in Which People Come to Philosophy

Opening Thoughts

- **Objective:** My goal is to describe some unavoidable facts about the lives of all potential students of philosophy.
 - These facts are deeply affected by socio-political realities
- **Why focus on students?** To paraphrase Lewis Carroll, "All teachers and great writers of philosophy have at one time been students, but not all students will be teachers or great writers."
- **Disclaimer:** People are rightly suspicious of universal claims these days, but I am going to contend that these facts are thin enough, and contain enough diversity to actually be universal.
 - **Not comprehensive**
 - **Not original**
- There are at least three facts of life
 - **Original Dependence:** We are born as babies categorically dependent on others

- **Limited Capacity:** We have limited time, abilities, and resources
- **Ongoing plurality:** We inhabit a world with multiple perspectives

Original Dependence

- We were all born completely dependent on others.
 - **Diversity:** We might have been born in Ancient Babylon or modern New York, with one or more parents, in wealth or poverty, etc.
- To get to a point where we could study philosophy we must have had our needs provided for for many years
 - They must have been provided for by people who already had a way of life of which we were a part
- To be capable of intellectual pursuits we must have been given tools to do so
 - E.g. language, books, scrolls, oral tradition, telescope, lab kit
 - These tools must have been a part of that way of life
 - These tools were themselves acquired from prior teachers or made with such tools
- The complete dependence is also a complete intellectual dependence
 - The tools must, at least at the beginning, be taken as a matter of faith
 - Any question or challenge must employ and therefore presuppose some of these tools
- If someone knows the answer to any serious question, then they must have lived for some considerable time without it.
 - **First Major Implication-Living in the Meantime:** If the question is political “e.g. how best to live together?”, then the student must have already more or less explicitly held a tentative answer.

Limited Capacity & Resources

- We all have limited time, ability, and resources
- For example,
 - **Time:** I only have 30 minutes for this presentation which shapes how much detail I give you
 - **Ability:** I only speak so many languages which shapes which books I can read. I only have so much patience which informs which writers I can handle.
 - **Resources:** I only have access to a limited number of books, which of course is shaped by political choices like having libraries and universities, as well as having the money to pay tuition, which books are banned, etc.
 - I also need to be able to eat and have some baseline level of security to focus.
- Other needs (food, security, housing, etc.) will be more pressing at least sometimes.
 - **Second major implication-Always a Choice:** Finite time and resources means that no intellectual proposal is judged solely on its own merit but as against these other demands and possibilities both intellectual and non-intellectual.

Ongoing Plurality

- There are multiple perspectives
 - This could be as simple as a disagreement between children over who the doll belongs to.

- Once resources are invested in perspectives across multiple generations, they can grow into philosophical schools of thoughts, academic disciplines, religions, etc.
- Depending on where and when we live we may be exposed to more or less of these but they are out there
- **Third major implication-Choice Between Perspectives:** Building on the first and second implication, the choice to take up any intellectual pursuit is not absolute but a choice among limited options, informed by how best to use limited resources.

The Demands on Philosophy: Standards by Which Any Text Must be Judged

Opening Thoughts

- What are the necessary preconditions for a student to take up a philosophical proposal? These four criteria are:
 - **Intelligibility:** I must be able to understand it (or at least think I do)
 - **Credibility:** I must trust the author
 - **Promise:** The realistic possible gains must outweigh the costs and possibility of failure
 - **Feasibility:** I must be able to undertake the method or proposal

Intelligibility

- It must be understandable to us given our limited abilities and the specific tools we have inherited.
- If it is not intelligible to us as we start out, then we may hear from others that it is worth investing our limited time and resources in being able to understand it,
 - e.g. by learning a new language or reading commentaries.
 - Thus before we even begin the text already makes demands of us,
 - Every demand is a risk because we don't know if it will be worthwhile
- **First Major Implication:** Clarity matters.
 - If your target reader already has especially depleted resources, you may never get in the door.
 - Every intermediary necessitated by the text (e.g. companion guides and translators) puts the power in their hands

Credibility

- The student is emerging from complete intellectual dependence, they are therefore not in a good place to assess a text based on its accuracy
 - The student therefore must assess whether they trust the text
- Tools are taken on faith, but it doesn't have to be a passive faith, it can be an active trust.
- Methodology of course plays a role in building trust, but at its heart trust is a social-political questions
 - Peer-reviewed journals, universities, etc. are just institutions designed to centralize trust
- Where the reader and writer come from will go a long way to determining how willing one is to trust the other

- **Second major implication:** We never break from our intellectual dependence but incrementally move away from it.

Promise

- The proposal must promise something worthwhile that is realistically attainable and greater than the cost it demands from the student
 - This is judged relative to the other options available, so really you are judging its opportunity cost.
 - The flipside of this is every philosophical proposal drains resources from other proposals, some of which may be political
- The cost is not the same for everyone, so the right choice will not be the same for everyone.
 - This about what they are not doing instead, e.g. caregiving activities, earning money, working in a political movement, etc.

Feasibility

- Can the student accomplish what is being asked of them?
 - Is their limited time, and are their limited resources and abilities enough?
- How will they live in the meantime, i.e. before the proposal is carried out or accomplished?
 - The more demanding the proposal, the more worked this tentative answer will have to be.
 - If this is not addressed the status quo will rule.

Taking Stock

- These are necessary preconditions of a successful proposal but we can make our choices better by paying attention to them both as students and as writers.

A Brief Illustration of How to Use this Analysis: Strauss and Rawls

- These criteria are all well and good in the abstract, but what does it look like to actually hold a philosopher up to them?
 - In practice it is a very personal analysis that depends on each person's particular situation.
 - We can however judge philosophies according to how well they take account of these facts of life in general.
- **Disclaimer:** You may disagree with my characterization of these methods. That would make sense as it's based on limited time with a limited part of each of their canons. The picture may therefore be incomplete. This does not worry me because:
 - These are merely illustrations
 - The point of my framework is that we're always working with more or less incomplete pictures.

Strauss

- **Texts:** "What is Political Philosophy?", "What is Liberal Education?", and "Persecution and the Art of Writing"

- **Does it seem understandable?** Yes, very understandable. It tells a story and offers simple schemas to explain very large things.
- **What is political philosophy?** The attempt to move from our (received) questionable views of the nature of the good (as it pertains to the judgement of all other political things) to views that are no longer questionable, in a way that ultimately serves political life
 - Notice how well it captures the incremental emergence from our intellectual dependence
 - It takes our pre-philosophical starting point very seriously
- **How do we do it?** Study the great radically original minds, who became teachers without themselves having teachers.
 - **In practice:** We do this by studying the great books. Life is too short for anything else.
 - Notice the explicit and central role finite time plays in the method.
 - **Who are the great minds?** Western canon but only because of his limited knowledge of other languages
 - Notice Highlights importance of limited capacity. Call to action for translators.
- **The problems:**
 - 1) Writers were afraid of persecution and so hid meaning.
 - Notice this is a big blow to intelligibility. Strauss offers us tools to overcome.
 - Notice Is he doing the same thing? **Can we trust Strauss?**
 - Notice This highlights the cost of doing philosophy
 - 2) The great minds say different things. We are not as great as them and yet we must judge between them.
 - Notice this is the problem of credibility par excellence, we must decide to trust yet as a student cannot really know
- **What are the alternatives?** He considers political thought, theory, theology, and science.
 - Notice This engages with the fact that our choices are always against a limited number of alternatives
 - Notice His criticism of a supposedly ethically neutral political science, is that we must always live in the meantime and that requires ethical commitments (i.e. that the pursuit itself is good, trustworthy, etc.)
- **What is the ultimate promise?** Strauss offers potentially unattainable goals with some corresponding consolation prizes:
 - **The big prize 1-Truth:** Knowledge of the whole and the nature of things, the correct standard by which to judge political options.
 - **Why is that valuable?** It'll make our political decisions tend towards the good.
 - He says outright that philosophy may never achieve this
 - **Consolation Prize 1-An Itch of the soul:** The comfort of the activity itself.
 - This is really only a prize for people who are:
 - comforted by questions without answers.
 - Are so disturbed by the difference between opinion and knowledge they can't help but do philosophy
 - The calculation of whether to follow Strauss then differs wildly from one person to the next

- **The big prize 2-A universal aristocracy:** Liberal education's greatest aspiration is to achieve true democracy, which is universal aristocracy
 - This goal seems to be contradicted by the method of political philosophy which is to talk to a select few
 - We can also wonder how scalable such a method is given how much it depends on a person's disposition and commitment to this one activity
- **Consolation prize 2-Partial improvements:** Some incremental gains can still happen for some
- **Consolation prize 3-Perfect gentlemanship:** Show us the beautiful, build human virtues, etc.
- **Consolation prize 4-Elite community:** Be part of a special community where the great works are written especially for you
 - Assuming you're the right guy
- **What is the cost?** The cost can hardly be exaggerated. It requires a person's relentless effort and complete devotion.
 - It will take as much as you are willing to give
- **For whom is it feasible?**
 - It will not be feasible for those who value answers above questions
 - We can never be sure at the outset if we are one of the masses or a true potential philosopher. This is therefore an enormous risk that most are likely not willing to take.
 - You need to be literate. You need to have access to the books, and ideally speak a number of European languages.

Rawls

- **Text:** A Theory of Justice
- Justice as fairness is just one tool in a broader method of moral theory
- **Does it seem understandable?** The size of the work and formalism is a bit jarring, but allows me to focus on small interesting parts. This may be helpful or misleading.
- **What is moral theory?** The attempt to describe our moral capacity, which most people above a certain age, intelligence, and under normal circumstance have
- **How do we do this?**
 - Step 1-We replicate the best conditions for exercising our judgment, e.g. no hunger, threats, prejudices, etc. both in practice and in thought experiments
 - Notice he immediately tries to separate out philosophy from all the actual and inevitable pressures of life. This is what people find so troubling about the method.
 - Step 2-We make decisions through this ideal situation and compare the answers against our considered convictions (i.e. our most firmly held beliefs).
 - Step 3-If there's a discrepancy, we figure out whether it's due to a problem in the conditions or our convictions.
 - Step 4-We revise one or the other until we come to equilibrium
 - Step 5-As new facts and theories get introduced we repeat and see if they disrupt the equilibrium.

- Notice He is very explicit about how we are always judging claims relative to a number of limited options and so this can only produce tentative answers.
- **Do we trust Rawls?** Rawls is very transparent about the facts of life in some ways but not in others.
 - **A theorist of the meantime:** He acknowledges plurality about fundamental questions. Arguably, Rawls is fundamentally a theorist of how to live in the meantime, i.e. without important questions being settled.
 - **Presumed Consensus:** On the other hand, he seems to take for granted agreement on some pretty big ideas like rationality, which as someone aware of plurality might bother me.
 - **The method isn't perfect:** He acknowledges his method is rough and ready rather than ideal.
- **What is the promise?**
 - A set of principles is *required* to choose between various social arrangements so as to minimize the influence of arbitrary factors.
 - If we implement our findings we will produce a society that as closely approximates a voluntary society as possible,
- **What is the chance we will succeed?**
 - Rawls, like Strauss, sees the ideal as far off and potentially unattainable. Nevertheless, his method is built for incremental improvements in our thinking.
 - As a way of exploring our own ideas, it seems to be a somewhat plausible way to do that
- **What are the costs?**
 - The costs seem to be those costs associated with knowing the thought experiments and taking the time to work through them
 - To the extent that it might depend on physical circumstances that imitate the ideal nature of the thought experiments, one needs to be safe, fed, housed, etc.
- **For whom is it feasible?**
 - He treats the conditions of our original dependence as an obstacle, and tries to set up a categorical break from it.
 - This seems to me impossible to achieve and besides which probably not desirable. As I have said, this concern is a common one.
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The Pedagogical, Methodological and Political Implications

Pedagogical

- Invite students to reflect on these four criteria explicitly (see handout)

Methodological

- We saw that both Strauss and Rawls go some way to addressing the facts of life in their methods:
 - Avoid all or nothing (Strauss' consolation prizes)
 - Explicitly ask your question in a limited way, i.e. the best of a limited range of answers

Political

- **Intelligibility:**
 - The harder you make your work to understand the more power you give to intermediaries.
 - Learn plain language and only deviate from it when absolutely needed
 - Don't be afraid of doing unoriginal work
- **Credibility:**
 - Who is your audience and how are you building trust with them?
 - Don't presume it or let central institutions do the work for you
- **Promise:**
 - Everything you write imposes a cost on the world (if only the time it takes to read it).
 - What are you offering?
 - What are you doing to minimize that cost?
- **Feasibility:**
 - Think explicitly about who your proposals are unavailable to.
 - Think about whose work and way of thinking a method is conducive to.
 - For example, Rawlsian method because it frames itself in terms of neutrality, impartiality, and promises sets of rules meant to be used by institutions, through the use of an experiment that can be done from your office, it is particularly well suited for civil servants and policy makers.