Philosophy as democratic underlabour

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To the best of my knowledge it was Stuart White who first suggested that political philosophy can be seen as a kind of 'democratic underlabouring' (White, 2003, p.29). White was riffing on John Locke, for whom it was 'master-builders' such as Boyle and Newton whose 'mighty designs, in advancing the sciences, will leave lasting monuments to the admiration of posterity' (Locke, 1690). For philosophers like himself 'it is ambition enough to be employed as an under-labourer in clearing the ground a little, and removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way to knowledge'. To regard philosophy as *democratic* underlabour retains Locke's insistence on its modest, ancillary role but changes the goal. Rather than preparing the path for knowledge, philosophical groundwork is necessary for our democratic processes to work well.

On the one hand, democratic decision-making is constitutive of people's public lives: we live our public lives partly *as* citizens, deliberating and making decisions together. By enriching the quality of our deliberation, philosophers can help us flourish in our role as citizens engaged in the process of collective self-rule, improving the quality of our democratic processes. On the other hand, the outcomes of those processes determine the content of our public lives: what we are collectively deliberating *about* are precisely the shared rules that we are to live by, and impose upon one another. By clarifying the normative issues at stake, and offering their considered views about what those shared rules should be, philosophers can also help to improve our decisions. Democratic underlabour may be done in service to their fellow citizens, but philosophers need not be modest about the importance of their contribution.

There are two kinds of philosophical work involved. The first is purely analytical. Philosophers can clarify concepts in a way that enables citizens, and those seeking their votes, to understand the normative issues at stake in political debate. Politicians sometimes invoke grand but vague ideals like 'justice', 'liberty', 'democracy'. Take 'justice' for example. There are different conceptions of that concept. Are they referring to some idea of fairness, of giving people what they deserve, or of people getting what they are entitled to? These three diverge in important ways.

Or consider something less thoroughly value-laden, like 'inequality'? On hearing that word, philosophers will immediately want to know whether we're talking about inequality in distributive or relational terms. Is the concern that people are unequal in the distribution of something, or is it rather that they do not relate to one another as equals? If distributive, are we supposed to be thinking about inequalities in outcomes or in opportunities? Is the speaker really interested in inequality at all? It often turns out on closer inspection that they are actually talking about something else, such as the plight of those who have least. 'Conceptual analysis' may sound fancy but it's simply the obviously important business of working out what people mean when they say things.

Sometimes the imprecision is deliberate. The vaguer the description of something that sounds nice (or nasty), the wider the support one can garner for (or against) it. Still, even where those seeking the power to make decisions may find it strategic to present their views in elusive feelgood (or feelbad) slogans, they have no good reason for *thinking* that way. And in any case, citizens choosing between them are empowered when they can distinguish between – and so are in a position to interrogate seriously – the various offers on the table. The democratic process is improved when citizens can see beyond the rhetoric to pin down where exactly politicians are disagreeing. Are they aiming at different goals or do they have different views about how best to achieve them? If the latter, is the disagreement principled or does it rest on different views about what is feasible?

Philosophical analysis can also contribute to our collective understanding of what is at stake when it comes to decisions about specific policies. It's rare for policy disagreements to be entirely technical – the kind that can be resolved merely by looking at the relevant evidence about 'what works'. Whether policy wonks realise it or not, policy choices nearly always depend on value judgements. Sometimes these are judgements about what outcomes one is trying to achieve. Sometimes they are about which means of achieving them are permissible. Some democratic underlabour involves exposing the different moral considerations that underlie policy decisions, so that citizens and their representatives can better understand what it is that they are choosing between.

Consider the domain of education policy. People disagree about what state schools should teach, about how they should select their pupils, about whether parents should be permitted to send their children to elite private schools, or to schools that will instruct them in a particular religious worldview, and so on. Advocates of different positions on these issues typically endorse different value judgements. Some of these judgements are consequentialist: they concern the outcomes that educational policy should be aiming for. Disagreement here will turn on views about, for example: what constitutes a good childhood; the mixture of educational goods – valuable knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions - that we should be looking to schools to produce in their students; how opportunities for those goods (and all the others to which education is instrumental) should be distributed; and so on. Some of the judgements are non-consequentialist: they concern not the value of outcomes but people's entitlements to be treated, or not to be treated, in certain ways – that is, whether the methods of producing such outcomes are acceptable. Perhaps parents' rights to spend their money on their children's education, or to send their children to an instructive religious school – or children's rights *not* to be sent to such a school – should be respected whatever the consequences.

In *How To Think About Religious Schools: Principles and Policies* (Clayton *et al*., 2024) my co-authors and I suggest an analogy between philosophical and chemical analysis. Just as a chemist analysing a compound will identify its constituent elements, and be familiar with the various ways in which those elements tend to combine to form more complex units, so the philosopher can analyse people's political views, identifying the particular combinations of normative judgements that motivate them. Where the chemist's analytical framework is given by the periodic table, which identifies and organises the discrete and basic constituents of the material world, the framework we offer identifies and organises the

various moral values and principles that combine to form people's views about religious schools. This type of analytical, clarificatory work is one kind of democratic underlabour – one way that philosophy can prepare the ground for democratic deliberation, improving both the process and the product by helping people to understand more clearly their own and others' beliefs, and the nature of their disagreements.

But philosophers can contribute more than clarification of the normative judgements that underpin political views, important though that is. They can also offer arguments for and against substantive conclusions, giving reasons why their fellow citizens – and their representatives – should endorse some views and reject others. Such arguments may operate at different levels of abstraction, and be of less or more immediate relevance to decisions currently on the political agenda. At the more abstract level, they can be about, for example: the best way to understand 'justice, 'freedom' or 'equality'; the complex ways in which property rights both protect and interfere with people's freedom; the moral basis of the family and its implications for parents' rights; and so on. Where values conflict, the arguments can be about which balance between competing values – which mixtures of elements in the philosophical periodic table – are better than others. At the more concrete level, they can be about the merits and demerits of specific policy proposals, whether concerning immigration, assisted dying, the regulation of social media, or whatever. Our book about religious schools begins with an analytical framework but it concludes with a concrete set of policy proposals for the regulation of religious schools in England, those proposals inevitably reflecting our substantive – and reasoned – judgements about the proper balance between the various value considerations at stake.

Although more than clarificatory, this second kind of philosophical work still counts as 'analytical' – as long as the arguments are presented in a suitably clear, precise and rigorous way. Does it really qualify as 'democratic underlabour'? Its aim is surely less modest. The goal here is to improve the quality of democratic decisions directly, by persuading others that some decisions are better than others. Advocating particular outcomes is more presumptuous than seeking only to improve the process. But the label still applies. What philosophers are offering when they engage in this kind of persuasive work remains precisely that, an offering. It is their contribution to democratic deliberation, their reasoned justifications offered as recommendations to those with whom they are deliberating. Those recommendations may be considered 'expert' in so far as they are the product of professional training, of the sheer amount of time spent worrying at getting the arguments right, of the improving filter of their intellectual community. But it is up to their fellow citizens – or their representatives – to decide whether to accept what they are offered. In this respect they are no different from economists and other social scientists, whose contributions typically take the form of the empirical evidence, and predictions based on that evidence, that are also needed to guide decisions. The Brexit referendum showed that they too can do no more than hope that their fellow citizens will take heed.

There is nothing novel or, I think, controversial in the story so far. So let me complicate the discussion by raising, necessarily briefly, three further issues. The first concerns how, on this conception of philosophy's contribution to public life, we should understand the significance of the philosophical input. Exactly what difference might it make? In my opening paragraph I claimed vaguely that philosophical underlabour is necessary for our democratic processes to

'work well'. In my second I distinguished between its contribution to the quality of processes or procedures, on the one hand, and decisions or outcomes, on the other. Philosophy can help us both to a better way of making decisions and to a way of making better decisions. However one conceives the relation between those two aspects – and much democratic theory is devoted to that question – it's not hard to see why we might value them both.

Less obvious, perhaps, is the thought that, in making its contribution, philosophy may be not merely improving the process or product, but contributing to the *legitimacy* of the political system. Political decisions are coercively imposed on all of us, including those who voted against them. The question of legitimacy, crudely, is the question of what justifies the winners' forcing the losers to comply, and it may be that part of the answer concerns the kind of deliberation involved. Where citizens contribute to collective decisions with little understanding of what they are voting for, or why they are voting for it, then it's questionable whether the winning outcome can legitimately be imposed on those who disagree. To be sure, one might think that legitimacy derives primarily from respect for the kind of equality that is embodied simply in majority rule, without regard to the quality of the deliberation (if any) that precedes it. But the procedural demands may be higher: for example, it may matter whether those participating in the practice of collective self-rule have an adequate sense of the values at stake. If so, philosophy can improve our democratic practice by making it more legitimate.

What happens, though, when a philosopher's reasoned view amounts to the claim that some matter is just too important to be left to the democratic process? This is the second complicating issue. My happy picture – philosophers have no special standing in public life but are simply underlabouring on behalf of their fellow citizens – fails in those cases where their judgements about how to balance the various values at stake lead them to the conclusion that something should not be up for democratic grabs in the first place. The plausibility of that conclusion is likely to depend, in part, on the extent to which real-world democratic processes approximate the philosophical ideal. In societies like ours, where the opportunity to influence political discussion is so unequal, and where many of those with greatest influence show so little interest in reasoned argument, it isn't hard to be sceptical about the legitimising force of (so-called) 'democracy'. But even in the ideal political system, there will be cases – typically conceived as matters of grave injustice or violations of basic rights – where philosophers may think that there is too much at stake for the matter to be decided by the collective will of their fellow citizens. In such cases, it is incoherent for them to regard themselves simply as one voice among others. They are committed to denying that modest view of their contribution.

In practice, however, things are complicated. Sometimes the very question of whether an issue should be subject to democratic decision is itself decided democratically. It can be through our (less or more) democratic political processes that we collectively decide who gets to decide what. Consider, for example, how recent prospective leaders of the Conservative party have campaigned on a ticket of withdrawing from the European Convention of Human Rights. In that kind of case, the happy picture still applies: philosophers can straightforwardly see themselves as participating in the process by trying to persuade their fellow citizens about what view they should take. Sometimes, though, it is

other bodies that make decisions. These may range from grand judicial institutions like the Supreme Court, to bodies like the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) or the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA).

Whether philosophers addressing decision-makers in such organisations can claim to be performing democratic underlabour depends on how we think about the democratic credentials of those organisations. Where the organisations operate with devolved authority – given the task, by their fellow citizens (or their representatives), of making decisions within a particular domain of expertise – then that description remains apt. Where they are better understood not as part of but different from – and indeed sometimes antithetical to – the democratic parts of our decision-making system, then philosophers contributing to their decision-making processes must accept that they are making a different kind of contribution. That's not a problem. There are proper limits on democracy and philosophy can contribute to valuable non-democratic elements in our decision-making arrangements. But we should be clear that, in such cases, we are no longer talking about philosophy as distinctively *democratic* underlabour.

This last scenario raises the third complication. When they are addressing their fellow citizens directly, philosophers should feel free to offer their own views on the matter in hand, however controversial or personal those views may be within the philosophical community. Given their expertise, they have a responsibility – we might think of it as a role obligation – to put forward their best arguments for their conclusions, eschewing the slogans and rhetoric that so often characterize political debate. It's their distinctive task to offer their contributions *as* philosophers. (I'm talking here about philosophers acting in their capacity as philosophers. With other hats on they can sloganise as much as the want.) But what they are arguing *for* can be as idiosyncratic as they like. Things are different when they are not addressing the public as a whole but are rather given special standing as advisers or consultants to bodies – like NICE or HFEA. Then they are more like representatives of the philosophical community than individual citizens who happen to be philosophers. Here their contribution seems properly limited to conveying the collective – though rarely consensual – wisdom of that community. That doesn't limit them to clarification or analysis, especially if considerations judged important by philosophers are not being given proper attention, but they should not see their position as an opportunity to push their own particular line from a position of influence.

How might philosophers better discharge the role I've described? It's hardly original to suggest that they might present their views in ways that make them accessible. Philosophers are incentivised to produce research that makes new, sophisticated or fundamental moves in specialised professional debates. That's not altogether a bad thing. I have nothing against philosophers talking to other philosophers about things that – and/or in ways that – only they can understand. I do some of that myself, and nothing I've said should be taken to belittle that kind of work. In time, and with the help of those skilled in rendering scholarly work accessible to wider audiences, it may even qualify as democratic underlabour. But, although individual philosophers may not always be well suited to the task, philosophy as a discipline best fulfils its promise in that role when it speaks to its

audience of fellow citizens – or their representatives, or those with devolved decision-making authority – in ways that are intelligible to them.

Relevance matters too. Philosophers collectively might do more to connect their research to issues that are currently, or at least foreseeably, up for democratic decision. These are the matters where their input is most pressing and where, in allowing their fellow citizens to set the agenda, their contribution can most clearly be seen as democratic underlabour. Urging this is quite compatible with acknowledging the potential long-term significance of work that is not directly oriented towards concrete, current concerns. It is perfectly possible to do both. But applying philosophy to the here and now requires recognition that useful guidance typically depends on combining abstract values – if not ideal theory then at least theory of ideals (Hamlin and Stemplowska, 2012) – with context-specific empirical evidence.

My final suggestion – also happily familiar – is that philosophers do more interdisciplinary work, and especially that they engage more with relevant social science.

References

Clayton, M., Mason, A., Swift, A. and Wareham, R. (2024) *How To Think About Religious Schools: Principles and Policies.* Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Hamlin, A. and Stemplowska, Z. (2012) 'Theory, Ideal Theory and the Theory of Ideals', *Political Studies Review* 10(1), pp.48-62.

Locke, J. (1690) *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

White, S. (2003) *The Civic Minimum: On the Rights and Obligations of Economic Citizenship.* Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Commented [A1]: It is OK to leave this as it is. Oxford University Press did not exist in 1690. 'Humane' for 'human' was a misprint by the original publisher. For a classic text like this, there is no need in the current context to cite a subsequent edition or to identify the quotation in the opening paragraph with page numbers.