

Public Policy Analysis Today and Tomorrow¹

Human beings live in the world, and must confront the question of whether and how to change it. This is a practical problem which requires some understanding of the nature of the world. However, the choice of whether and how to attempt to change the world must be made in light of appropriate ends, including moral ends.

The truth expressed in these statements may be called the “simple truth”. It cannot plausibly be contested. Nevertheless, the presently dominant strands of practical reasoning and moral reasoning in relation to public problems are not compatible with it. The simple truth entails that moral reasoning and practical reasoning must necessarily infuse each other. However, they are often wrongly treated as if they are distinct.

Dominant Forms of Public Policy Analysis: Complementary Blindnesses

The dominant current of contemporary “practical reasoning” as applied to public problems is exemplified by public policy analysis based on applied economics. The practitioners of this current of public policy analysis recognize that whether and how to change the world is a practical problem that must be informed by empirical analysis. However, they attempt to avoid the simple truth by adopting an overly confined framework. They typically suppose that the motives of agents and the appropriate ends of public policy are narrow. They suppose that the ends to be pursued can be encapsulated by the consequences that public policies and institutional arrangements have for the welfare of persons, understood narrowly in terms of the degree to which their subjective preferences (usually presumed to be advanced by greater consumption) are indulged. They avoid distributional judgments on the ground that such judgments have no basis that is beyond dispute. They give little weight to other relevant considerations regarding both the outcomes to which policies give rise and the processes which they entail. Moreover, they typically adopt an impoverished view of human psychology. Human beings are presumed to be motivated by a relatively narrow range of considerations, centered on their material self-interest. The dominant current of contemporary “practical reasoning” thus typically offers a portrait of the problem of judgment that is rich in its worldly sensibility but poor in the extent to which it recognizes the fullness of the human person and the rich and plural nature of her appropriate ends.

The dominant current of contemporary “moral reasoning” as applied to public problems is heavily influenced by central tendencies of modern moral philosophy. The practitioners of this current of public policy analysis recognize the necessarily central role of moral ends in public decision-making. However, they often attempt to avoid the simple truth by failing to take adequate note that public decision-making is necessarily practical, and must be informed by empirical analysis. Practitioners of this strand of public policy analysis are typically guilty of one of two equal and opposite evils: excessive abstraction or excessive concreteness.

The practitioners of excessive abstraction seek to identify the obligations of individual actors without paying much heed to the empirical context within which these actors are situated, and in

¹ Christian Barry and Sanjay Reddy, August 25th, 2005

which their obligations are to be exercised. They give little consideration to the practical design of feasible institutions in light of the incentives that they create and the dispositions and motivations that they generate. The practitioners of excessive concreteness, on the other hand, ask whether in the world as it now stands (the primary features of which are taken largely to be fixed) individual actors have identifiable obligations. The possibility that the obligations of agents may extend to changing some of the defining features of the world as it stands is given relatively little attention. Instead, great emphasis is placed on what agents ought to do against a background that is presumed to be fixed. The practitioners of excessive concreteness are consequently conservative in their conception of the problem of moral decision-making. The dominant currents of contemporary moral reasoning as it is applied to public problems thus typically provides an approach that is rich in the extent to which it recognizes the fullness of the human person and the richness and plurality of her appropriate ends but poor in its worldly sensibility.

The Alternative Form of Public Policy Analysis: Worldly and Wise

If we adequately appreciate the simple truth we will be led to deliberate differently about public policy and institutional design. We will insist equally on the necessity of practicality and the importance of morality in practical reasoning. The resulting style of deliberation is nothing other than public policy analysis correctly done.

In order to achieve practical relevance, practitioners of a truly alternative approach to public policy analysis must follow certain rules. They must avoid reasoning in abstraction about “first best” institutional arrangements and favor the comparison of feasible alternative proposals for individual or collective action and institutional change. They must begin from the here and now. They must insist that all proposals for institutional change be assessed in light of relevant facts about the world, including considerations of incentive compatibility. They must seek to assess through empirical judgments whether institutional changes can be achieved and whether they can be sustained over time.

In order to give adequate significance to the place of morality in individual and public life, practitioners of a truly alternative approach must follow certain rules. They must view individuals as being motivated by a variety of ends, including (but not confined to) the desire of individuals to live a morally worthwhile life. They must recognize that the motives of agents are formed in the crucible of social life. They must view it as proper to make the choice among public policies according to the extent to which such policies serve a variety of moral ends. They must recognize that distributive judgments are unavoidable in the construction and conduct of a practically relevant and morally plausible public philosophy, and thus do not refrain from them. They must concern themselves with whether and how the transition to new institutional arrangements which are thought to promote valued moral ends can be brought about in a manner consistent with these ends.

Practitioners of a truly alternative approach must be worldly: they must steep themselves in facts concerning institutions, social life and the human person. Practitioners of an alternative form of public policy analysis must also be wise: they must steep themselves in the study of moral principles and the acquisition of moral judgment so as to develop an evaluative framework that is

adequate in the ends that it conceives and the approach that it takes to adjudicating among them. Those who conduct practical moral deliberation must be both worldly and wise if they are to identify how the appropriate ends of public policy can best be pursued in the world in which they actually live.

Realistic Utopianism

Practitioners of the alternative form of public policy analysis must be what John Rawls has called realistic utopians — attentive to constraints of feasibility but imaginative in identifying what is feasible. They must avoid both uncritical acceptance of the status quo and endorsement of unrealistic and underspecified utopian alternatives. In this way, while beginning from the here and now, they ensure that the horizon of their thought extends beyond the incremental to embrace the possible.

Realistic utopians avoid conceiving of the future as the radical other of the present. They focus on the next steps, while recognizing that these may be only the beginning of an expanding cascade of possibilities. They do not expect to deduce definitive rules of conduct or institutional rules. Instead, they aspire to provide rough guidance to those concerned with practical dilemmas in the non-ideal circumstances of political life, marked by the need to contending with disagreement, noncompliance, and incomplete or apparently conflicting evidence. By avoiding both shallow empiricism and abstract moralism, practitioners of the alternative achieve new forms of thought and action. Through thought they free themselves from the inadequacies of the present. Through action they realize the promise of the future.