

WHAT IS THE PUBLIC RESPONSIBILITY OF INTELLECTUALS?

Introduction

As Gramsci put it, “Everyone is an intellectual...: but not everyone has in society the function of an intellectual”. In a culture which increasingly treats knowledge as a commodity and the very idea of truth as empty, the tradition of the morally and politically committed intellectual (Socrates, Plato, More, Voltaire, Wollstonecraft, Mill, Sartre, Russell) seems quaint.

So much the worse for our culture: I shall argue that the function of intellectuals is to think; thinking, and thus at least on occasion knowing, demands doing; intellectuals therefore have a particular responsibility to engage with the world. Since I think this is a statement of the obvious, I’ll begin with various objections to it: go on to outline a conception of practical reason on the basis of which they can be met; and then consider some implications of my argument.

First, then, the objections.

(1) Here’s another list of thinkers: Plato - again - Bacon, Machiavelli, Hume, Schmitt and Heidegger. So what sort of “responsibility” is it that includes such very different commitments: from democratic to totalitarian government; from truth to expediency as the guiding principle of political activity; from a humanistic to a racist outlook; from conservatism to socialism; from liberalism to Nazism? Surely reasoning well is one thing and any conclusions reached another?

We should not judge philosophers by the light of the intelligence.

The intelligence is fit for any purpose, it is good for any purpose,

it is adaptable to any purpose.... The intelligence is useful in the service of truth or falsehood, peace or war, hate or love.... . Prison guards are as intelligent as their prisoners, conquerors as intelligent as the conquered.... Intelligence turned against man, intelligence in the service of man: it is only a tool.... (Paul Nizan)

(2) Facts are one thing and values another. Since moral and political commitment is fundamentally not a rational matter but rather an affective one, it cannot be a consequence -- let alone a basis -- of truth-claims. So, for example, Ayer's social egalitarianism had no more to do with his philosophical commitments than Heidegger's Nazism with his. Intellectual views are one thing; their possessors' morals or politics quite another.

(3) The pursuit of truth is distorted if it is not disinterested; and that precludes practical commitment. And anyway, (4), such commitment requires the mistaken belief that there exist certainties in the moral and political arenas; but there are none. Furthermore, (5), commitment might imply that the truth of a view is to be judged by its consequences, a Machiavellian, or Rortyan, pragmatism. Finally, (6) the slightest acquaintance with the everyday conduct of intellectual institutions, universities, shows that intellectuals are as easily swayed as anyone else by non-rational considerations.

Practical Reason

There is a notion of practical reason, stemming from Plato and Kant, which insists that thinking and doing are closely interconnected. Thus, for example, Plato's identification of cognitive reliability with value and in

particular his notion of the Good as the source of cognitive reliability and of value alike: the exercise of reason that enables us to gain knowledge is an inescapably normative activity. Or, turning to a Kantian approach, ‘the rational necessity of believing the implications of our beliefs [i.e., reasoning] can only be explained if we regard believing itself as a normative act’ (Korsgaard). That is what Kant is getting at with the odd claim that ‘[T]he will is ... the faculty of desire considered not so much in relation to action (as choice is) but rather in relation to the ground determining choice to action. The will itself, strictly speaking, has no determining ground; insofar as it can determine choice, it is instead practical reason itself’. The will, it seems -- at least in this passage -- is a rational capacity, not an affective faculty.

To put it bluntly: the question ‘Why be rational?’ both demands and allows a response which goes deeper than any instrumental value that being rational may have -- not kicking the car when it won’t start because it won’t help. Being rational is a necessary condition simply of acting at all; and acting is what we human beings do. We are indeed thinking things, as Descartes insisted: but the common assumption that, so to speak, we are like machines -- normally static, and active only exceptionally, when “started up” -- is mistaken. Rather, we are agents first and foremost, agents who sometimes, and exceptionally, are at rest. We are, in short, no less active beings than thinking ones. Rationality matters because it makes agency possible.

In claiming that rationality serves agency I do not mean to imply that it subserves agency, that what makes something rational is after all an

instrumental consideration. To argue that being rational is a requirement of our nature as agents is not to suggest that 'intellectual activity is worthy of esteem to the extent that it is practical and to that extent alone' (Benda), however: it is to reconceptualise 'intellectual' and 'practical' not as opposites but as both of them elements of human agency. Objection (5) thus fails; there is no question of the practical consequences of a rational belief's coming to serve as criterion of its truth.

Two things follow. First, inasmuch as the mainstay of moral anti-cognitivism has gone -- the argument that, since moral belief requires moral action, it cannot be rational, since reason (alone) cannot motivate -- moral knowledge is possible. And this in turn implies that the claim that 'intelligence is fit for any purpose', echoed by empiricists and postmoderns alike, is mistaken. For if a course of action which was apparently rationally indicated turned out to be morally inadequate, then, it turns out, it was not, after all, rationally indicated in the first place -- just because it was morally inadequate. And so the spectre of authoritarianism (objection [4]) fades away; the only authority in question is that of reason. (In short, postmodern relativism is self-refuting.) Second, the question of what is to be done cannot be radically separated from the question of what is to be thought: the caricature ivory tower intellectual is an inadequate intellectual on that account. The determinedly disinterested intellectual goes wrong in failing to limit disinterest to the investigation of the truth or falsity of a matter and in supposing that retaining disinterest at that stage implies a disinterest in -- let alone a lack of interest in -- the practical results of their deliberations. Far from retaining a proper neutrality, such an intellectual

already takes a particular moral or political position: to ignore, or pretend to ignore, the implications of their reasoning:

[T]hey [philosophers] must no longer be allowed to fool the people, to play a double game. When Demetrius laid siege to Athens, Epicurus stood alongside his fellow Athenians. Epicurus took sides. If our philosophers publicly refuse to do so...then even the most innocent adolescent will recognize that, in effect, they *have* made a choice.... (Nizan again).

So much for objection (3). Marx was right that, while ‘[T]he philosophers have only *interpreted* the world; the point [however] is to *change* it.’ The notion of the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, while usefully marking a contrast with knowledge pursued explicitly for some particular end, is also misleading: it’s not that the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake has no point (other than itself). It serves a very general, and only vaguely articulable, end, such as making the world a better place. And so objection (3), that the pursuit of truth requires disinterest, also fails. Finally, the objection, (6), that intellectuals’ “own backyards” show how unfit they are to intervene in the public domain, also fails: it doesn’t show that intellectuals have no special public responsibilities, just that their moral failings are at once intellectual failings too. As Plato insisted, you cannot knowingly do wrong. That takes me to my positive case.

Intellectuals Public Responsibilities: the positive case

One point in arguing that we have in the first place a responsibility not to go along with the exigencies of the political

or financial moment as they affect our own professional lives is that that is a necessary condition of our exercising our wider public responsibilities. The other is that it's in any case the everyday betrayals that are especially insidious. If we deny our responsibilities in those things over which we have *most* power - at work -- then we are acting in bad faith. It's these issues which are a test of academics' integrity; if we fail here, then people will be right to be sceptical about any broader intervention. (I leave the obvious examples to you. My current favourite is acquiescing in citation counts as indicating research "quality".)

So let me turn to wider responsibilities: to truth and to engaging in public life accordingly. The first is surely self-evident. But with the responsibility to truth comes a responsibility to engage in public life in accordance with intellectual conviction. To be an intellectual -- to have the social function of an intellectual, to contribute to society through intellectual production -- is to engage in finding, testing and re-testing reasons; in developing and changing one's views accordingly; and in communicating these processes and their results to others. That is to say, one's job is to think, to be critical. But if thinking is itself an activity, and if the activity which is thinking and the activity which is the implementation of thinking are interlinked -- if theoretical reason does not have priority over practical reason -- then not to take on the responsibilities which that brings is no less intellectually than morally culpable. To know more and/or to be able to think more critically brings with it a greater degree of

responsibility: for not only does 'ought' imply 'can', but -- on a cognitivist account -- 'can' implies 'ought'. And the more one can, the more one ought. The train driver and the university teacher are equally responsible as citizens: but the train driver is more culpable than the university teacher if they are drunk at work, simply because in the train driver's but not the university teacher's case that could well result in people's being killed. And in turn, the nursery teacher is likely to be less culpable than the train driver, but more so than the university teacher - just as the university teacher is more culpable than the train driver if they're intellectually dishonest or self-deceiving.

Here's an example. Heidegger was no more, and no less, responsible for the Nazis' coming to power and for their exercise of it than the train driver transporting people to Auschwitz: but he was more culpable by virtue of his professed commitment to truth and his ability to think. His being a Nazi, important though of course that fact is, constitutes a *different* deformation. In the mid 1930s he was *not* guilty of pretending that his academic role bore no direct relevance to his political activities -- quite the contrary. It was only after the war, when he remained silent about his Nazi activities and their significance, that he became dishonest (as well as remaining a Nazi).

But doesn't all this imply that intellectuals have, or can have, moral expertise? It does. But moral expertise does not imply moralism. Like medical or engineering expertise, moral expertise is neither necessarily authoritarian nor arrogant, authoritative though it may be.

Intellectuals, then, have a special responsibility to engage in public affairs. It is doubtless a matter of temperament, opportunity, etc., whether and to what extent this takes the form of activities such as contributing to the deliberations, and to the decisions, of a whole range of public bodies, committees, enquiries and the like, official or otherwise; teaching, and not forgetting questions of who comes to be a student and how, and who does not; or the more directly political interventions of a Michael Dummett. But we cannot set it aside in the name of “purely” intellectual work, for being intellectuals we also occupy a particular role in the matter of trying to make the world a better place, as Plato long ago recognised in his association of truth with goodness.