
Does philosophy have anything to offer those working in public policy? Jonathan Wolff entered the public policy world thinking that it does, and after being involved in projects concerning railway safety, drugs, crime, animal experiments, and health care, among others, he hasn't changed his mind. But what surprised him about those encounters, he writes, is that they taught him something about philosophy. *Ethics and Public Policy: A Philosophical Inquiry* aims to show that philosophy can enrich public policy and that public policy can enrich philosophy. Wolff argues that philosophical reasoning can contribute to the resolution of controversial public policy matters and that philosophers' interactions with the public policy world can improve how philosophy is done. Each chapter is written with these theses in mind. There is a chapter on animal experimentation, gambling, drugs, safety, crime and punishment, health, disability, and the free market. Each chapter surveys the current state of philosophical debate, describes recent movements on the public policy front, and suggests ways that philosophical reasoning can make a contribution. And each chapter ends with a section called "lessons for philosophy," in which Wolff explains how philosophy can benefit from its interactions with the public policy world.

With regard to the first thesis—that of showing how philosophy can enrich public policy—Wolff's book is quite compelling. Philosophers are expert critical thinkers, and Wolff shows how these skills can occasionally be used to break through conceptual logjams and find points of agreement on a host of diverse and controversial issues. Those familiar with the applied ethics literature aren't likely to find a lot that's philosophically novel in Wolff's chapters, but those who are new to applied ethics could hardly hope for a more accessible and penetrating introduction. They'll have to look elsewhere for a comprehensive review of the state of applied ethics as there is little to no mention of issues like abortion, euthanasia, and affirmative action. But anyone interested in seeing what a sophisticated philosophical approach to public policy looks like would be well served to read this book.

While I doubt that Wolff intends *Ethics and Public Policy* primarily for teaching, I highly recommend it as a supplement to an applied ethics course. For some time I've been hoping to find just such a book—one in which a prominent philosopher defends views on a variety of moral topics for a general audience. Most ethics anthologies consist of essays written by philosophers for philosophers, which undergraduates often find impenetrable, or long literature reviews, which they often find dull. Much more engaging and pedagogically useful, I believe, are books like Wolff's—sophisticated polemics written for a general audience. I'm eager to assign it to my ethics students.

Many instructors, I believe, will find the chapter on safety especially useful. That chapter concerns the thorny question of how to weigh lives—how to assign a value to human lives so that governments could assess various health and safety regulations via a cost benefit analysis. It's tempting to think that such assignments
are inappropriate, but, as Wolff makes clear, in some contexts it's hard to see a suitable alternative. Discussing rail safety in the UK, for instance, he notes that each year a few lives could be saved by implementing a new computerized signaling system, but at a cost of roughly 6 billion pounds. Wolff uses this case, along with several others, to motivate a discussion of the merits of consequentialist reasoning, the difference between saving lives and reducing risk to a population, the role of responsibility in public policy, and how people's purchasing decisions can give us insight into how much they value their own lives (and also how such evidence can mislead). In all, it's a masterful presentation of how various moral ideas relate to, and are in tension with, each other.

While Wolff is convincing on the matter of how philosophers can enrich public policy as critical thinkers, there remains the question of what they can contribute as philosophers—as thinkers who, roughly, are interested primarily in the essence of things. Much of what Wolff says about the public policy world—how it prizes consensus and its impatience with unconventional and unpopular views—leads me to believe that, in that world, a fascination with essences would be counterproductive and alienating. Wolff himself concedes as much, noting that “[p]ublic policy needs philosophers more than it needs philosophy” (p. 202). That seems right, but it also weakens Wolff’s first thesis, which then has to be revised to say that public policy would stand to benefit from better critical thinking. That may be too uncontroversial to be worth disputing.

I have a bigger bone to pick with Wolff’s second thesis: that engaging with the world of public policy can enrich philosophy. I’m not convinced that philosophy has all that much to gain from such engagements beyond the practical benefits of securing more funding, especially if, by engaging with that world, philosophers would have to set aside their interest in philosophy and act only in the capacity of critical thinkers. Indeed, Wolff’s aim in his “lessons for philosophy” sections aren’t entirely clear. He may be aiming to provide lessons for philosophy itself or just lessons for philosophers who are inclined to wade into public policy’s murky waters. Either way there are problems. Regarding the former, the main lesson I can discern in Wolff’s book lies in his advocacy of a “bottom-up” approach to moral theorizing. The idea, in brief, is to start with the concerns and commitments of the relevant interest groups and policymakers rather than with abstract moral principles. I have no doubt that this now fashionable approach would make philosophy more hospitable and relevant to those outside the academy, but Wolff never explains how this would make for better philosophy. It’s hard to see why giving more weight to the commitments of policymakers and interest groups would provide added insight, say, into the nature or content of moral properties.

Of course, Wolff’s aim may be more limited—it may be only to suggest that philosophers who are interested in influencing public policy should adopt a bottom-up approach when dealing with policymakers and interest groups. That seems right, but that is useful advice only if there are policy-oriented philosophers who’d be inclined to do otherwise. Wolff thinks there are such philosophers, though he doesn’t name names. In the introduction, for instance, he writes that “[i]t is tempting to think that the way to approach a moral problem that arises in the context of public policy is to formulate the correct moral theory, show how it would resolve