

SYMPOSIUM  
PUBLIC ETHICS



A PRÉCIS OF  
*ETHICS AND PUBLIC POLICY*  
BY  
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# A Précis of *Ethics and Public Policy*

Jonathan Wolff

**E** *thics and Public Policy* was written for several different audiences: philosophers, academics in related fields, policy makers, students, and the ‘interested general reader’ if there are any left. It was also written for several reasons. On one level it was an attempt to account for what I had been doing for the previous decade or so. My first serious engagement with issues of public policy started around 1999 when I had the privilege of being invited to join a government committee looking to modernise gambling regulation in the UK (something I remain involved with to this day). After that ended, I was asked to work with the Railway Safety and Standards Board, who were grappling with the question ‘how safe is safe enough?’ given that it is always possible to spend more on safety and that the industry was suffering intense media criticism after a number of high profile railway accidents. Other invitations followed and I have found myself thinking about the regulation of recreational drugs, the law of homicide, accounting practices and sustainability, value-based pricing of pharmaceuticals, and many other issues, some of which I did not know existed until I was asked my opinion on them. In the great majority of cases the impetus to work on an area came from an invitation, rather than my own research agenda. Not all of these areas have led to chapters in *Ethics and Public Policy*, but my most extensive engagements have.

In one way I regarded this work as a side line to what I consider as my main work: philosophy and social policy, as distinct from public policy, by which I mean the study of disadvantage, equality and social justice. (There are some overlaps, in the case of health and of disability, for example.) Nevertheless, I found the topics I looked at fascinating, and working with civil servants, lawyers, journalists, world leading academics in other disciplines and people in charities and business provides a variety of refreshing perspectives, and a reminder that universities are very far from having a monopoly on intelligence or research skills. In each case I studied I came to my own view about the rights and wrongs of the subject under consideration, but also came to see how little my own view mattered. Policy debates are hemmed in by practical considerations of the politically feasible, the need to bring others with different views with you, and the irritating but fascinating ability of our fellow citizens to see ways round, or in the limit simply ignore, whatever regulations you recommend if they don't agree with them.

One purpose of the book, as I have said, was to record and bring together my activity over the years, some of which had been written up in papers, and some of which had not. Another, obviously enough, was to try to contribute to a number of substantive debates, such as the debate over the justification of punishment, picked up in Gerald Lang's contribution to the symposium. But a third, and perhaps the most important aim, was to reflect on what it is to make a philosophical contribution to a public policy area, which is the topic discussed, one way or another, by the other papers in this symposium. Prior to looking at this question in detail I had a fairly low opinion of applied moral philosophy. A typical contribution might identify a moral dilemma, attempt to work out what various forms of consequentialism and deontology would entail for the subject

area, declare one of the theories the winner and come to an end. It seemed to me formulaic and unhelpful, and not a way in which I wanted to spend my time. No doubt this is very unfair, but it nevertheless reflects the prejudice against applied philosophy that I held and the position that many philosophers continue to hold now.

The more I became engaged in public policy the more a different approach methodology forced itself upon me. First of all it is vital to understand the dilemma presented to you in the way that those it grips in real life understand it. What, exactly, are people worried about? Why has anyone asked a philosopher for help? Second it can often be very useful to find out how we got to the situation we are in. Very often I have heard policy proposals which, if implemented, would take things back to a situation which was previously found unacceptable and in need of urgent reform. Third, what empirical evidence is there concerning the field? How many people are dying in train crashes? What physical harm does heroin do to a human being if given by a safe method in a regulated dose? How do people gamble on slot machines? ‘Common sense’ in these and other areas is often distorted by pre-judgement and, worse, by media reports, which are motivated by the need to sell more copies or increase viewing figures, and stories are chosen on the basis of their headline potential rather than their significance for the subject area. Philosophers breathe in the same air as everyone else and need the same correctives from objective research.

To work in an area of public policy, then, can be time-consuming. It requires understanding policy, regulation, history, political pragmatics, and the role of the media and of campaigning groups, which are sometimes funded by ‘sinister interests’ on an apparently objective moral crusade but with the ultimate goal of knocking competitors out of business. Once all

this is understood, it raises the question of what room is there left for philosophy? My answer is: not much, at least as traditionally done in the sense of appealing to a theory that will be ‘sort out’ a subject area. But on the contrary I think there is a lot of room for philosophy in the sense of the application of philosophical reasoning, training and intelligence. What this means in particular cases will vary according to the circumstances. One has to observe, listen, reflect and look for a way in. And one should not expect to be able to move things very much, although ultimately large and very significant changes can happen. *Ethics and Public Policy* is intended as one example of how philosophers can engage in a range of topics in public policy.

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