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VOLUME 1

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PUBLIC POLICY ANALYSIS TODAY AND TOMORROW

Sanjay G. Reddy*

Public policy analysis is today caught between a conception of practical reasoning, which is based on a caricatural understanding of human beings, and a conception of moral reasoning, which is unworldly and thus collapses into moralistic pieties. In order to save itself from this predicament, and be the servant of democracy rather than technocracy, it must, therefore, become both worldly and wise, realistic and utopian.

Keywords: Public Policy, Democracy, Technocracy, Economics, Moral Philosophy

Human beings must confront the question of whether and how to attempt to change the world.¹ This requires practical knowledge. However, such knowledge alone does not suffice. The choice of whether and how to make such efforts also requires ends, which must be chosen appropriately.²

These statements together capture a ‘simple truth’ which cannot be contested plausibly. Nevertheless, the dominant strands of reasoning in relation to public problems, especially as reflected in the prevailing academic and institutional practices of public policy analysis, do not reflect a live understanding of it.³ The simple truth entails that evaluative reasoning and practical reasoning must necessarily infuse each other. However, they are often wrongly treated as if they can be detached, and rarely do both enter public reasoning in an appropriately integrated way.

Dominant Forms of Public Policy Analysis: Twin Blindnesses

The dominant current of ‘practical reasoning’ as applied to contemporary public problems is one which is based on applied economics. The practitioners of this form of public policy analysis recognise that we face practical problems and that these must be informed by empirical analysis.

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However, they attempt to avoid the simple truth by adopting an overly confined framework. They typically suppose that both the motives of agents and the appropriate ends of public policy are narrow. They imagine 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 in terms of the degree to which their subjective preferences (usually presumed to be advanced by greater consumption) are gratified. They avoid distributional judgments on the ground that such judgments do not have any basis that is beyond dispute. They give little weight to other relevant considerations with regard to both the outcomes resulting from policies and the processes that they entail. Moreover, they typically adopt an impoverished view of human psychology. Individual human beings are, in parallel, presumed to be motivated by a relatively narrow range of considerations centred on their material self-interest. The dominant current of contemporary 'practical reasoning' thus typically offers a portrait of public policy analysis that has a worldly sensibility but is based on a caricature of the human being: it does not recognise the fullness of her possible and appropriate ends.

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

The practitioners of excessive abstraction among the 'moral reasoners' seek to identify the obligations of actors (usually thought of as individuals) without paying much heed to the empirical context within which these actors are situated, and in which their obligations have to be exercised. Further, they give little consideration to the practical design of feasible institutions in the light of the incentives that these create, and the dispositions and motivations that they generate, preferring instead to ask unmoored questions about what individuals should generally do. As a result they fall prey to moralism. The practitioners of excessive concreteness among the 'moral reasoners', on the other hand, ask whether in the world as it now stands (the primary features of which are taken to be substantially fixed), individual actors acting alone have any identifiable obligations. The possibility that the obligations of agents may extend to changing some

of the defining features of the world is given little attention, and the impersonal standpoint for evaluating alternative institutional arrangements is disprivileged. 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. They prescribe a morality without consequence.

The dominant currents of contemporary moral reasoning as applied to public problems thus more adequately recognise the fullness of the human person, and the variety and plurality of her ends. However, they are weak in their worldly sensibility, failing both to recognise the ways in which the world can be changed and the practical considerations which must enter into any such effort.

The Alternative Form of Public Policy Analysis: Worldly and Wise

If we appreciated the simple truth adequately, we would be led to approach public policy and institutional design differently. We would insist equally on the necessity of worldly sense and of moral and evaluative richness. The resulting style of deliberation is nothing other than public policy analysis that is properly anchored and motivated in the lives and concerns of human beings.

In order to achieve practical relevance and human appeal, practitioners of an alternative approach to public policy analysis must adopt a certain orientation. They must avoid reasoning in abstraction about 'first best' institutional arrangements and favour the comparison of feasible alternative proposals for individual or collective action, and institutional change. They must begin from the 'here and now' (see Sen 2009). They must insist that all proposals are assessed in the light of facts about the world. They must seek to assess through empirical judgments whether specific institutional changes can be achieved and whether they can be sustained over time.

In order to accord an adequate role to evaluative judgments in individual and public life, the practitioners of a renewed approach to public policy analysis must be alive to certain concerns. They must view individuals as being motivated by a variety of ends, including (but not confined to) the desire of individuals to flourish in the different aspects of a life and to fulfil interpersonal responsibilities towards those near and far. They must recognise that agents are formed in the crucible of social life. They must view it as proper to make a choice among public policies in accordance with the extent to which such policies serve various distinct ends that are not easily reducible to a unitary concept. They must recognise that distributive judgments are unavoidable in the construction and conduct

of a practically relevant and ethically attractive public philosophy. They must concern themselves with whether and how the transition to new institutional arrangements that are believed to promote valued ends can be brought about in a manner which itself respects them.

The practitioners of an alternative form of public policy analysis must be worldly: they must steep themselves in facts concerning institutions, social life and the human person. However, the practitioners of an alternative form of public policy analysis must also be wise: for this, they must steep themselves in the study of evaluative principles and the acquisition of evaluative judgment. They must develop a mode of assessment that is sophisticated in terms of both how it identifies ends and how it seeks to integrate them into applied reasoning. Those who conduct practical deliberation must, therefore, be both worldly and wise. They recognise that judgments can differ and that for this reason they practise art more than science. They view this recognition as presenting a warrant and not admonishment. They reject the conception of public policy analysis as the activity of technocratic experts and embrace the idea that it is an aid to democratic debate.

Thought and Action

The practitioners of a renewed form of public policy analysis must be ‘realistic utopians’⁴—attentive to constraints of feasibility but imaginative in identifying what is feasible. They must avoid both uncritical acceptance of the status quo and the endorsement of unrealistic and under-specified alternatives. In this way, while beginning from the ‘here and now’, they can ensure that the horizon of their thought extends beyond the incremental to encourage and embrace the possible.

Such realistic utopians avoid conceiving of the future as the radical other of the present. They give moral and practical weight to the lineaments of the past as embodied in the present. They focus on the next steps, while recognising that these may be only the beginning of an expanding cascade of possibilities. They do not conceive of utopia as an end state but rather as an encouragement to dream. They do not expect to deduce definitive rules of conduct or institutional rules from *a priori* reasoning. Instead, they aspire to provide sufficient guidance to those concerned with practical dilemmas in the far from ideal circumstances of political life, marked by the need to contend with disagreement, non-compliance, and incomplete or apparently conflicting evidence. By avoiding both shallow empiricism and abstract moralism, the practitioners of the alternative thus achieve new forms of thought and action. Through thought, they escape what exists. Through action, they embrace what can be.

Notes

¹ These reflections emerged in part from a discussion with Christian Barry, Director of the Centre for Moral, Social and Political Theory at the Australian National University.

² We collapse all consequentialist and procedural concerns under the heading of 'ends'.

³ We refer in particular to the dominant practices in the academic and public institutions of the North Atlantic world, and to those beyond which are influenced by them.

⁴ We use the phrase here without in any way endorsing John Rawls's particular conception of realistic utopia (see Rawls 1993).

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