THERE IS AN IMPLICIT SOCIAL CONTRACT BETWEEN PROFESSIONALS AND THE DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES IN WHICH THEY LIVE

PAUL DURBIN

HOW HAS THE DEVELOPMENT OF KNOWLEDGE WITHIN YOUR PROFESSIONAL DISCIPLINE MODIFIED THE POSSIBILITIES FOR HUMAN ACTION?

Philosophy of technology—which overlaps significantly with science and technology studies, as well as with environmental philosophy—probably offers more possibilities for human action than almost any other discipline (disciplines) in academia today. On the other hand, many of these possibilities have yet to be realized.

First, what I see as the possibilities. In my *Social Responsibility in Science, Technology, and Medicine* (1992), I invited technical professionals to get more heavily involved in the solution of technosocial problems than they had up to that point. It was addressed to technology educators, medical school reformers, media professionals, biotechnologists and bioengineers, computer professionals, nuclear experts, and environmentalists—as well as, paradigmatically, social workers and the "helping professions." About ten years later, I edited a group of my "activist essays" (available on my University of Delaware website), addressed to fellow philosophers and especially philosophers of technology; the message was the same, to get more involved in solving the problems of our technological world.

In both cases, I based my approach on that of philosophers in the American Pragmatist tradition—most especially John Dewey and his friend and colleague G. H. Mead—for whom there is no split between professional and civic work. Indeed, activities ought to flow smoothly in both directions, from academia to the "real" world and from there to academia—seamlessly.

This view is not shared by all philosophers calling themselves "pragmatists," and certainly not by all philosophers in general—even those in fields

Contemporary Moral Problems and Philosophy of Technology, Philosophy Department, University of Delaware, USA.
pdurbin@udel.edu. / http://www.udel.edu/Philosophy/sites/pd/
Last contribution to *Ludus Vitalis*: "Can there be a best ethic of sustainability?", special number 2, 1997, pp. 257-265.

like bioethics or applied ethics generally or even environmental ethics. But mine was not a program—not even an invitation—for all. It was aimed only at increasing the number of activists, in academia or in the professions, who might have the expertise and the will to help solve social problems in our technological age.

HOW TO CHOOSE BETWEEN THOSE POSSIBILITIES?

Presumably this question seeks an answer in the "ought" category, perhaps something like an ethical or social or even political obligation. But that's not what I think is called for here.

The problems calling out for action in our troubled technological world are so urgent and so numerous—from global climate change to gang violence, from attacks on democracy to failures in education, from the global level to the local technosocial problems in *your* community—that it isn't necessary to talk about obligations, even social obligations. No, it's a matter of *opportunities* that beckon the technically trained—including philosophers and other academics—to work alongside those citizens already at work trying to solve the problems at hand. And when academics do get involved, they can't go in as though they had all the answers; they have to work as equals in a true democratic fashion.

Why? Can I offer a general answer to the question about how to choose among the numerous possibilities? I suppose I could try, but I don't feel the need to do so; certainly no urgency to do so. The problems are just there for all to see. And democratic societies have a right (there is a traditional ethics term, but I am not going to defend it) to expect that experts will help them, experts from all parts of academia and all the professions. I would even go so far as to say that there is at least an implicit social contract (another ethical/social/political term that I won't define here) between professionals and the democratic societies in which they live and work and get paid for their professionalism.

This may sound like rampant relativism: just get involved in any crusade you choose, as long as it "improves" society. To avoid this implication, I need again to fall back on American Pragmatism. It was the view of Dewey and Mead that there is at least one fundamental principle on which to take a stand: that improving society always means making democracy more widespread, more inclusive, inviting more groups—not fewer groups—into the public forum; elitism, "my group is better than your group," and all other such privilegings are anti-democratic. This "fundamental principle," however, is not just another academic ethics principle; it is inherent in the nature of democracy—at least as the American Pragmatists understood it. As I understand it.

I'm always happy when fellow philosophers try to provide academically respectable answers to questions of social obligation, of social contracts on the part of professionals, of the need to keep democracy open to ever wider inputs. But if we wait for them to provide such answers, it will typically be too late. Global warming proceeds apace. Loss of species diversity, of life on Earth, proceeds apace. Threats to local communities in the so-called "developing world" in the face of economic globalization proceed apace. And so on and on. These and others like them are not issues of academicism. What I have in mind are *urgent* social issues that cry out for answers *now*.

I have been accused, on these grounds, of favoring activism over principle—even of abandoning the traditional role of philosophy as theoretical discourse. But I don't mean to do that. I believe Dewey was right in opposing all dualisms, including the dualism of principle versus practice or theory versus action. I welcome academic work on my issues; I just ask academics to accept activism as a legitimate part of philosophical professionalism. The issues seem to me that important.

One final note, on the relation between these views and science, in particular the science of evolution: Mead and Dewey were writing at a time when evolution—biological evolution, social evolution, human cultural evolution—was beginning to emerge as the cultural matrix in which modern learning takes place, preeminently in universities. That it was *not* such a matrix for all led Dewey to many struggles against religious fundamentalists. But this is the one point on which I do not agree fully with Dewey: better, I think, not to fight against fundamentalism but to invite fundamentalists to find a way to fit evolution within their systems of thought.

Mead, more clearly than Dewey I think, laid the groundwork for this, when he said that any adequate account of human knowing, philosophical or scientific, must recognize it as falling within the evolutionary unfolding of the human race. In Mead's terms: "It is the technical function of philosophy to so state the universe that what we call our conscious life can be recognized as a phase of its creative advance" (*The Philosophy of the Act*, 1938, p. lxxi). Even the most traditionalist of religious philosophies ought to accept this: what we know now depends on previous knowledge of earlier communities, all the way back to the beginning. Tradition is often taken to be the enemy of science, but this need not be so.