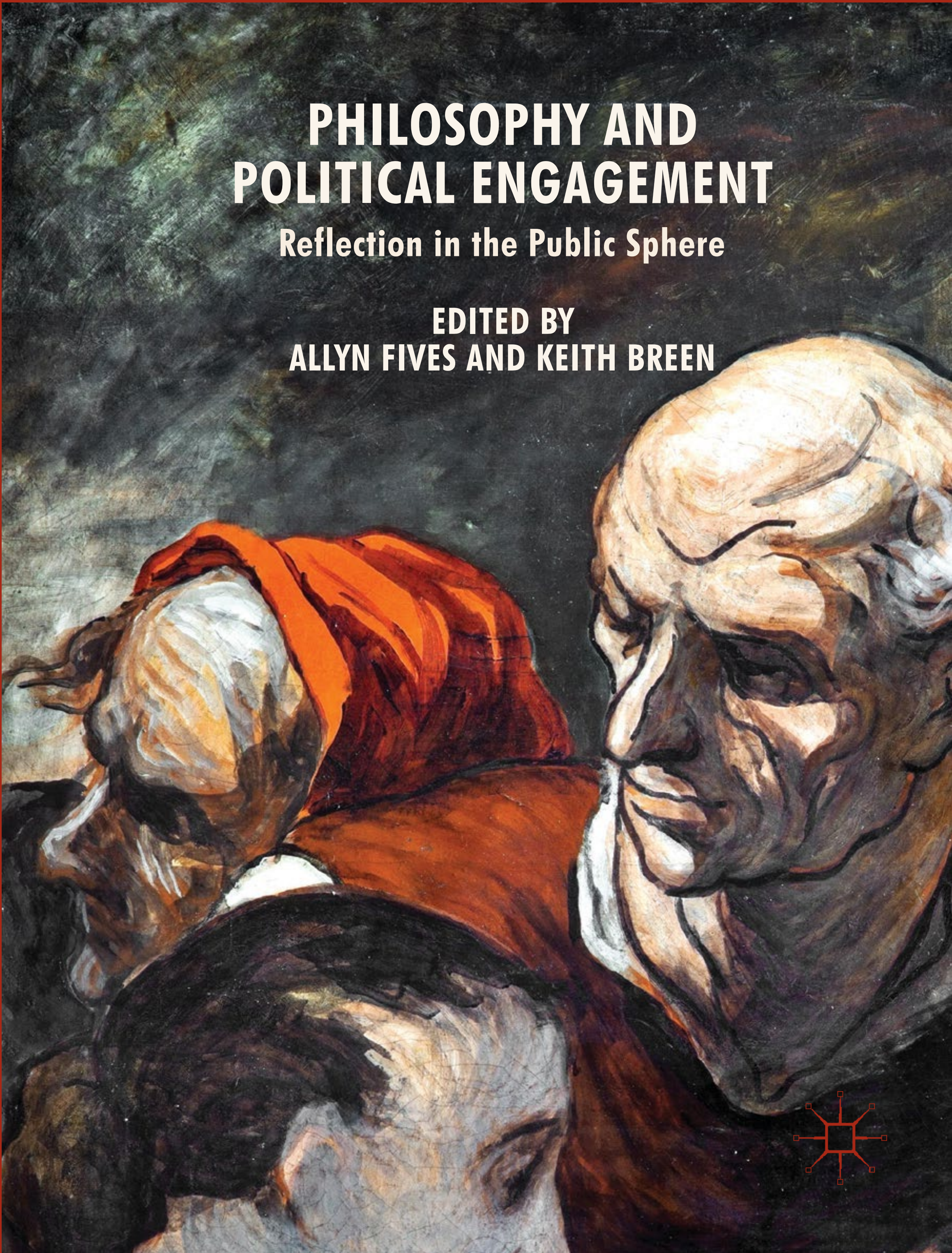
INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL THEORY

PHILOSOPHY AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Reflection in the Public Sphere

EDITED BY
ALLYN FIVES AND KEITH BREEN



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Allyn Fives • Keith Breen
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Philosophy and Political Engagement

Reflection in the Public Sphere

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This volume of essays is dedicated to Joseph Mahon, to mark his retirement from the National University of Ireland, Galway, where he taught philosophy from 1968 to 2013.

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Joseph Mahon was Lecturer in Philosophy at the National University of Ireland, Galway, Republic of Ireland, from 1968 to 2013. His research and publications have concentrated on topics in Marxism, existentialism, feminism, applied ethics, and cultural policy. In addition to numerous journal articles, critical notices, and reviews, he has published three sole-authored books: *Simone de Beauvoir and Her Catholicism* (2002), *Existentialism, Feminism, and Simone de Beauvoir* (1997), and *An Introduction to Practical Ethics* (1984). His articles have appeared in *Journal of Moral Education*, *Understanding: A Journal of Ideas*, *Irish Medical Times*, *Philosophical Studies*, *History of European Ideas*, *Journal of*

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Allyn Fives and Keith Breen

Do philosophers have a responsibility to their society that is distinct from their responsibility to it as citizens? If so, what form does this responsibility take? It has been argued by many that philosophy has a specific contribution to make to the discussion and resolution of public matters. Such a philosophical enterprise concerns itself with issues that are of a public rather than a purely private nature, or issues that have political rather than simply intellectual or academic relevance. This was the conclusion of many philosophers who began to engage in practical ethics in the 1960s and 1970s. At that time, Joseph Mahon argued that, as moral language is used in appraising everyday practices—political, legal, religious, economic, educational, and domestic—then philosophers should 'concern themselves with these practices, and make that concern primary, pervasive and lasting in their professional practice. It is good philosophical sense to do so, and, ultimately, the only professional initiative that can be justified' (Mahon 1975, pp. 10–11). The main objective of this edited volume is

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to explore both what type of contribution philosophy can make to public matters and what type of reasoning is appropriate when addressing public matters now. These questions are addressed by leading international scholars working in the fields of moral and political philosophy.

The essays in Part I of this book examine the role of philosophy in practical ethics. It is the case that many believe philosophy is ill-equipped to help address the fundamental challenges faced in contemporary democratic politics. In his introductory chapter to Part I, Allyn Fives asks whether we are caught on the horns of the following dilemma. On the one hand, to successfully engage in critical, rational analysis one must establish some distance with respect to the everyday world and its prevailing presuppositions and practices. Does it follow that philosophers will be too detached from political reality to have any appreciation of, and impact on, public matters? On the other hand, if philosophers do become engaged in practical matters, will they then lose the detachment necessary for truly general and abstract philosophical work? In the following three chapters, the role of philosophers in practical ethics is further explored. Joseph Mahon investigates the contributions of philosophers to public matters in the twentieth century and asks what this tells us about the proper role of philosophy now. He charts the course of a debate, spanning more than a century, concerning the role of philosophy in practical and applied issues, a debate marked by the prevailing influence of both J.S. Mill and Karl Marx. James E. Mahon extends this exploration, analysing the role of philosophers in debating the rights and wrongs of abortion. In particular, he considers the impact on the field of practical ethics of Judith Jarvis Thomson's seminal 1971 essay on abortion and then analyses the contrasting views of Thomson and Joseph Mahon on this important and pressing topic. In their essay, Richard Hull and Annie McKeown O'Donovan examine the case for assisted death in certain clearly defined circumstances. Through an analysis of the distinction between acts and omissions, they conclude that we should continue to question our traditional moral landscape and to encourage more action in the light of our humanitarian convictions.

The essays in Part II address the issues of ethical commitment and political engagement. Are philosophers entitled to let their ethical convictions influence their philosophical analyses of contemporary political issues? Indeed, is philosophy a barren and meaningless endeavour without such ethical commitment to provide its starting point and its parameters? Alasdair MacIntyre takes up this theme in his analysis of the works of

George Bernard Shaw and G.K. Chesterton and their public interventions on the social evil of poverty. MacIntyre asks what does it matter for society as a whole if philosophers—and, indeed, non-philosophers—no longer presuppose answers to fundamental philosophical questions, answers provided in part by Aristotelian and Thomist accounts of the human good? It is argued by many, in particular by liberals, that in our contemporary pluralist and individualist age, citizens are entitled to disagree about the bigger ethical questions that these philosophical accounts and traditions claim to answer. However, in their respective essays, Russell Keat and Keith Breen argue that ethical commitment to some account of the human good—or, more precisely, of a plurality of human goods—is unavoidable and that such ethical commitment is valuable when reflecting on the policy issues of meaningful work and the state's support for cultural goods. Returning again to the observation that we will encounter a plurality of such ethical commitments, Allyn Fives examines the role of philosophical analysis in situations where ethical principles come into conflict, focusing in particular on the longstanding debates about research ethics and the institutional review of research in universities. He argues that philosophy has a dual role, combining the abstract and general reasoning involved in theoretical analysis, on the one hand, with the practical reasoning required to work through moral conflicts, on the other.

Finally, we turn to the justification of power, as well as resistance, in Part III. What role can philosophy play in the normative justification of power relations, distinguishing legitimate from illegitimate power? Philip Pettit puts forward the case for a republican model of democracy. Pettit's argument is that such a regime is legitimate because it rests on power relations that preserve rather than hinder individual freedom, that is, relations of non-domination. However, throughout the modern period many philosophers, including Marx and his followers, have questioned the very possibility of making a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate power relations in societies structured in line with capitalist imperatives. In his essay, Allen W. Wood re-examines Karl Marx's writings on capitalism, ethics, and revolutionary activity and argues that these writings remain necessary reading for those who hope, however forlornly, for future human progress. In his contribution, John Foley adds to this theme by revisiting the debate between Albert Camus and his critics on the left, in particular Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, over whether there can ever be a justification for political violence. Exploring the phenomenon and lived experience of violence further, Felix Ó Murchadha then questions the very possibility of a philosophical examination of violence that is not itself implicated in the very violence it seeks to examine.

The themes and issues considered here are assuredly varied, highlighting different societal problems and concerns. But while varied, these highlighted problems and concerns are linked insofar as they are faced by all of us in our various roles, including our roles as (ideally) reflective persons and responsible citizens. We therefore hope that taken together the essays in this volume, in throwing light on what is required of us as reflective persons and responsible citizens, illustrate the continued relevance of philosophy as a discipline and of philosophical thought generally to everyday life and practice.

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Mahon, J. (1975). Philosophy and public matters. *Understanding*, 5, 5–11.

PART I

Practical Ethics

CHAPTER 2

The Role of Philosophy in Public Matters

Allyn Fives

This book explores the role of philosophy in public matters and poses the following question: does philosophical reflection have a public or political role and, if so, what is it? In posing this question, there are good reasons to believe we are, or appear to be, caught on the horns of a dilemma. The appearance of dilemma arises in the following way. On the one hand, the understanding that is 'distinctively philosophical' is 'general and abstract, rationally reflective, and concerned with what can be known through different kinds of inquiry' (Williams 1985, p. 1). So as to successfully engage in such critical rational analysis, one must establish some distance with respect to the everyday world and its prevailing presuppositions and practices. While there are various methodological approaches taken in philosophical reflection, common to them all is a process of disengaging from the everyday world so as to better pursue a critical rational analysis of what is taken for granted. However, to the extent that philosophy is disengaged, will it also be ill-suited to play a public or political role? Will philosophy be uninformed about practical matters or too distant from those who need to be convinced by philosophical argument, or will it lack credibility among those who are making decisions and implementing their programmes in the public sphere?

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On the other hand, some philosophers have called for a direct engagement in public matters, if philosophy is ever to be successful in attempts to persuade or actively collaborate with those who hold office, fill public roles, or agitate for public reform (Wolff 2011). However, again this seems problematic, for such direct public involvement, it can be argued, is antithetical to the philosophical disengagement required for critical rational analysis in general and also, specifically, for the impartial and dispassionate analysis of social mores and social injustices, as well as for the critique of ideology and its distorting effects on human consciousness. Can we remove ourselves from the horns of this dilemma? Is it possible to combine philosophical reflection with political engagement? Can the type of philosophical disengagement required for critical reflection somehow be made compatible with active involvement in public matters?

The contributors to this volume endeavour to answer questions of this sort, and each attempts to demonstrate how philosophy can engage with public matters. In doing so, the contributors are continuing a tradition of philosophical engagement with public matters that is, in one sense, as old as philosophy itself. It is a tradition that can be traced from classical Athens right up to revolutionary and reformist writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and beyond. However, we can only undertake politically engaged philosophy if we take into consideration why many philosophers rejected such a project during the last century. It was argued that while philosophical reflection can help improve the concepts used in public debate, it is singularly ill-suited to play any role in resolving the substantive issues raised in such debates. What is more, it was argued, when philosophers stray beyond these limits, they are prone to make meaningless statements (philosophical nonsense) and also to promote a political environment hostile to critical rational enquiry.

In this chapter, I will first outline the reasons why many philosophers argued that they had only a restricted role in public matters. I will then look at subsequent efforts to expand that role. First, many philosophers began to make substantive normative arguments, promoting a particular type of society or a particular resolution to one of society's problems. And, second, some philosophers left the campus behind, entered the public arena, and tried to sway and influence people and events, whether as public commentators or as members of committees. Two themes will be central to this discussion. Because of the diversity of philosophical doctrines, there is no one distinctively philosophical approach to public matters, and philosophers employ different and perhaps incompatible methodological approaches.

Second, there is a diversity of moral considerations appropriate to public matters, and it is possible for these to come into conflict in any one instance. Given the diversity of methods and the possibility for moral conflict, how can philosophers engage in public matters in a way that is meaningful?

1 Philosophy as Conceptual Improvement

As we have seen already, for one school of thought philosophy should play only a limited role in public matters. I want to draw attention to two versions of this argument. The first, and perhaps the more extreme, derives from the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein and A.J. Ayer. They make a distinction between ethics, on the one hand, and science and philosophy, on the other. In his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), Wittgenstein concluded by stating that 'What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence' (1921, § 7, p. 89). While the propositions of mathematics and the empirical sciences can convey definite cognitive information, ethical and moral statements cannot. Therefore, 'it is clear that ethics cannot be put into words' (1921, § 6.42, p. 86).

A similar distinction is made in A.J. Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* (1946). It was an overriding aim of that book to identify and reject what Ayer referred to as 'metaphysical nonsense':

> For we shall maintain that no statement which refers to a 'reality' transcending the limits of all sense-experience can possibly have any literal significance; from which it must follow that the labours of those who have striven to describe such a reality have all been devoted to the production of nonsense (Ayer 1946, p. 34).

Ayer argued that a proposition is meaningful, if and only if, it can be empirically *verified*, whether directly through observations or indirectly based in part on observations and also analytic statements (Ayer 1946, p. 13). In contrast, many statements made about moral and ethical issues cannot be empirically verified and therefore, he believed, are nonsense.

There are good reasons to question the assumptions of Ayer and other logical positivists, in particular the view that meaningful statements are those that can be empirically *verified*. For example, Karl Popper attempted to show that empirical science does not progress through efforts to verify statements, but rather through efforts to show that a null hypothesis can be *falsified* or *refuted* (Popper 1963, p. 51). Indeed, by

1959 Ayer conceded it was no longer possible to maintain his distinction between meaningful statements and metaphysical nonsense (Ayer 1959, pp. 15–16).

Others who are broadly sympathetic with the idea that philosophy should play a minor role in public matters do not rest this argument on an account of metaphysical nonsense. They believe philosophy can play a role in our reflection on ethical matters, although this is the limited role of conceptual improvement. This argument is based on a metaethical account of what we are doing when we make moral judgements. It is argued, the improvement of concepts is pursued 'in the interests of clarity and coherence … Coherence means either consistency or, more strongly, positive logical connection; and clarity is an aid to understanding and to the avoidance of intellectual confusion' (Raphael 1970, p. 20). Philosophy cannot and therefore should not attempt to go on to play the further role of 'critical evaluation of beliefs'; that is, 'the attempt to give rational grounds for accepting or rejecting beliefs which we normally take for granted' (Raphael 1970, p. 4). Thus, philosophy can play a *negative* role with respect to our moral beliefs, as conceptual analysis can show if beliefs are based on logical incoherence and/or lack of clarity; but philosophy cannot go on to play a *positive* role and identify what moral beliefs are valid or should be accepted.

It is assumed that philosophy cannot play this second, broader, role because of a particular metaethical view of moral judgement. For emotivists, when we use moral language, we express attitudes (Stevenson 1944; Hudson 1983 [1970]). For instance, when people conclude that poverty is an injustice, they are expressing their disapproval of poverty and the social, economic, and political contexts in which it arises. Those who, in contrast, believe that poverty is unfortunate, but that its presence is not sufficient evidence of injustice, are also expressing an attitude. Because competing views in public debates are based in large part on different and incompatible attitudes, philosophy cannot tell us which of the competing ethical views is correct. Philosophy can tell us if a moral judgement is based on conceptual confusion, because this is a matter of philosophical analysis, but it cannot tell us if the attitudes expressed in a moral judgement are correct, because attitudes cannot be either correct or incorrect.

What are the considerations motivating this approach to philosophy? This approach goes back to David Hume's distinction between the two sources of knowledge, what is now referred to as 'Hume's fork' (Hudson 1983 [1970]). For Hume, we can have knowledge through empirical observation and experience and also through logical analysis, but we cannot have knowledge of what is, morally speaking, right and wrong, as this instead is a matter of the *passions*. In moral matters, reason does play a role, but it is a secondary, supportive role to the passions: 'Reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions' (Hume 1969 [1739–1740], Book 2, Part III, § 3, p. 462). Morality does not consist *merely* in a matter of fact or in rational principles (Hume 1969 [1739–1740], Book 3, Part I, §1, p. 521). Rather, it is a matter of sentiment, disapprobation or approbation, and it is an object of feeling, not an object of thought.

What we have said so far about emotivists is based on a distinction between different facets of moral judgements, namely, the parts that are and are not susceptible to rational analysis. On the basis of this distinction, emotivists do not contend that normative judgements fall outside the category of statements that are meaningful, unlike Ayer and Wittgenstein. Rather, they argue that in making moral judgements there is some non-rational remainder, that is, the expression of an attitude that cannot itself be given a rational justification. We can rationally analyse the logical consistency of a judgement and we can rationally analyse the beliefs a person has about a state of affairs, but a person's attitudes cannot be either rational or irrational (Stevenson 1944). Many may agree there is a non-rational remainder in moral judgement, but the real issue here is where that line should be drawn. While some conclude that only a narrow sphere of moral judgement is susceptible to rational analysis, others conclude that the sphere of reason is broader, and the majority of the contributors to this volume take the latter view.

Ayer's distinction between meaningful statements and metaphysical nonsense is unhelpful now, as it simply categorizes normative judgements as meaningless. Nonetheless, rational argumentation presupposes a distinction between statements that can and cannot be rationally justified, and in practice, some normative judgements will fall on the wrong side of this dividing line. What we can say is that the statements of philosophy should be meaningful, including philosophical statements about substantive normative issues, and that philosophy is a rational enterprise, whatever way we construe the term *rational*. Therefore, in principle, it must be possible to offer rational considerations in support of philosophical statements, as well as rational considerations that could cast doubt on philosophical statements. If we accept these basic assumptions, then we can say that *statements are not meaningful when no rational considerations can be offered to support or to cast doubt on them*. We will return to this below.

2 Political Legitimacy

I turn now from the question of the proper limits of philosophy to the question of political legitimacy. I will not be able to address the very important question of what makes power legitimate, a question addressed in particular by republican theorists such as Philip Pettit (see Chap. 10). Instead, I want to explore whether there is a connection—and, if so, what type of connection—between the type of philosophical engagement in public matters, on the one hand, and the type of political regime in existence, on the other. The implication of what we have said so far is that some of the statements made by philosophers about moral issues may not be meaningful, and also that philosophers may be unaware that what they have stated cannot be supported by or called into question by rational considerations. Is there some necessary connection between such meaningless engagement by philosophers and a politics that suppresses, rather than fosters, critical engagement in public matters?

We could proceed here by way of examples, both that of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Firstly, Jonathan Glover has drawn a connection between Martin Heidegger's approach to philosophical reflection and the totalitarian politics of the regime he gave support to. Heidegger's real crime, Glover concludes,

> is about undermining philosophy's role in developing a climate of critical thought. His books are an embodiment of the idea that philosophy is an impenetrable fog, in which ideas not clearly understood have to be taken on trust … Deference is encouraged by having to take it on trust that the obscure means something important (Glover 2001, pp. 375–376).

Glover quotes a long segment from Heidegger's *Being and Time* that, Glover argues, represents Heidegger's trademark 'inarticulate complexity' and 'blurred' thinking. Glover also believes that Heidegger's approach to philosophy had a parallel in the political statements he made. Just as Heidegger believed we should defer to tradition in our thought, in politics he called for deference to authority, rather than a rational justification of the authority of the state: 'Let not propositions and "ideas" be the rules of your Being. The Fuhrer alone is the present and the future German reality and its law' (Heidegger, quoted in Glover 2001, p. 369).

However, there is another way to interpret the example of Heidegger. His was an effort to rehabilitate prejudice, that is, to reject the supremacy of reason in Enlightenment thought and instead to affirm the supremacy of presuppositions that are not themselves justified by reason (Gadamer 1989 [1975]). In addition, his work can be seen as a radical or extreme form of scepticism and as an alternative to both totalitarian and liberal-democratic politics. While the Nazis were guilty of a form of violence that led to an aestheticization or eroticization of violence, violence as an end in itself, liberal democrats are guilty of a different type of violence, one that forces reality to conform to a universal conceptual system. What lies between these two extremes is a type of philosophical engagement, one derived from the work of Heidegger and others, including Derrida, 'in which boundaries are destroyed', as suggested by Ó Murchadha, 'in order to interrupt and suspend norms, set aside boundaries, and release self and other to the vulnerability of their own being' (see Chap. 13).

A second example is the justifications offered for various forms of Marxist communism. In many instances, they were not meaningful, in the sense I have used here, as no rational considerations could be offered to support or to cast doubt on them. For example, G.A. Cohen had once believed that Marxist communism was justified by any and all moral considerations, and therefore objections to socialism must be based on an undisclosed class interest of those making the objections (Cohen 1995, pp. 5–6). Although Cohen came to realize that he had been mistaken to take this view, his original position was that it was unnecessary and pointless to offer rational justifications for the Marxist view of communism. What are the political implications of such an approach to philosophy? One possible implication is a regime that forbids and crushes dissent because, it is claimed, all such dissent is based on overt or covert class interest. For instance, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was imprisoned in a labour camp (*Gulag*) for the reason that his private letters were found to contain statements critical of Stalin's rule. Although later, during the Khrushchev era, Solzhenitsyn did publish an account of his time in the Gulag in the November 1961 issue of *Novy Mir*, he was prevented from publishing further accounts of his experiences, in the *Gulag* and internal exile, and was forced into exile abroad as a dissident (Solzhenitsyn 1973; Thomas 1999).

Solzhenitsyn is rightly seen as an individual possessing many of the virtues required of a public intellectual, not least, commitment to disclosing the wrongs done on behalf of a regime. But the example leaves many questions unanswered. First, it does not establish definitively that revolutionary regimes lack legitimacy or that philosophers should not support revolutionary movements. Although Albert Camus, among others,