

## THE PHILOSOPHER AS AN INTELLECTUAL

- Syed Sayeed\*

### I

Without going too much into the conceptions of the intellectual, let me just state that in my view, in a contemporary democratic society (since that is what I assume we are concerned about), an intellectual is anyone who thinks on behalf of others about public affairs and issues of common or collective interest, and/or helps others engage in such thinking themselves. In what follows I shall essentially elaborate on the different elements and tacit assumptions of this loosely textured statement. Of course, even after all the implications and assumptions are clarified, still some imprecision will remain, but that is because the concept of the intellectual is like those concepts with an inbuilt denotative imprecision such as the concept of a crowd or a heap.

In all ages, everywhere, there have been brave souls with exemplary courage of conviction who stood for truth and were willing to make great sacrifices for that truth. The truths they were anxious to uphold and express were sometimes to do with the life of the community or the individual, or sometimes about the universe or some abstract matter, but inasmuch as they stood for not just the truths they believed in but for the right of the individual to publicly hold and express such truths, the central issue concerned public space. In this sense, all such individuals can be regarded as intellectuals. However, and even keeping the caveat I made above regarding the in-built fuzzy boundaries of this concept, to include all those remarkable individuals into a notion of the intellectual that would be relevant to us, would be misleading and somewhat pointless. It is best, therefore, to delimit the concept of the intellectual and concede that intellectuals did not exist in all ages. The social, economic and political conditions of the possibility and the desirability of the intellectual were found only in few ages. In saying this, we are not saying that individuals with courage of conviction or concern for the public good did not exist. As I said just a while ago, they did, but when we

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speaking about intellectuals we have something more in mind. In trying to articulate that factor we run into a paradox. The intellectual must constitute an institution. Yet the intellectual cannot be institutionalised. In fact, it is part of being the intellectual that she must resist institutionalisation. An institutionalised intellectual is a compromised intellectual and in effect no intellectual. Explicitly or implicitly a society must acknowledge such a thing as an intellectual. Unless a society recognises the category of ‘intellectual’, it is difficult to say that intellectuals existed in that society, since the relationship between the intellectuals and the society is a reflective, purposive relationship based on recognition and consent, though the consent has an agonistic structure. We shall pursue this issue presently. To proceed with the immediate question, we must acknowledge that the intellectual is possible only in a kind of society where there is a public sphere. This is true to the extent that the two terms in the above statement can be regarded as mutually dependent. This is not as mysterious as Continental philosophy makes it sound.

Thanks to the fact that physics constituted the wave front of modern science, we have come to take the isolability of things for granted. We do not realise that nothing in fact exists in isolation. An isolated thing is an abstraction. Since physics is largely concerned—subatomic physics being an exception—with the isolable states or aspects of things, the fallacy that things exist in isolation and they can be properly studied in isolation is reinforced. As A.N. Whitehead pointed out, had biology advanced ahead of physics many of our ontological, epistemological notions would have been very different. The truth is that the proper unit of existence is not a thing but a thing in its environment. To put it more precisely, a thing must be seen as existing at the centre of concentric circles of environments (that are mutually interactive, but we can bracket that complication here). Speaking of intellectuals, this anti-institutional institution became possible only with the coming into being of a certain structure of public sphere. Let me simplistically call it the space of democratic spirit. I use the term ‘democratic spirit’ advisedly. When we speak of democracy and ask as to its essence, we tend to speak either in terms of its procedures and institutions or in terms of the idea of participation. However, I think the essence of democracy lies at a more fundamental level: the level of certain normative axioms about autonomy. How the axioms find manifestation, through what procedures and through what modalities of participation is secondary. Democracy therefore is essentially a matter of faith in the dogma (along with subsidiary axioms about fundamental rights) that every individual and any non-majoritarian<sup>1</sup> collective consisting of individuals has an inalienable right to determine their destiny.<sup>2</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup>Majoritarianism is intrinsically anti-individualistic and therefore fundamentally incompatible with democracy.

<sup>2</sup>That they should exercise that right in such a way that their decisions should not undermine the very axiom at some level or some stage, is naturally part of the idea.

intellectual has place only in such a social structure or rather only in the interstices of such a social structure. What this means is that for intellectuals to exist there has to be democracy not in the sense that there should be democratic institutions but in the sense that the democratic spirit should be conceivable. The intellectual represents the democratic spirit even in a non-democratic space. She embodies the idea that an individual—any individual—has the right to decide how to live and to determine the conditions under which she will live and that she requires no permission or granted privilege to publicly assert and argue for that right. However, for various reasons of essentially trivial historical contingency, the idea of an intellectual has come to be associated with great knowledge, wisdom, a special understanding of public affairs and some unique gift to articulate that understanding and so on, as a result of which intellectuals have come to be regarded as a special sort of elite, superior creatures with special skills and virtues. As I indicated above, I wish to suggest that while a certain class (in the logical sense) of people may have performed the intellectual function<sup>3</sup> in recent times, we must not let that mislead us into identifying the function itself with them. The essence of that function lies in what I described at the beginning as thinking for others.

This idea begins to more sense when we realise the generic nature of the intellectual function. By ‘generic’ here I mean social functions seen not in terms of specific jobs or professions or designations in terms of the fundamental activity they perform or the purpose they are supposed to meet. This would mean speaking of, for instance, a manual labourer, an artisan, a performer, an entertainer, a teacher, a healer, a priest/counsellor, a soldier and so on. An artisan might be a carpenter, gardener, smith or potter. The teaching function, to take another example may be discharged in a variety of conditions, at different levels, and may be described in different terms that we may forget that they are all performing the activity of teaching. A nurse, a paramedic, an ambulance attendant or doctor all may be performing or be involved in the performance of the healing function. There are of course no definable or always easily recognizable functions and also there are contemporary professions or jobs that are combinations of two or more fundamental functions, but still, of any profession whatsoever, we can ask about its place under the rubric of a generic activity, and sometimes it is useful to focus on the latter.

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<sup>3</sup>I do not know of any suitable term to denote the function of the intellectual. Since this idea is important for my purposes as I argue that we must understand the intellectual in terms of function rather than skills and abilities, I have found it necessary to adapt the admittedly misleading term ‘intellectual function’ to denote the essential function of the intellectual.

I think that we can understand the idea of the intellectual better if we look at it in terms of the fundamental social function discharged by the intellectual. To put it quite simply, in societies where the democratic impulse is a significant factor, there is a basic social function that comprises the facilitation and articulation of critical understanding. Whosoever discharges this function is an intellectual. There may be different kinds of intellectuals, belonging to different fields, there may be different levels of intellectuals in terms of the quality and magnitude and sophistication of their intellect, but they are in the business of performing a certain kind of function that we refer to as the task of the intellectual. The next question is who appoints, selects or designates the intellectual and on what basis?

There are two different kinds of social roles (understood in a very broad sense to include tasks, functions, responsibilities, etc.). Some social roles are primarily defined by the skills and capabilities or other kind of eligibilities of a person and putting them to the service of society. On the other hand there are social roles which are primarily defined in terms of the duties they involve. There is also the fact that sometimes it is possible to look at a particular social role from the vantage points of duties and obligations. From which vantage point we look at a certain role or function is not trivial, for the essence of that function, its *telos* may lie in one or the other aspect. Where the essence lies in the nature of the obligations defining a certain function, this kind of distinction becomes all the more important. To put it simply and conscious of the several ways this can be misunderstood, we can say that the carpenter or the aircraft pilot is *primarily* defined in terms of his skills whereas a soldier or a policewoman is primarily defined in terms of her duties. It is, as I conceded, a matter of focus or emphasis but it has some significant implications. A soldier for instance, must have some requisite qualities and skills in order to be a soldier. However, he is not just someone who can fight, he is someone who (not speaking of mercenaries) has accepted the obligation to fight for his people or his country. Or better still, consider the example of a doctor. A doctor is one who is trained to heal, who has the capability to heal. But we also expect him to perceive himself as one whose duty it is to heal. The reason why this dual way of looking at social functions does not generally come into focus is that in a particular context only one of the two aspects tends be pertinent. But sometimes, the relation between capabilities and obligations is fundamental and the two aspects are very integral. This is conspicuously so in the case of the doctor. A firm relation between skills and duties in this case is established by the Hippocratic Oath. It would be safe to say that Hippocrates would have frowned on the notion of a ‘non-practising physician’ in the strict sense of the term, in the sense of someone who refused to treat a patient (in appropriate conditions) on the grounds that he is no longer practising medicine or that he is at that moment off duty. Hippocrates would have probably said—which is another way of saying that this seems to be the spirit of the oath— that

wherever there is illness and ameliorable physical suffering, the physician's duty comes into play. In other words, the broad presupposition is that at least in certain cases, capabilities entail obligations *without choice*, that certain abilities unconditionally imply commensurate duties. Now, the ethical basis of this is not—although it can be—the point that since society has invested in the acquisition of those capabilities, it has a right to expect an exercise of those capabilities in its service. For that matter, there may be skills in the acquisition of which society has played no role. Rather the ethical basis here lies in the very idea that just as there are rights that follows from the fact that one is a human being or even a sentient being, there are obligations that follow from the fact that one is a sentient being, and that these obligations derive content from our situatedness with regard to who needs our help and to what extent we are in a position to help. This is the spirit—to come closer to the topic at hand—of the general dictum that it is as wrong to be mute witnesses to oppression as to inflict it or be complicit in it.

It must be fairly clear what I am trying to say. My point is that the notion of the intellectual has been distorted because we have been looking at it too much in terms of what are imagined to be its requisite capabilities and qualifications. Most of the debates about who is an intellectual or what kind of entity is the intellectual, have tended to centre on which kinds of capabilities lend themselves to or are essential for the intellectual function. I am suggesting that it makes much more sense to ask 'what is the obligation of an intellectual?' rather than 'what are her qualifications?'. Let me clarify that I am not suggesting that we first identify the intellectual and then ask what is expected of him. Rather I am saying that we must *define* an intellectual in terms of the commensurate obligations than in terms of what are perceived to be the requisite abilities. However, let me add that my suggestion is not just a matter of greater heuristic economy. I believe that normatively that is how we must now construe the intellectual and that this is an important strand in the broader effort to make democracy substantive and meaningful.

To recapitulate and add a few points in the process— an Intellectual, in this sense, is not someone with some qualities or abilities. 'Intellectual' is the name of a relation—the relation between an individual and a certain social space; it is the name of a function—a function that I described in terms of thinking and articulating for the collective; but most centrally, of an obligation—to restore to the powerless power over their own destinies through one's ability, such as it is, to know, understand and express. In other words, to apply

Gandhiji's famous talisman at the level of one's mental abilities.<sup>4</sup> If I may repeat myself for the sake of emphasis, the constitutive obligation of the intellectual consists of a two-fold task: to critically think about matters of public relevance<sup>5</sup> on behalf of society and to strive to enhance the ability of other members of society, individually or collectively, to think critically.<sup>6</sup> I shall try to say more about what I mean by thinking critically in this context. The relevant point right now is that if we look at the intellectual in this way, we can see that a number of significant things follow.

Firstly, it follows that anybody or everybody (the latter in a democracy in particular, but we agreed that that is what we really are concerned with) is an intellectual. There are no qualifications for being an intellectual. And insofar as one employs one's primary skills or capabilities related to one's primary social function in his performance of his intellectual function, one uses them at the generic level. That is to say, if I am a healer, it is the skills of a healer that I bring to bear in my intellectual function, not my skills as a cardiac surgeon or nephrologist. More pertinently, if I am a physicist, it is as a scientist that I contribute to the intellectual function. I will point out the importance of this aspect later on, but of immediate relevance is the point that the presence or absence of a certain minimum amount of skill or competence as a significant factor in the performance of the intellectual function should be treated as strictly irrelevant. To emphasise, it is dangerous to deny any one at all the possible role of the intellectual. Democracy, if it is not to be reduced to a façade over the substantive reality of bureaucratic oligarchy, must assume that every single citizen understands the meaning of justice and truth, of duty and the right to what one might call the sacredness of life, from which it follows that in principle every citizen, no matter how 'unintelligent', 'ignorant' or 'uneducated', has the right to critique institutions which are meant to be the instruments of these values. Assuming intellectual honesty and related virtues—without which assumption, the very idea of an intellectual in any case becomes meaningless—competence becomes a relative matter, it becomes a matter of intellectual gradient. That is to say, if I am even infinitesimally better informed than the others around me or have even a slightly better understanding of the issue than they, it is my obligation to enable them with the help of my knowledge and

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<sup>4</sup> To state in his terms, 'to restore the weakest to a control over their own life and destiny'.

<sup>5</sup> For this reason, I find the term 'public intellectual', although it is established in common usage, something of a pleonasm. If a distinction of this sort is to be made, I think the distinction between a private thinker and the public thinker would more useful. The public thinker asks, 'what is a good society?' whereas a private thinker asks, 'what is a good (individual) life?'. This is not to say that they are asking unrelated questions. It is a matter of point of departure. Both questions, along with some others, eventually fuse into the larger question of our place in the universe.

<sup>6</sup> Inasmuch as this is the primary task of philosophy, it implies that philosophical education is an extension of the intellectual function. In other words, in the teaching of philosophy, even in an institutional set up, the philosopher is discharging the duty of the intellectual. This in turn implies that the philosopher is quintessentially the intellectual. To say this is not to claim a privilege but to acknowledge the stringency of the obligation.

understanding to take the right decisions, and if a public articulation of the matter is necessary for achieving the objective, to muster the courage for it.<sup>7</sup>

The second thing that follows is that everyone ought to be an intellectual. Or to put it in the terms I have suggested above, everybody ought to be willing to perform the service of—to coin a phrase—intellectuality. Now, what I just said may seem to reduce the question of the intellectual to a potentiality. It may be argued that realistically one must discuss who actually is to be an active intellectual. It is one thing to say that the intellectual function is part of one's right and duty as a citizen, and quite another to talk about who should be entrusted with this function in a salient way. It is a well taken point. My anxiety, however, is to point out that the idea of a full-time intellectual is a dangerous idea. It makes the intellectual a professional and institutionalises the function. And to institutionalise the intellectual function is to basically destroy it. We must understand that the task of the intellectual is in a very significant sense subversive. That crucial aspect cannot be preserved when we introduce intellectuals who perform their task as their primary function. To opt for a full-time, professional intellectual is to entrust the Socratic function to the Sophist. The question then is, on whom is the intellectual obligation incumbent? Is the intellectual chosen, appointed, identified in some way? Does someone appoint or identify her? The answer at one level, as I have already hinted, is that everybody who can understand this question about intellectual obligation is under that obligation. This is simply a corollary of the general rule that in some cases, to be aware of the nature of a moral obligation is, as such, to be a fit agent for that moral obligation. More generally we might even say that to be aware of moral sense is already to accept the obligations that follow. More specifically in this context, it is the application of the maxim that being situated in a certain way, without further stipulation, places you under certain obligations. If you are the only passer-by at the site of a just occurred road accident, regardless of anything else (unless you have to be at some other place immediately in order to avert a greater tragedy) you are the one to stop and assist. The situation chooses you; that's all. In other words, every thinking person must perform the task of the intellectual for those who are not able to think for themselves adequately or as required in that situation. But the critic might say, all this is very well but the question of who should be expected to be proactive in the performance of the intellectual function remains unanswered. The answer, I

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<sup>7</sup>Needless to say, as Aristotle rightly pointed out, the primary virtue here as anywhere else is courage in whose absence all other virtues become vacuous. There is no other way but to assume the indispensability of courage in the function of the intellectual, and put it beyond the pale of discussion as a necessary, non-negotiable factor, no matter how difficult it may be in practice to implement it.

would say, is obvious enough. If, cautious of all the insidious implications of the social structure depicted in Plato's *Republic*, we take the broad division of social functions outlined there, the answer is that all mental workers, all those whose engagements occur in the cognitive domain, that is to say all scientists, social scientists, philosophers and scholars of the Humanities as well as creative artists, writers and policy makers are all under greater obligation than others to discharge the intellectual function. This answer is definitely not novel and it may seem to be contrary to the notion of the intellectual function I have been trying to present here. But I do not think so. For my point has been that these classes of people are not to be treated as having exclusive (or not) right to perform the intellectual function. They only have a greater obligation to attend to that function. Their cognitive skills—understood in a broad sense—place them under that extra obligation. In other words, going by the maxim I stated earlier, the extent of one's intellectual obligation is in proportion to the extent to which one's primary social function and its attendant capabilities lend themselves to the intellectual function.

Now I think we can proceed to the next question of what precisely is the nature of this thinking for others? At least part of the answer, I believe, can be inferred from Kant's notion of 'private reason' articulated in his celebrated essay 'What is Enlightenment?'. As Kant says, while we must follow the existing rules and norms in our respective social roles, we reserve the right to interrogate those (or any other) rules, norms, institutions and practices in our personal capacity rational agents and citizens. It follows that if one's critique of the existing frameworks is indeed in collective interest and is in consonance with what one perceives as justice and compassion, to engage in such criticism is not just a matter of private right but (at another level) a matter of public duty. To play the role of the intellectual is to perform this duty to the best of one's abilities and also to create, and promote the conditions in which it is possible to engage in such criticism. The latter, as I pointed out earlier, includes the duty to help others to cultivate the ability to engage in such critique.

In parenthesis, but not without relevance, we must note that regarding the question of thinking for others, there have been anxieties about the problems of representation, captured, among other places, in the discourse of Deleuze and Foucault with the phrase 'the indignity of speaking of others'. This anxiety comes from a certain understanding of 'representation'. According to this interpretation, representation involves substitution which in turn implies displacement. From this comes the worry about someone standing outside the (cultural, economic, political and experiential etc.) situation and presuming the authority to speak for those in that situation. As such this is a well-founded worry. However, there are two aspects to this anxiety which make it somewhat unbalanced. First, there is an exaggerated emphasis on experience that almost



contemptuously rejects any status to empathy. No one would deny that experience, in particular the experience of suffering, should be treated as irreplaceable. The interiority of suffering is absolute. This however does not mean that we should be cynically suspicious of the capacity of the other to empathise and understand. Secondly, experience in itself does not provide authority to speak on the suffering, in the sense that while I alone can speak on the intensity of my suffering, I may not understand the structure of my suffering, its reasons and causes. Therefore, while humility towards the lonely interiority of someone's suffering is quite appropriate, it is not very helpful from a practical, ameliorative point of view to glorify the privacy of suffering and celebrate its inaccessibility. No human community can survive without the assumption that while we can never experience the other's suffering, we can understand it. As an aside, if I may be allowed, I feel that the contemporary intellectual or at any rate the contemporary theorist takes pride in this sort of modesty sometimes indistinguishable from a self-lacerating sense of guilt at not being the subject of the experience of the other. I think, at the intellectual level, this attitude is the product of a rejection of what were perceived as reformist moves from hegemonic positions. Ranging from the critique of Enlightenment to postcolonial theory, feminism and caste related discourses, there is an intellectual trend that is grounded in the perception that the more powerful other has tried to guide and improve the supposed subjects in need of help and progress, and that these moves, no matter how well-meaning, are ultimately a part of the hegemonic apparatus, are indicative of the arrogance of the other, his analysis is wrong and his help is humiliating and even harmful since it seeks to perpetuate the heteronomy. However, while this attitude and the discourses that have crystallised from it have performed a significant corrective function, one must ask if the tendency to make this attitude totalising and trying to extend it to all situations micro or macro, is not counter-productive. If we want to preserve the space for the intellectual function in any fashion at all, we must moderate our stance in this matter. Otherwise, if we persist with the notions of exclusive moral authority or ownership of the right to speak on the basis of the being of suffering subjects, it will result in a fundamental rejection of representation altogether that in turn implies the rejection of the very possibility of communication (there are theorists who seem to have no problem in embracing this option but right now I do not wish to talk about theorists who are not interested in the practical consequences of their ultra-sophisticated theory). As I said above, the denial of even a minimal status to empathy as a basis of understanding in some of these discourses of suspicion not only tends towards a narrow positivism but in the end involves the kind of contradictions that lead generally to cognitive and normative solipsism.

More pertinently, however, as I shall point out, from the vantage point of the conception of the role of the intellectual I am trying to present here, these anxieties are somewhat misguided for another reason as well, since the function of the intellectual is that of thinking in the sense of critical understanding and *not of defending a position or taking a decision*. A critique of course involves a standpoint but the kind of thinking I am talking about involves a relentless openness to the fallibility, the questionability of all assumptions. To speak for others in the sense of questioning on behalf of others is not the same as *deciding* for others. I hope to further clarify this point when I discuss the distinction between knowledge and understanding, but at this point I would like to state my view briefly. This view is basically an adaptation of Karl Popper's idea of the principle of rationality. From this viewpoint, the task of the intellectual consists of an application of the rationality principle, to see how and how far a claim, assertion or belief fails to justify itself through whatever coherent mechanisms of justification, and help those concerned understand that deficit. Popper and Foucault would be in agreement on one fundamental point: the idea of a universal intellectual who is an omniscient sage in possession of final (and therefore eternal) truths, and is thereby in a position to tell others what constitutes their happiness, and who therefore can be allowed his authority to tell everybody how to live. One cannot agree more with this view. However, this figure of the universal intellectual comes from a totally false caricature of the function of the philosopher. Too long it has been held that the philosopher claims to have special access to truth, that he claims to be the master of the discourse of truth and that these claims need to be debunked. Derrida among others spent some of his exuberant energy on this project. But the fact of the matter is that this is just not true. Only a very careless and partial reading of the history of philosophy can give such an impression. Even the much maligned project of metaphysics is not about final or eternal truths. Even taking a vulgar view of metaphysics, a view on ultimate reality is not necessarily an exclusive claim to truth. In our present context, suffice it to note that the intellectual's legitimate function is to critique and not to proffer positive views or positions. This itself does not make the activity fool-proof. Other safeguards would be needed. But first of all we must get the nature of the intellectual's task right.

To return to the other aspect of the issue, what is the kind of thinking required by the intellectual function? As I have tried to suggest above, my answer to this question is that the intellectual function is *not* about offering expert knowledge to the community. It is a matter of the use of one's *good sense* in the public sphere on behalf of those who are victims of the asymmetries of social structures. However, good sense as I understand the term is not an immutable, innate faculty. Our good sense evolves, is honed and refined and given focus through our personal and professional activities. In other words, one's good sense is informed and circumscribed by one's training, experience and one's personal and professional preoccupations.

Therefore, if one is to use one's own good sense efficiently to help others understand and decide, one must do it through the frameworks of one's primary activities. That means that one's intellectual activity must consist of the extension and application of (the good sense of) one's core competence for intervention in public affairs. This view is broadly in consonance with the views of such diverse thinkers as Foucault and Chomsky. The only thing I am anxious to emphasise is that in the performance of her function, the intellectual is not supposed to bring into play her expert knowledge as much as her good sense informed by her expertise or the good sense characterised by her field of knowledge. This caveat is important because democracy should not be diluted through recourse to dependence on experts *qua* experts. If we allow the intellectual's specific capabilities as such to be the main strand of the intellectual function, we will be making the intellectual an expert, and the expert *qua* expert as the intellectual, that too regardless of her stance towards power. There is no more certain way of jeopardising the very fabric of democracy. Further, in our anxiety to escape the universal intellectual, we must not misconstrue the structure of the specific intellectual. We must realise that our specific skills and jobs allow their extension towards the intellectual function, but the impulse and the rationale of that function cannot be provided by those capabilities. To use the Kantian terms, there is nothing as such in private reason to prompt me towards public reason. The impetus for it must come from elsewhere. That place from where that impetus comes is precisely our universal notions of truth, justice, duty and freedom. One of the reasons for my introducing the notion of generic functions is that I am inclined to think that the bridge between these two domains can be facilitated by looking at the matter in terms of generic capabilities and functions, since they situate one's activities in the frame of the general good, however varied may be the ideals that inform the particular conceptions of the general good. Unless the individual can think in terms of the generic nature of his primary social role and related competencies, he will neither find any reason to nor will be meaningfully able to extend his knowledge or understanding to the intellectual task. If we look at the intellectual function in these terms, it will become clear that the specific must embrace the universal in order to even *conceive* let alone perform the intellectual function. I can ask about the truth or justice of something only when I can see it in terms of the generic organisation of society. To invoke Kant's idea of public reason again, it is not possible to exercise public reason without invoking *some* universal categories. What is of course dangerous and deserves to be criticised is the notion of someone who is supposed to have the exclusive competence of judging truth and justice.<sup>8</sup> But this too is actually based on a

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<sup>8</sup>We may note, as Derrida pointed out in his essay 'Before the Law', that expertise in law is not the same as expertise in justice. Claims of core competence in law are unexceptionable. What should be strictly rejected are claims to privileged competence in

misunderstanding of the role of philosophy and its ambitions in relation to the question of truth to which I have already referred. At this point, what I would like to emphasise is that strictly speaking, there is no way that an individual can remain at the level of specific knowledge and competence and perform the function of the intellectual. She must first of all look at her own field in terms of its generic function, its fundamental virtue (in the Socratic sense of the term) and use it as a basis and also as a perspective to critique what she perceives as the wrongs committed in the exercises of power. *To be an intellectual is, to a certain extent, to accept the obligation to see things at the universal level.* A normative relativism of the kind that Foucault would favour and the anxieties that entail from it with regard to a possibly hegemonic universalism might not be comfortable with the kind of position I am holding here. But the alternative view with its normative relativism makes the very idea of an intellectual or an intellectual function meaningless.

To recall the central point I wish to make in this connection, the intellectual function consists of the use of the good sense (if old fashioned words do not make you cringe, you may use the word ‘wisdom’) characteristic of and derived from one’s primary, generic social function of articulating publicly wherever there is abuse of power and neglect of the powerless. As I explained above, my notion of ‘good sense’ includes a sense of the universality of some values, some existential facts and some understanding of how life unravels. The question then is how exactly the good sense of one’s primary activity is to be put to use in the intellectual function. The answer to this question should be simple enough.

One of the ways in which my professional good sense could help me discharge my intellectual function is through the use of the actual knowledge, the conclusions of my cognitive field. If one is in the business of production of knowledge, there would be questions regarding the relation between that knowledge and power structure, questions regarding ownership, misuse, risks, and implications of certain applications of that knowledge.

Another way would be to use the logic of my cognitive domain to understand certain things of public importance. Every field of knowledge or cognitive pursuits tends to have its own peculiar logic. What counts as plausible or what counts as proof can be radically different in different areas. It is trivial to just talk about the relativity of these logics. The diversity of these logics can be used to understand the diversity of structurality of different kind of phenomena and to show how a certain logic would have to be invoked to

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justice. Jacques Derrida. “Before the Law”, *Acts of Literature*. Ed. Derek Attridge. New York: Routledge, 1992. (pp. 181-220)

understand a particular situation. Common sense has but a very fuzzy idea of the diversity of such logics. An individual trained in a particular logic can use that mastery to public advantage.

Similarly, while traditional philosophy might have taught us to think of ethics in totally general, abstract terms, no one familiar with this area would deny that the only sensible way to go about ethics is not to try to apply abstract, a priori ethical notions to situations but develop a variety of ethical frameworks from different categories of life-situations. To take an example, if we wish to get a grasp of the ethical implications of surrogate motherhood or sex-change surgery, it would be useless and even risky to take some general, abstract moral notions to the table. Whatever our point of departure, we must develop a sensitivity to the peculiarity of the moral domain constituted by the normative issues in those situations and forge ethical concepts and arguments that can do justice to the dilemmas generated by the new situations. This is not to say that every seemingly new situation necessarily requires a new normative framework. But the very question as to how radically new a certain situation is, to what extent it can be non-reductively understood in existing moral terms, and at what point we must recognise that a new framework is needed, all these questions themselves are such that someone dealing with such situations would be in a better position to address.

Another important function of the intellectual would be simplification of discourse. Most modern social theory—by this I mean all theorisation in the fields of the Humanities and Social sciences—is so complex and is expressed in such complicated, convoluted terms that sometimes one begins to wonder about the exact cycle of transmission and dissemination operating there. If a theoretical physicist articulates her theories in a way that nobody except a handful of her colleagues can understand, my demand for intelligibility may be met with the rejoinder that I do not need to understand that theory. Someone might wish to offer a simplified, ‘popular’ account of that theory or someone more fastidious may consider it a pointless attempt at an impossible task. The justification all in all would be that the trajectory of that knowledge does not have to cover a layman like me, that I will be entitled to share in the human glory of that achievement, and I will be entitled to enjoy whatever gains may accrue from the successful application of that theory, but that it is unreasonable to demand that the theory be reformulated in a way that is accessible to my understanding, and that in any case, aside from its impossibility, I have no cause for complaint since there is no loss, deficiency or disadvantage I am subjected to due to my inability to understand that theory. This, I should say, is fair enough. But in the case of social knowledge (that is to say knowledge of social reality and other human

phenomena) such a justification would not be defensible. I might say that I am the subject and end user of the knowledge produced by the social scientist and the scholar of humanities and I cannot be kept out of the loop. First of all, the layman would not be totally off the mark in wondering whether human reality is really so complicated as to require all the forbidding theoretical apparatus on display. If it is really so complicated and requires such dreadful jargon to talk about it, the question is as to the exact point of that knowledge. The natural scientist can frankly share the potential technological applications to which his discoveries are amenable. There will of course be powerful vested interests that would not wish him to do that. But that is where the intellectual function comes in. However, the natural scientist can say that she understands what she is doing and the person who is going to translate that discovery into a technology knows how to go about it, and that you and I need not understand either the theory or the way in which it is embodied in a technology. All I need to know is what the technology will do and whether there are any attendant risks in its use. That, she may assure us, will be explained to us to our full satisfaction. Even medical research can, at least to some extent, take such a view. It can say that the precise molecular structure and function of a drug need not be comprehensible to the patient, that the latter should be satisfied if she has access to lucid information about the ethical practices of its production, the attendant risks of use, long term implications etc. It is not obvious how a scholar of human reality can take that line of defence. You cannot say that it suffices if the scholar himself and the person who makes technological use of that knowledge understand the matter. I as a citizen would want to know what kind of technology it is going to be, since the most likely use of such knowledge would be manipulation, in which case I have a serious stake. If there are no applications but the object of the study is itself so complicated that knowledge about it cannot be articulated in simpler terms, then the question would be as to the point of such knowledge. Why there should be public funding and institutional support for totally useless, esoteric knowledge is a legitimate question. In any case, I would like to have some sense of the social ontology with which these scholars/experts are operating. And if it is in principle possible, I have a right to expect that, at the risk of loss of precision, the humanist scholar and the social scientist take me into confidence as to their epistemic labours. This provides the occasion for the intellectuals, especially those from the stream of the humanities and social sciences, to include in their intellectual function the obligation to make their knowledge comprehensible to those whom it concerns, and for whose benefit it is allegedly generated.

## II

Let me now turn to the question of what precisely is the fashion in which a philosopher can extend his generic, core competencies towards the intellectual function.<sup>9</sup> In order to answer this question, if we follow the path I have suggested, one has to first ask about the philosopher's generic task. To do this, I want to refer to a distinction that I have come to believe is a crucial one and one which has been obscured, particularly in the history of western thought. It is the distinction between knowledge and understanding.

I believe that for a long time, the idea of knowledge as covering the entire ground of the cognitive domain has dominated our thinking, to the point where to ask the question of cognitivity has been taken to be synonymous with asking the question of knowledge. This conflation has had grave implications for the way we look at culture and education. In particular, it has distorted our view of the role of the Humanities comprising such things as literature, art, history and philosophy—in fact all that constitutes the study of culture, understood in a broad sense. This in turn has been responsible for a warped view of several fundamental things including the question of what makes life worthwhile, and what gives value to anything whatsoever. Further, blurring the distinction between knowledge and understanding or reducing the latter to a species of the former has brought about a great deal of confusion about epistemic categories as well. Concepts of truth, objectivity, validity etc. have been invariably defined in terms of knowledge as the ultimate and exclusive goal, without regard to the fact such definitions rule entire domains of human cognition out of the picture. The extreme views of logical positivism are only a conspicuous instance of the kind of 'single vision' induced by the failure to recognize understanding as a separate, autonomous and irreducible cognitive category. The fact of the matter is that unless there comes about a transformation of our basic view about our cognitive relation to reality based on the realisation that to know and to understand are fundamentally distinct, the default mode of our approach to all things will remain positivistic. As long as the question of cognitivity is posed (as challenge to its *raison d'être*) to, say literature, in terms of what kind of knowledge it provides, we cannot hope to escape the blinkered framework of positivism.

This does not mean that art or literature do not have any cognitive dimension, that artworks or literary texts do not have any cognitive value. The cognitive value of art and literature as of all Humanities (by the latter I

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<sup>9</sup>In answering this question, I will be repeating some of the points I have already stated. I beg the reader's indulgence for this repetition.

mean everything other than the formal and the positive sciences) consists in providing a certain sort of understanding. The generic function of philosophy too is that of providing understanding.<sup>10</sup> It follows that the function of the philosopher as intellectual consists in providing understanding (in contrast to any kind of knowledge) wherever a lack of it contributes to the unchecked perpetuation of what is unjust and what is not in the best interest of the entire community.

Before I say a little more about the intellectual function of philosophy, let me briefly speak of what I see as the important and neglected distinction between knowledge and understanding. At the outset let me state that I am not in favour of expanding the denotative scope of knowledge to include other things in it. I believe that such moves only add to the confusion. It is best to go with whatever knowledge means in ordinary usage and whatever philosophers have tried to say about it under the rubric of epistemology. In other words, I am content to stay with the notion of knowledge as factual knowledge. That is to say, with all the subtle, elusive problems associated with the deceptively simple notion of 'fact', I take knowledge to mean knowledge of all kinds of facts. I also think that—while this too is not without problems—perception of entities can also be treated as knowledge. However, there are things about which it would be odd to use the word knowledge, for which we spontaneously reach for the word 'understanding'. My claim is that there is very good reason why we do that. I believe that we instinctively recognize that here is a different kind of cognitive relation and ordinary usage acknowledges that recognition.

Probably the simplest (but by no means exhaustive) way to delineate the distinction between knowledge and understanding is the following: knowledge concerns facts whereas understanding concerns relations between facts. Let me make it easier by presenting some instances where the term understanding seems significantly appropriate. We understand a poem; we understand a joke (in contrast to knowing a joke); we understand a situation; we understand a pattern; we understand a structure; we understand the meaning of a text (in contrast to knowing the meaning of a word), and so on. Another way to get a purchase on this distinction may be to focus on those occasions when there is failure of understanding: Occasions such as when someone just

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<sup>10</sup>There are even now occasions when people presume that philosophy constitutes a body of knowledge, leading to vexing questions as to the kind of knowledge it embodies and whether there is progress in philosophy, implying some cumulative corpus of knowledge. The same has been—if it is any comfort—with science as well. The word 'science' suggests to many people that it refers to a body of knowledge, whereas it is, quite simply, the name of a certain method. In the case of philosophy, the fact that it is name of a discipline has made it difficult to see that philosophy is the name of a certain practice (of understanding) and does not signify an effort to accumulate some kind of knowledge.



cannot see the point of a story, or see the significance of a certain action in spite of having all the relevant information; when someone is unable to *see* the picture even though the full picture is in front of him.

Aside from these oblique hints, I must confess that it is indeed difficult for me to define understanding. However, I must also add that aside from my incompetence (that I claim to notice something that has generally not been noticed should not be taken to imply the claim that I have a full grasp of that thing), the chief reason for the difficulty lies not in the elusive character of understanding but in its blinding obviousness. The phenomenon (in a loose, non-Kantian sense) of understanding is too close to us and therefore the distance required for conceptualising it is hard to achieve. All cognitive equilibrium ultimately relates to understanding and therefore to objectify it is far from easy. By this I mean that if we try to understand the desire and the *telos* of our cognitive relation to reality, our ignorance of a thing combined with an awareness of that ignorance provides the motive force to lift the veil of that ignorance. At a somewhat deeper level, my perplexity, my confusion and my inability to grasp<sup>11</sup> the structure or meaning of something in or around me lead me to the quest for understanding, to get a sense of its structure, which when attained in a certain way results in what might be called cognitive equilibrium, a sense of harmony between our mind and the structure of its object. It is a state of rest, with a feeling of satisfaction that is so fundamental that it permeates our entire consciousness and works as its regulative feature. Because of this, it is possible to point to understanding than articulate it. The second reason is that the entire history of thought has been so obsessed with the notion of knowledge that all epistemology has been filled with that notion, leaving understanding without the bare minimum vocabulary to articulate it. A more accurate description would be to say that epistemology has left no space for hermeneutics—if we designate the latter as the discourse concerning understanding in contrast to the former whose central concern is knowledge.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>What Whitehead would call ‘prehension’. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, Macmillan, New York, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge UK. 1929.

<sup>12</sup>As I have tried to argue elsewhere, in the *Theaetetus* this becomes very clear. The dialogue leaves us with the impression that the subject of the dialogue is understanding whereas it makes all the moves directed at knowledge. It would not be farfetched to suspect that Plato himself got a little confused about this, and began to interpret Socrates in terms of a project of philosophy whose aim was to provide a certain special kind of knowledge, an idea totally alien to Socrates’ own practice.

In Wittgenstein we see the same unambiguous perception that philosophy is all about understanding, nothing more and nothing less. However, for what seem to have been rather trivial reasons, the word ‘clarity’ was used more often, and came to be identified with the very tradition of analytic philosophy. Clarity as a goal implies confusion as an abnormal or pathological state that requires therapy. This might have jelled well with Wittgenstein’s temperament but has little to do with philosophy as such. Once we see this clearly, it becomes obvious where early analytical philosophy went off the tangent, setting up for itself the rather narrow twin goals of rectifying the bewitchments of language and pointing out the confusions of which traditional philosophers were guilty. Clarity is an important ingredient of understanding but is not coterminous with it. The mistake was to identify the initial, partial task with the

In the present context, I suggest that we must take note of the role of understanding in decision making. One may have all the relevant facts, and even have knowledge of the possible consequences, but it may not be enough to make the right decision. On such occasions we speak of the ‘total picture’, which is a reference to understanding. Knowledge can be fragmentary. In order to make decisions in life-situations we need to have that fragmentary knowledge organised into a certain structure that we can understand. Our normative thinking has as its object not knowledge but understanding. Of what is right and what is just, we seek an understanding. The task of the intellectual is to present the relevant facts in that way so that those affected can take or demand a decision in the light of their understanding. There are a couple of other points I want to say on the notion of understanding but I want to save them for the context of philosophy.

Now finally to return to the question of how does the philosopher perform the intellectual function. To make my task easier, I propose to take Socrates as a paradigmatic figure and suggest that his practice covers more or less all that we could consider as the intellectual function of the philosopher.

I hold Socrates as the quintessential philosopher. What he set for himself I see as *the* philosophical task, which is another way of saying that subsequent philosophy can be seen in essentially Socratic terms.<sup>13</sup> From this viewpoint one can see the other philosophers as continuing—refining, elaborating and so forth, but basically continuing—what he was trying to do in terms of the generic function, which is to help the community understand the meaning of its beliefs and practices. To skip a couple of millennia, I think of Wittgenstein or Heidegger as having been in the same business of continuing the work of Socrates, that is, to help us understand and more significantly *to prompt us towards learning to understand* the structure of our thinking—in itself and in the context of our individual and collective existence.

Let me briefly flesh out my view of Socrates’ fundamental activity in terms of the distinction between knowledge and understanding I referred to a while ago.

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project of philosophy itself. This mistake led to the on the whole justified charge of restrictiveness and sterility directed at analytic philosophy.

<sup>13</sup>I am sure A. N. Whitehead would have said that all subsequent philosophy is a series of footnotes to Socrates, had it not been the case that Socrates did not *write* anything! Most of the credit Plato gets is, one suspects, in large measure due to Socrates’ confinement to orality.

It would be fair to say that many thinkers, ancient and modern, did notice the crucial distinction between understanding and knowledge proper, but it was never emphatically foregrounded as it should have been. Socrates, I think, was one of the few people who clearly understood the distinction and realised that the aim of philosophy was to provide understanding, and nothing but understanding; that anything else would only be a distraction or even a perversion of that task which he regarded as almost a sacred duty. In fact, it seems to me that he realised that the relation between philosophy and understanding is so intimate that it is almost an internal relation, in other words, that the central preoccupation of philosophy *is* understanding to such an extent that philosophy *is* understanding.

I would go so far as to maintain that philosophers more often than not realised that understanding is all they have to offer, all they need to offer and actually did offer, but were often intimidated (though, in all fairness, not as much as the other disciplines of Humanities) by the demand to justify their activity in terms of knowledge production and failed to explicitly state that they did not *set out* to provide knowledge.<sup>14</sup>When they did begin to try, philosophy's own past had blocked the option to speak of understanding as distinct from knowledge. The conceptual apparatus of knowledge as the exclusive cognitive object had dominated epistemology to such an extent that anyone wanting to speak of understanding was found fumbling and was often thought to be speaking of some strange, mystical phenomenon. As a compromise, everybody settled for 'truth' as the aim of philosophy. This of course is meaningless. As we all know, there is no such thing as truth. It is one of those conceptual forms along with 'value' and other similar entities which should be taken far away and disposed of with the precautions employed for the disposal of toxic nuclear waste. It is a testimony to the remarkably hypnotic character of this term that an otherwise shrewd observer like Derrida falls for this and spends considerable energy deconstructing the putative binary of philosophy and literature in which the former claims to be the repository and vehicle of truth. If he had seen that philosophy aims at understanding, he would have been able to see that he was looking at the contrast/opposition between literature and philosophy along an altogether wrong axis. If we must speak of truth at all, we can only talk about truth as a property of correspondence to facts possessed by propositions. (Whether such a view adds anything significant to our cognitive relation with facts or not has been a debatable matter and that debate is not relevant here). In that sense of truth, that is to say truth as signifying a corpus of true assertions,

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<sup>14</sup>In any case, philosophy has itself to blame in this matter since it was not the scientist but the philosopher who created the confusion leading to the positivist view of all cognitive endeavor.

philosophy has little to do with the production, management or delivery of truth. What the practitioners of philosophy have failed to emphasise is that when we speak of truth in the context of philosophy, our reference is to the harmony of understanding to denote which we often use the term ‘insight’, and that the grammar of this concept is entirely different from that of truth as correspondence to fact which belongs to the domain of knowledge.

Now, conceding that providing understanding is the generic task of the philosopher, we are yet to say how this task is inscribed in the intellectual function.

The philosopher concerns himself broadly with two kinds of questions: those concerning life and those concerning the universe. The distinction between these two sorts of questions is quite perspicuous in all originary thinkers such as Socrates, the Buddha, Lao Tse and Confucius. As I stated above, the distinction does not necessarily imply that they are totally unrelated but these thinkers do insist that an individual should as such concern himself with questions about life and leave aside the questions about the universe, which I presume implies that they can be left to a specialist who makes it his job to pursue them. We should of course remember that when these thinkers speak of questions regarding life, their reference is, as I indicated at the beginning, two-fold: to questions relating to what Foucault called the techniques of the self, or he along with others called the art of living; and to questions relating to collective or community life and the determinative as well as normative relations between that and the life of the individual—in short, questions relating to justice. The role of the philosopher as the intellectual obviously involves the latter.<sup>15</sup>

The philosopher in her primary function may be concerned with the questions relating to the universe, or more pertinently, with questions relating to the concepts and frameworks necessary for asking any questions whatsoever, as to their coherence and suitability. But in her *intellectual* function, her job is to sharpen the understanding of others with regard to the structures of power and the way in which their regulation of the individual life may breach the boundaries of autonomy, happiness and dignity. Such task would involve what we might consider as the broad objectives of philosophical practice viz. clarity of thought and unity of understanding.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> This of course is not a matter of timeless absolutes but a historically variable issue. The role of the intellectual has to be modulated as per the conditions of collective life. In this discussion I am assuming that we are concerned with the intellectual in today’s world, with certain more or less entrenched structures of power around whom the questions of justice must revolve.

<sup>16</sup> It might not be altogether unfair to suggest that the first component characterises (in a very rough way) the practice of analytic philosophy and the latter has been the preoccupation of what is known as continental philosophy.

As part of the first task, the philosopher's job as the intellectual would be to clarify discourses. Contrary to what many thinkers have said, philosophy is not a discourse. It is precisely a non-discourse (in the way a mirror is a non-surface devoid of any positive features of its own by virtue of which fact it can reflect surfaces) without any discursive features of its own, by virtue of which fact it can serve as an instrument for the analysis and clarification and criticism of discourses. Discourses are systems of structural differences that constitute concepts, and for this reason, in seeking to describe the world they re-create it in the image of their concepts. In other words, a discourse (as a language) creates referents on the basis of its sign structures, and the screen of referents constitutes the condition of possibility of accessing what lies beyond, and in that very process blocks access to that which lies beyond except on its own terms. At best, the layer of referents makes the object a palimpsest. This means that there is no way a discourse can be subjected to scrutiny from within. Nor is there a way to critique it from the vantage point of another discourse. The only way is to watch for the inconsistencies and incoherencies lurking under the surface and use them as wedges to prise open the discourse. Now, the social world is regulated by a number of dominant discourses that are imbricated together in complex ways along the lines of their alignment in the hierarchy of power. The philosopher's task would be to expose the structure of the palimpsest, to show the workings of the grammar of the sedimentations of sign systems. This task would involve explaining how the discourse is either inherently (that is to say constitutively) imbricated with certain power structures or is twisted and distorted by the latter, or even as it lends itself to certain asymmetries of power transactions.

Another component of this very task would be to interpret the workings, procedures and products of discourses in a way that is simple and also generic in the sense already alluded to, that is to say in terms of those broad themes which define our lives. The assumption here of course is that the most important things in life are simple. The question is not whether this is true. The assumption is rather a stipulation, a normative principle, which holds that no *person* can be regarded as incapable of understanding what is justice, what constitutes suffering and what gives value to our existence. There would be conditions that may bring into question the personhood of some individual where his rationality/agency are an issue. But the boundaries of such conditions must themselves be considered as *understandable* without qualification. To summarise this point, the specialist may say you cannot understand a certain issue because it is technical, or complex or subtle. It is precisely here that the philosopher as the intellectual must intervene and interpret the issue in

what I have called generic terms by exposing the logic of the frameworks involved, by explicating the intersection of concepts and theories and use that insight to enable others to understand what the issue means *for them*).

The theorist employs a discourse that is dense with its own formations such that at its centre the object of the discourse becomes completely invisible. As I said at another point in this article, she may be writing for fellow theorists, but the issue the theorist is engaging with concerns people, on whose behalf and putatively for whose sake the discourse was created. But the interface between the discourse and its generic relevance to those with whom it is concerned must be such that those who manage the discourse cannot deny access to that discourse on any grounds. The oncologist may know the complexities of the cancer but the question of the value of living and how much of suffering can be reconciled with life and its prolongation cannot be the privileged topics of the doctor's expertise. They must be determined by the patient or at any rate by ordinary people. This point has large implications for the very choices we make about the kind of world we wish to live in. At the level of the State, democracy is ultimately just the implementation of this principle that ordinariness is the non-negotiable state whose autonomy cannot be ever alienated.

The other related task of the philosopher as the intellectual is to place the specificities of an issue in a larger frame of existential issues. The decision we take in a particular matter is often determined by the extent to which we situate it in a much larger frame of beliefs and values, for it illuminates the full implications of our decision. To place a small decision in the frame of the right to dignity may change its character entirely. It is the task of the philosopher to help the community view its beliefs and decisions in that sort of broad perspective.

More than any of these, the intellectual function of the philosopher is to offer the open-endedness of enquiry as the guiding light for society. Every discourse, every disciplinary practice, every religion brings its axiomatics to bear upon the form of life of a society. It is the task of the philosopher to counterpose his own stance of critical outlook, involving no claims or assertions, but to interrogate discourses for the coherence and consistency of their ground. This is an essentially negative task but this very feature makes the philosopher's contribution to the ensemble of intellectual functions significant. The philosopher has no position to defend, there are no conclusions he is anxious to preserve, no beliefs in which he has made an emotional or cultural investment. Consequently, he has no reason to deviate from his perception.

Another task, related to the above, under the rubric of unification of understanding that the philosopher can perform as part of her intellectual function is to attempt to draw attention to the need for a unified perspective to configure the scattered fragments of specialised knowledge that cannot relate to each other although they converge on the same object. The onus to help the community ask ‘what is a good life?’ still rests with the philosopher and she cannot perform this task unless she addresses the need for a unified perspective.

There are some important points in what I have said above which, largely due to my own incompetence I have not been able to articulate properly. I would like to use an illustration to capture some of those points.

The issue I would like to use for illustration is that of secularism. Presumably, for all of us who live in this country, this is an issue of great importance. If wrongly handled, it has the potential to alter the fundamental character of our polity with possibly disastrous consequences. And fittingly, this issue has been discussed and debated by thinkers of all hues in various fora, ranging from TV to technical journals and scholarly books. Now, one would imagine that questions regarding secularism—what it means, what it implies, why it is important, what are the alternatives, whether or not we should continue (assuming that we are) to be a secular republic—are something not for experts and sophisticated thinkers to deliberate upon and announce their conclusions to the people who will duly accept them. One assumes that this is a matter which should be understood by every citizen, such that s/he can take an informed and enlightened decision not just on the large and to an extent abstract question of whether we should be a secular country but more specifically about whether any action by the State or by a group is in tune with the spirit of secularism. This is the meaning of democracy. And if we are serious about our democracy we must make sure that what I said above comes about, or at least a beginning is made to create conditions in which it can be brought about. But unfortunately what we see is a stark dichotomy of ideological, obscurantist rhetoric on one side and highly sophisticated and practically opaque disquisitions in complex syntax and convoluted theory on the other side. The tactics of the former are understandable. But how do we justify the latter? Those who engage in these complex debates may be right when they say that the matter is intrinsically complex and to articulate it in simpler terms would seriously compromise not just the rigour but the very essentials of their theses and arguments. Perhaps. But what are the implications of this position? How are people to decide whether they want a secular country or not? Or are we to say that it is a complicated issue and the people of the country must take on faith what the

thinkers say on the subject? That ordinary people are to be just bemused spectators to the arena of these debates? At this point we can sense that there is something deeply wrong here. But let us concede even this. We still have a problem: there seem to be equally persuasive arguments—all equally complex and too profound for ordinary people of course—for and against secularism. Who is to guide the common public to take an informed stand on this all-important issue? Someone must take the responsibility to interpret the issue and point out the implications from different perspectives such that citizens can take a meaningful decision. Somebody must climb down from the ivory tower and—to just cite an example—explain, among other things, that ‘secular society’ is a misleading term, that it is the State which can be secular or otherwise; and lucidly explain what are the other values which we regard as non-negotiable that would be affected by our stance on the question of secularism, and so on. My point is that whether we can individually do it or not, democracy would be meaningless unless we recognize that it is our collective duty to create the conditions of such understanding. The role of the intellectual, in my view is that anyone at all must take the initiative from wherever she is in this regard. By way of recapitulation, let me repeat what I believe to be the most central point.

All of us are intellectuals inasmuch as we find occasion to perform the duty of being an intellectual. And this duty comes into effect whenever we find someone more ignorant, more confused and bewildered than us. The duty consists in making the effort to understand an issue of collective importance, inasmuch as possible with the help of the generic cognitive skills one has acquired in the context of one’s basic social role, and communicate that understanding to those who need it; strive to create the conditions for the continuance of this activity and also help create conditions of self-reliance in this regard. To be an intellectual in this sense, there are no special qualifications. There is no particular space in which to perform this duty, and there is no permission to be sought from anyone. To be a part of society, to be part of a democracy is to accept the obligation to play the role of the intellectual whenever the occasion for it arises without fear. If the idea of an intellectual is to have any meaning, any productive purpose, this is the only conception to work with, where we see the intellectual in terms of an obligation incumbent on all citizens without exception.

In addition to these, I would like to point to what you might call a meta-task of the intellectual. The primary mode of the intellectual function is not expositional as much as dialogical. Hence, it is the duty of all those engaging in the intellectual task to preserve against all odds, the possibility of conversation in the sense of preserving the ethos of conversation.



As for the philosopher, given the fact that her primary task is itself to achieve and disseminate understanding, to interrogate the structure of concepts and help situate particular issues against the backdrop of larger existential concerns, the task of the intellectual is already her task. All that remains for her is to stick to the task with relentless perseverance and courage.