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An Exploration of the Ontology of the Intellectual

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An Exploration of the Ontology of the Intellectual

Abstract

In this paper I wish to explore the historical and sociological contexts that allowed the flourishing of philosophy and identify the modern intellectual's relevance in a society that outside the realm of academia has appeared to regress in an appreciation or acknowledgement for the usefulness of philosophy. I will begin by examining the influence of socio-political and economic factors on the success of intellectuals primarily in the enlightenment period and the later 20th century French thought. I will include references to the motive of committed writing, ethical purity, investment in the academic community, autonomy of the discipline, and institutional roles. I wish to focus on the ontological identity of the public intellectual by examining the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Paul Sartre on this topic, as well as their own public presence as applied philosophers. This exploration requires the secondary interpretations of Nathan Crick as well as Carl-Goran Heidegren and Henrik Lundberg. My aim is to illustrate the ontology of the modern intellectual through the understanding of (1) external identity—how outsiders perceive philosophy, (2) community identity—how members within the network perceive philosophy, and (3) personal identity—how the intellectuals themselves perceive philosophy.

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“Thus, by speaking, I reveal it to myself and to others in order to change it. I strike at its very heart, I transfix it, and I display it in full view; at present I dispose of it; with every word I utter, I involve myself a little more in the world, and by the same token I emerge from it a little more, since I go beyond it towards the future” (Jean Paul Sartre, *What is Literature*).

1. Introduction

In this paper I wish to explore the historical and sociological contexts that allowed the flourishing of philosophy and identify the modern intellectual's relevance in a society that outside the realm of academia has appeared to regress in an appreciation or acknowledgement for the usefulness of philosophy. I will begin by examining the influence of socio-political and economic factors on the success of intellectuals primarily in the enlightenment period and the later 20th century French thought. I will

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2. Crick’s Division of Theory and Rhetoric

In his essay titled, “Rhetoric, Philosophy and the Public Intellectual,” Nathan Crick evaluates the division between theory and practice throughout history with the objective to reconstruct an understanding of the modern, public intellectual. The idea of the *public intellectual* was a product of the enlightenment period’s paramount works of science and philosophy that celebrated theoretical truth, which eventually provoked a cultural change in approach to knowledge. For the enlightenment period, the public intellectual served as a transmitter of knowledge by situating themselves in between the great thinkers and the public. The goal of this public intellectual is described by Crick as being founded in a revolutionary belief that one could disseminate philosophy and science to the public, an enlightenment that replaced tradition with a rational society. The enlightenment period’s notion of the public intellectual thus requires the celebration of the great works of philosophy and science.

Crick then examines a counter conception of the enlightenment period’s public intellectual invented by the 20th century Marxist theoretician and politician, Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci produces the notion of the *organic intellectual*, who is valued not for their knowledge and ideas but the application of their knowledge and ideas in society. This notion of the intellectual emphasizes the importance organizing change in culture as practicing agents in the world. Gramsci’s conception of agency within the intellectual is thought of to be a result of his interest in Marxism, which emphasizes the necessary association with the classes as social agents in order to create change.

It is through the critique of the enlightenment period’s public intellectual and Gramsci’s organic intellectual that allows Nathan Crick to put forth his conception of the modern intellectual. He argues that both the public and organic intellectual contain a deprived perception of the socio-historical situations that rhetoric and theoretical work are a response of.

Crick claims that the division between application and theory results in a rhetoric that lacks substantial content and the produces a vision of theoretical work as meaning without relevance. He argues that this division originated in the Aristotelian tradition that separated *episteme*, meaning contemplative knowledge such as philosophy, and *techné*, meaning productive knowledge such as rhetoric. Crick clarifies:

On the one hand, the Enlightenment orator wants to disseminate episteme using techné. On the other hand, the Gramscian activist disregards the whole process and instead embraces pure *praxis*, or political action. In both cases, however, episteme is impotent on its own, while techné is purely derivative. Praxis, meanwhile, because it is separated from episteme, drifts uncomfortably toward forms of irrationalism and dogmatism (Crick, 130).

It appears that Gramsci's ideas should be criticized as containing a problematic, un-reflected logic on historical change, one that does not address credit or value to famous works of philosophy. Crick explains that by only valuing knowledge that is applied, he is denying importance and usefulness of the paramount, theoretical work of the enlightenment period's scientists and philosophers. On the other hand, the enlightenment period's notion of the public intellectual as one who is strategically placed between the knowledge and the public is not necessarily relevant to our socio-historical situation. It seems evident that philosophers who once held acclaimed social and political positions throughout time are now confined to the realm of academia. While throughout history philosophers were viewed as essential members of academic or political institutions, it appears that the modern philosopher is rarely a participant in these organizations.

In conclusion, Crick intends to reject the Aristotelian understanding of intellectual work that divides knowledge and application by returning to the pre-Aristotelian Sophist notion of techné which is conceived through the combination of episteme and praxis, or applied knowledge. Thus, Crick's main objective is to produce the framework for the modern, public intellectual whose work, whether it be theoretical or rhetoric, is a direct response of their socio-historical situation and in turn instigates cultural change. This conceptualization is grounded by the pre-Aristotelian Sophist understanding of techné, which combines both contemplative and productive knowledge. It is necessary for the relevance of theoretical knowledge to assert itself in the world as a contemplative techné, which has shown to produce a gradual historical change, while it is equally necessary that the application of knowledge must not be void of valuable content. Thus, Crick's elemental requirement for the public intellectual is that the work produced is in response to the socio-historical influences of their time.

3. The Sociology of The History of Philosophy

In their essay titled, “Towards a Sociology of Philosophy,” authors Heidegren and Lundberg interpret the work of sociologists Randall Collins and Pierre Bourdieu with the goal of establishing a method of understanding the history of philosophy through a sociological lens. Randall Collins argues that the famous philosophical works throughout history were created in an autonomous environment separate from socio-political factors. In referencing his work, it is necessary to clarify the use of the term *great works of philosophy*, which should be understood not necessarily as a value statement but as a more obvious, recognized popularity of philosophers selected to maintain philosophical relevance throughout the centuries: Descartes and Hume, Kant and Nietzsche, Sartre and Heidegger, etc. He illustrates a notion of first class and second class thought, the former as transcending cultural and sociological conditions and the latter as being more susceptible to influence by religious factors and political circumstances. First class intellectuals are seen as members of an elitist social circle, which ensures the opportunity for superior academic mentorship and creative flourishing. Collins outlines a causal theory of first class philosophical thought:

There are three layers of causality: (1) economic-political structures, which in turn shape (2) the organizations which support intellectual life; and these in turn allow the buildup of (3) networks among participants in centers of attention on intellectual controversies, which constitute the idea-substance of intellectual life. Economic-political conditions determine ideas not directly but by way of shaping, and above all by changing, the intermediate level, the organizational base of intellectual production (Heidegren and Lundenberg, 9).

This theory illustrates that economic and political circumstances directly affect the organization of institutions such as churches, publishing houses, and universities, which in turn provide structure for the intellectual circle to exist. Thus, the first class intellectuals are those that have been given the resources and financial security to pursue creative philosophical endeavors that become relevant throughout centuries, while the secondary intellectual derives from a class who is exposed to economic and political repression which consequentially limits their creative thought. This creative limitation results in the philosophical focus on social conflict, politics, or public demonstration specific to their occupation of space and time. While the secondary intellectuals focus their work on the topics that are essential for an evolving society, the first class intellectuals are presented with the opportunity to transcend the over circulated reflections and topics of the revolution or class struggle. Collins is ultimately arguing that through this causal relation, socio-political factors influence the cultural coloring of a society and its institutions, or secondary intellectuals, which does not directly affect but allows the primary intellectual network to flourish under a privileged autonomy.

This privileged autonomy may be further explained through Collins' notion of *emotional energy*, defined as feelings of confidence, elation, spiritual strength, enthusiasm, and power of initiative. He believes that within the dominant intellectual network there is a transfer of emotional energy between members, which encourages the production of philosophical thought. He clarifies that emotional energy is not a personality trait, but is received through positive external identification from members of the group. His research shows that this type of work environment produces confidence, initiative, charisma, as well as a pressure of high expectations from peers. In addition to this transfer of energy, Collins argues that admittance into this intellectual circle also ensures the members to be at the center of popular intellectual topics and events, valuable mentorship and the transferring of valuable information to which he assigns the term: *cultural capital*. The production of emotional energy by peers within the social circle as well as the transfer of cultural capital throughout mentorship and even generations of mentorship are required for the production of great works of philosophy.

While Collins' sociological understanding of philosophy has certainly generalized the success of great philosophers, it has undeniably demonstrated itself to be insightful to the social process of superior mentorship, which produced many famous works of philosophy. This theory stands in contrast with the traditional Aristotelian understanding of philosophy which is driven by a human's longing for knowledge and truth. While this information is useful in the exploration of the modern intellectual, his perspective must be understood as a type of external identification of the ontology of the public intellectual. External identity should be understood as the way in which outsiders of the group perceive the group, thus Collin's membership in the field of sociology has driven him to have a unique perspective of philosophy through his style of research and writing, which reinforces his position as an outsider in reference to the discipline of philosophy. Although this external identification is notably essential to the ontology of the modern intellectual, it is not complete without the presentation of the community identity or personal identity of the philosopher, whose perspective may be grounded in the idea of doing philosophy for philosophy's sake, or an intrinsic desire to explore the possibilities of our place in the world and understanding of ourselves.

Authors Heidegren and Lundberg move on to examine the work done by Pierre Bourdieu in reference to the sociology of philosophy. The focus lies on Bourdieu's notions of *illusio*, *nomos* and *doxa* which serve as the conceptual structure for how the social network of philosophy operates. *Illusio* represents the requirement for members of the network or group to believe in the significance of the "game" of academia, which requires the engagement of members within their field to participate and value the importance of the network. *Illusio* entails the investment in immense academic research and writing with offers only occasional success and commendable results. The subscription to this game, or the time and energy devoted to intellectual work often

appears as an illusion to outsiders who don't understand the amount of research and revision that goes into the finished result. In other words, in order to appreciate the success of the game, it is a prerequisite for a person to have already subscribed to it or hold value to it. Bourdieu states:

Every attempt to bring philosophy into question which is not bound up with a questioning of the philosophical institution itself still plays the institution's game by merely playing with fire, by rubbing up against the limits of the sacred circle, while still carefully refraining from moving outside it (Heidegren and Lundberg, 12).

The authors clarify that intellectual thought is dependent on *illusio* to drive philosophers to invest in the game. *Doxa* is described as the set of beliefs members must adopt in order to legitimize the work they produce. This requires the discussed topics to be relevant to the philosopher's place and time as well as being produced under the academic community's guidelines which include peer critique and revision. Those who don't subscribe to the set of beliefs may be dismissed as vulgar, naïve, or irrelevant to the academic community. The community-supported *doxa* allows outsider's objections to be negated or dismissed as trivial or absurd. *Nomos* is illustrated as the specific perspective that the group adopts regarding its *doxa*, or belief system. Authors Heidegren and Lundberg refer to this as the specific way a discipline constructs its object of interest through a specific writing style, which affirms that the product is work done from this specific discipline. This excludes approaches from other disciplines from being incorporated into the specific field of study. Bourdieu describes the *nomos* of philosophy as being 'the philosophy of philosophy.' A possible critique to this *nomos* of philosophy is whether the result is righteous or productive for the discipline, for it may at times prohibit the incorporation of fields of study such as neuroscience, psychology, or sociology into philosophical works. Bourdieu ultimately advocates against *nomos* as a restriction of intellectual thought, which he calls, "a form of symbolic violence, i.e. it is a socially authorized way of reading." (Heidegren and Lundberg, 13) Community identity is found in the way in which intellectuals view themselves in relation to their discipline, thus, Bourdieu's conceptualization of *illusio*, *doxa* and *nomos* constructs the community identification of the production of great works of philosophy, as the philosophical network or discipline is aware of the standards they themselves are held to as well as the standards they hold their peers to as a requirement for membership within the group.

4. Sartre's Notion of Philosophy as a Discourse of Disclosure

In his book titled, *What is Literature*, Jean Paul Sartre offers clarification to his critics on his understanding of committed writing by conceptualizing the basic framework under which writing is produced. He poses the elemental questions: What is writing?

Why does one write? For whom does one write? Sartre's objective is to reinvent the conception of the committed writer as a participant in a type of secondary action, an action of disclosure.

Sartre begins by distinguishing two types of writers: the poet and the prose. A poet, (whom he associates with other artists such as painters, and musicians) uses language indirectly to express emotions, and makes use of words as objects for literary illustration. Understanding the work of the poet should emphasize representation rather than direct expression of ideas, their work may be seen as a mirror of their perception of the world. This allows the creative freedom for the poet to use ambiguities and elaborate descriptions to color their style of writing and evoke emotion out of the reader.

A prose instrumentalizes language more directly to convey meaning, and conceptualizes words as signs for objects rather than reflections of objects. Sartre argues that for the prose the substance of a word is by nature significant, a word is not an object to be interpreted by the reader but a symbol for an object to indicate a certain notion and be transparent to the reader. The prose does not wish to be ambiguous, but aims for their expression of ideas to be understood by others. Sartre describes the prose as a utilitarian, a speaker who makes use of words in order to create discourse through actively demonstrating, persuading and exposing.

Sartre does not refute that passionate social and political statements may be at the origin of a poem, but clarifies that the poet uses words more as an illustration rather than an expression. While the poet may write with indifference, a prose is disclosing information to the reader in order to create responsible discourse. Sartre argues that to write is to speak, and to speak is to act, thus I have interpreted speech as a type of primary action for the committed writer. Within the act of speech involves the secondary action of disclosing information to the reader. In order to create responsible discourse, the committed writer must be trusted to leave out ambiguities and be willing to express their direct purpose of writing to the world. Sartre states that the ultimate function of a committed writer is to introduce ideas to the world in such a way that nobody may be ignorant of what the objective is or be innocent to what it's all about. Personal identity should be understood as the way in which the intellectual views herself/himself in relation to philosophy and their place within the discipline. Within this depiction of the committed writer, Sartre outlines the personal identification of an intellectual, an identity which is devoted to purpose, and is wholly transparent with one's motives when creating great works of philosophy.

5. Bourdieu's Bidimensional Being

In his 1991 speech titled, "The Role of Intellectuals in the Modern World," Pierre Bourdieu gives an analysis of intellectual thought throughout history from a sociological perspective with the goal of promoting a symbolic, political action. He describes this as a type of intellectual intervention grounded in anti-political politics: the perfect antithesis for the popular French philosophical notion of *raison d'etat*, meaning purely political action. He illustrates a historical example of anti-political politics conducted by artists and poets in the Romanticism Movement of the 19th century. The cultural producers of this period advocated for a kind of intrinsic value in art, which may be referenced as "art for art's sake," which opposed "bourgeois art," or art produced for political, religious, or social motives. The trend was to renounce industrialized literature or commissioned work with the philosophy that these motives for cultural production would pollute the intrinsic quality of the art itself. By the end of the 19th century artists, writers and scientists had succeeded in distancing themselves from external factors of cultural production. It was once this autonomy was solidified that these patrons were able to reintroduce their acclaimed work into the social and political fields as a type of intervention. This historical example perfectly outlines the notion of anti-political politics as a type of autonomous intervention which refused to adhere to the social legality of valuing ends rather than means, and whose emphasis lies in ethical purity.

Bourdieu's notion of anti-political politics requires the intellectual to participate in the intellectual community as a *bidimensional* being. Under this necessary framework, (1) an intellectual should first belong to an autonomous field that is separate from religious, economic and political motives, and he or she must follow the laws expected of them within that field. In addition (2) outside of their academic research and writing the intellectual must apply their position of authority and dedicate their knowledge within their field to social and political action. Bourdieu emphasizes that it is essential for intellectuals from all fields to collectively apply their knowledge to social and political discussions in order to serve the public good and to be virtuous participants in the world.

Ideally, Bourdieu believes that an intellectual has the ethical competence and purity to participate in political discussions in which the outcomes of success are void of money, power or honors. The intellectual who participates in anti-political politics does so only after successfully asserting the autonomy of their work and their field. Bourdieu sees this as a constant struggle for autonomy against external agents and institutions which paradoxically reinforce the quality of life an intellectual seeks in order to conduct research and writing. He argues that the solution is to move away from spontaneous individual action and eliminate the divisions between intellectual disciplines in order to collectively intervene into political life. Thus, Bourdieu's conception of personal

identity for the intellectual is to see oneself as an autonomous member of their discipline who produces academic work grounded in the ethical purity of anti-political politics, while outside their discipline participating in politics.

6. The Applied Intellectual

In an essay titled, “Reply to Albert Camus,” Sartre responds to a critique of his career and life’s work which may be summarized by Camus in his journal: “I prefer socially responsible people to socially responsible literature” (Hage, 2003). This distaste for Sartre’s political presence is found in Camus’ belief that Sartre was willing to subscribe to the political institutions that were the root cause of human rights violations and oppression, taking place during the post World War II, Cold War era. Camus’ political presence was grounded in the refusal to accept an ideology at the cost of human suffering, and he described the nature of Sartre’s philosophy and submission to political institutions as the downfall of the revolutionary spirit. Sartre’s response is grounded in what he refers to as the historical paradox:

For we too, Camus, are committed, and if you really want to prevent a popular movement from degenerating into tyranny, don’t begin by condemning it out of hand and threatening to withdraw into the desert, particularly as your deserts are only ever a less frequented part of our cage. To earn the right to influence human beings in struggle, you have first to take part in their fight; you have first to accept a lot of things if you want to change a small number...When a man sees the present struggles merely as the imbecilic duel between two equally despicable monsters, I contend that that man has already left us; he has gone off alone to his corner and is sulking. (Sartre, *Selected Essays*, 224)

Sartre asserts that the only solution for responsible political intervention is by adhering to the institution in order to change it from within, by involving opposing contemporaries within the cage to unite and break the cage together. He argues that Camus’ fault lies in his tendency to cling to historical resentment of the institutions which in turn causes a perpetual state of condemnation. Sartre references Camus’ famous essay when he states, “You have condemned yourself to condemn, Sisyphus” (Sartre, *Selected Essays*, 225).

7. Conclusions

Sartre’s statement appears to contain multiple key ideas regarding the responsibility of the intellectual found in my research. His assertion illuminates the importance of participation in social and political life through committed writing and ethical purity, as well as adhering to the autonomy of academic disciplines while still understanding the institutional structure of politics, which the intellectual wishes to change.

Sartre’s statement to Camus also includes parallels to Bourdieu’s notion that the participation grounded in anti-political politics by the intellectual within the structure of the network in which he/her exists is necessary in order to be taken seriously and provoke social change. The institutional requirement for the intellectual found in Bourdieu’s bi-dimensional being indicates that an academic must keep activism separate from the publications within their discipline, but is also required to participate in politics outside of their discipline. Similarities in philosophy may also be found in Bourdieu’s idea of subscription to institutional games through *illusio, doxa and nomos* in order to obtain credibility and support. This appears to be a fluid segue into Bourdieu’s line of thought, that in order to participate in politics, similar to the rules assigned by the academic institution in which investment and belief of significance of the game is essential, an intellectual must adhere to the rules of the political institution in order to be given credibility and change the institution itself.

Crick’s research reinforces Sartre’s the value of the institutions that allowed famous works of philosophy to be produced, while requiring the modern intellectual to practice rhetoric and the application of knowledge. Crick emphasizes that acknowledging the socio-historical context of great works of philosophy is essential to the relevance and success of the intellectual, which may be found as a parallel for Sartre’s notion of the “historical paradox,” in which he accuses Camus of denying the value of the historical and contemporary institutions which gave birth to these great works of philosophy.

Reviewing the identity of the intellectual throughout the multiple historical periods was relevant in order to depict a macro perspective of the intellectual’s role in society throughout space and time. My ultimate goal, to illustrate the complexities of the modern intellectual through the ontology of identity should be reiterated: (1) external identity –how outsiders view philosophy, shown through a sociological lens which attempts to calculate the success of famous works of philosophy through emotional energy and cultural capital, (2) community identity –how members within the network view philosophy, as participants in a sort of game where belief in significance as well as participation under the guidelines of the institution are necessary in order to succeed, as well as (3) personal identity –how the intellectual herself/himself views philosophy, which has proven to be shown as producing conflicting ideas of one’s own method of participation, commitment, and motives for writing and practicing philosophy. It is important to note that these conflicting personal identities, such as Sartre and Camus, are precisely what stokes the fire of philosophy, a discipline that encourages engagement and critique with one another regarding ideas of what exists, how we understand the existence of what exists, why existence matters, and ultimately, what the purpose of existence is.

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