THE ROLE OF THE INTELLECTUAL FROM A PHILOSOPHER'S PERSPECTIVE

Syed Sayeed

Introduction

Contrary to the general perception that philosophers are people who concern themselves only with abstract issues far removed from ordinary life, the fact is that many philosophers since antiquity have played an active role in the public affairs. In other words, they performed the function expected of what we today call intellectuals, or more specifically, public intellectuals. As several thinkers such as Noam Chomsky (1967), Michel Foucault (2007) and Edward Said (1996) have said, albeit in different ways, an intellectual, particularly today, is one who uses her knowledge, skills and understanding to help members of society know the truth, understand the dynamics of power, and thereby achieve a greater control over their own individual and collective existence. That is to say, an intellectual brings to bear on this public task her own special skills—personal and professional. In this connection it is worth asking how the philosopher uses his own special skills to perform the task of the intellectual. However, before we address that question, it is necessary to understand what precisely constitutes the task of the intellectual, and clarify *who* can be or *is* an intellectual. The general understanding is that intellectuals are a particular set of people of a certain educational and professional status, with a certain magnitude of intellect, who are committed to the task of helping individuals and groups understand their condition as well as the factors that control and regulate that condition, and use that understanding to achieve and preserve their legitimate rights and liberties, and gain control over their own destinies. But this is a narrow and politically inadequate conception of an intellectual. Particularly in a democracy we need a different, and more broad-based, conception of the identity as well as the role of an intellectual. In this context I would suggest that, in a contemporary democratic society 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, after which I shall discuss how the philosopher performs the role of an intellectual.

I

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 privilege. 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 structure of the universe or some abstract matter to do with how some concepts should be understood, but inasmuch as they stood for not just the truths they believed in but rather for the right of the individual to publicly hold and express such truths in public space. In this sense, all such individuals can be regarded as intellectuals. However, aside from the 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. This is not to say 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 speak about 'intellectuals' we have something more in mind. In trying to articulate that factor we run into a paradox.

The paradox consists in the fact that intellectuals must constitute an institution. In other words, there must be a space in the social economy for the function they represent. Yet the intellectual cannot be institutionalized. In fact, it is part of being the intellectual that she must resist institutionalization. An institutionalized intellectual is a compromised intellectual and in effect, no intellectual at all. Yet, explicitly or implicitly, a society must acknowledge such a thing as an intellectual. Unless a society recognizes the category of the 'intellectual', it is difficult to say that intellectuals existed in that society, since the relationship between the intellectuals and the society is a reflective, and a 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 realize 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 that they can be properly studied in isolation is reinforced. As Alfred North Whitehead (1967) 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 where contestation was a legitimate feature. 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: at the level of certain normative axioms about autonomy. How these axioms find manifestation, through what procedures, and through what modalities of participation they are realized, is secondary. Democracy is essentially a matter of faith in the irreducible conviction (along with subsidiary axioms about fundamental rights) that every individual and any non-majoritarian collective consisting of individuals has an inalienable right to determine their destiny. The 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, democracy must exist as well, though not necessarily in the sense that there should be democratic institutions but in the deeper sense that the democratic spirit should be conceivable in that society—democracy should have already become a *possibility* in that society. Where there is no democracy, the intellectual represents the struggle of the democratic spirit to find foothold 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. That is to say, the essence of intellectuality is not knowledge but *resistance* in the cause of autonomy.

However, for various reasons of essentially trivial historical contingency, the idea of an intellectual has come to be associated with great knowledge, superior 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 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. However, as I shall point out, the emphasis is not on the ability to think for others as much as the *willingness* to think for others.

This idea begins to make more sense when we realize the generic nature of the intellectual function. By 'generic' here, I mean the social functions seen, not in terms of specific jobs or professions or designations, but rather, 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 such different terms that we may forget that they are all performing the activity of teaching. A nurse, a paramedic, an ambulance attendant or a doctor may all be performing or be involved in the performance of the healing function. There are of course no definable, or always readily recognizable functions. Further, added to this difficulty is the fact that there are contemporary professions or jobs that are combinations of two or more fundamental functions. Nevertheless, of any profession whatsoever, we can always inquire with regards to its place under the rubric of a generic activity, and sometimes it is useful to focus on this, primarily in order to get a grasp of, what classical Greek philosophy would have called, its *arete*. Therefore, I suggest that in order to understand the idea of the intellectual better, we may look at it in terms of the fundamental social function discharged by intellectuals. 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 concerning matters of public interest. Whosoever discharges this function is an intellectual. If we accept this functional definition of the intellectual, then we can see that 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 then, is, who identifies, appoints, selects or designates the intellectual and on what basis? The simple answer to this question, as must already become evident, is that nobody selects or appoints an intellectual. An intellectual is always and necessarily a volunteer. But I would like to still persist with this question in order to draw attention to what I regard as an important aspect of intellectual function.

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 which are brought into 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 both duties and obligations. The chosen vantage point to 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. Such a distinction becomes all the more important where the essence of the function lies in the nature of the obligations that define it. 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 is to heal others. The reason, as I hinted above, 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 to be pertinent. But sometimes, the relation between capabilities and obligations is fundamental and the two aspects are integral. This is conspicuously so in the case of a 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 automatically comes into play. In other words, the broad presupposition is that, at least in certain cases, capabilities entail obligations *without choice*, or 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. To state the matter more precisely, it does not always have to be a matter of skills; a situation and the way we are placed in relation to that situation may impose certain obligations on us, not as a matter of supererogatory duty but as fundamental obligation. Therefore, 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 a mute witnesses to oppression, as is to inflict it or be complicit in it.

By now it must be fairly clear what I am trying to say. The notion of the intellectual has been, I think, distorted because we have been looking at it exclusively in terms of what are imagined to be the requisite capabilities and qualifications. Most of the debates about who is an intellectual, or what kind of entity is the intellectual, tend to centre on the kinds of capabilities that lend themselves to or are essential for the intellectual function, or what abilities must be seen as constituting an adequate basis for considering someone an

intellectual. I am suggesting that it makes much more sense to ask what the obligation of an intellectual is, rather than inquire about qualifications required of her. Of course, 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. My point is normative and I believe that we must construe the intellectual in this fashion if we wish to make democracy substantive and meaningful.

II

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 at the level of one's mental abilities. If I may repeat myself for the sake of emphasis, the constitutive obligation of the intellectual consists of a twofold task: to critically think about matters of public relevance on behalf of society and to strive to enhance the ability of other members of society, individually or collectively, to think critically. 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.

First, it follows that anybody or everybody (the latter in a democracy in particular) is an intellectual. There are no special qualifications for being an intellectual. And insofar as one employs one's primary skills or capabilities related to one's primary social function in her performance of her 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 emphasize, it is dangerous to deny the possible role of the intellectual to anyone. 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 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.

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, this assertion may seem to reduce the question of the intellectual to a potentiality. It may be argued that realistically, one must define *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. Some must accept — must be in a position to accept — the intellectual obligation more than the others. My anxiety, however, is to point out that the idea of a full-time intellectual is a dangerous idea. It makes the intellectual a profession and institutionalizes the intellectual function. And to institutionalize 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 especially incumbent? The answer at one level, as I have already hinted, is that the degree of the obligation will depend on the abilities, the situation and the urgency. 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 specifically in this context, it is the application of the maxim, stated in the beginning, 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 road accident that has just occurred, then regardless of anything else (unless you have to be at some other place immediately in order to avert a greater tragedy), you are obligated 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 as required in that situation. But a critic might contend that all this is very well, but the question of who should be expected to be proactive in the performance of the intellectual function still remains unanswered. The answer, I 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 cognitive workers, or 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 a novel one and it may seem to be contrary to the notion of the intellectual function that I have been trying to present here. But that is not so. For my emphasis has been that these classes of people are not to be treated as having exclusive (or predominant) 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 holds, 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 as 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, then 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 a critique.

In parenthesis, but not without relevance, we must note that with regards to the question of thinking for others, there have been anxieties about the problems of representation, captured, among other places, in the discourse of Foucault (1977) with the phrase 'the indignity of speaking for 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 somewhat make it 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 always, a priori, be cynically suspicious of the capacity of the other to empathize and understand. Secondly, experience of suffering 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 solitary 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 suffering of an other, we can understand it. We must realize that to deny this is to remove the obligation to address the suffering of the other. That is why I believe that it is important to affirm the possibility of understanding the suffering of another being and insist on the obligation that follows from such an understanding. The distrust towards offer of help from the other is very much symptomatic of the attitudes of contemporary

intellectuals and theorists who seem to take pride in this sort of modesty, which is sometimes indistinguishable from a self-lacerating sense of guilt at not being the subject of the experience. 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, cannot but be, ultimately, a part of the hegemonic objectives that perpetuate heteronomy. However, while this attitude and the discourses that have crystallized from it have performed a significant corrective function, one must ask if the tendency to make this attitude totalizing 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, which 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. The best way to guard against the dangers represented by these anxieties is, first, to be distrustful of any self-perpetuating help, any help that does not allocate a significant part of its energy to render itself redundant at some point of time, and second to reject the notion of intellectuals as a fixed group of people with certain cognitive advantages. Once we adopt these two precautions, which the conception of the intellectual I am trying to present here does, these anxieties become irrelevant.

However, there is another important aspect to this matter which my proposed conception of the intellectual addresses. The anxieties I mentioned above arise also from the assumption that the intellectual seeks to articulate the position of those who cannot speak for themselves. But as I have tried to point out, the true function

of the intellectual consists in providing critical understanding and *not in supplying a position or taking a decision.* Her task is to unravel the implications of the position of those for whom she is speaking and to expose the structure of thinking underlying the situation regarding which they need to take a stand or make a decision. The kind of thinking involved in this activity is a relentless openness to the fallibility, and 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. What I am trying to say here is, in a sense, an adaptation of Karl Popper's (1994) 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 the fundamental point that we must reject 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 this authority to tell everybody how to live. Having said that, it should perhaps be pointed out that this figure of the 'universal intellectual' comes from a totally false caricature of the function of the philosopher. For 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 his 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 speculation on ultimate reality is not necessarily an exclusive claim to truth. In our present context, it suffices to note that the intellectual's legitimate function is to *critique* rather than to proffer positive views or positions. This, of course, does not in itself 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.

III

So, 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 an extension and application of (the good sense of) one's core competence for intervention in public affairs. The only thing I am anxious to emphasize 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 characterized 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 a certain way of jeopardizing 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 realize that our specific skills and jobs only 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 the repertoire of 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, she will neither find any reason to nor will be meaningfully able to extend her 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 organization of the 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 criticized is the notion of someone who is supposed to have the exclusive competence of judging truth and justice. But this too is actually based on a 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 emphasize 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 reiterate the central point that I wish to make in this connection, the intellectual function consists of the use of the good sense (or if you prefer, 'wisdom') characteristic of, and derived from, one's primary, generic social function for articulating publicly wherever there is abuse of power and neglect of the powerless. As 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 is the good sense of one's primary activity 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, and through 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 tend to have its own peculiar logic. What counts as plausible or 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 kinds of phenomena and to show how a certain logic would have to be invoked to 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 general and 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 recognize that a new framework is needed, are all questions that are such that someone dealing with such situations would be in a position to address them better.

Another important function of the intellectual would be the simplification of a discourse. Most modern social theory — by this I mean all theorization 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 in operation. 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 circuit 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) it is difficult to see how such a justification can be deemed appropriate. The layperson may say that she is the subject and end user of the knowledge produced by the social scientist and the scholar of humanities, and therefore, 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. I am not suggesting that even in these fields such a justification is always valid. But how can a scholar of human reality even attempt that line of defence? You cannot say that it suffices if the scholar himself and the person who applies that knowledge or makes technological use of that knowledge understand the matter. I, as a citizen, would want to know how that knowledge is going to be applied to my life, 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 and must insist on my consent as a non-negotiable condition. If there are no applications and it is knowledge for knowledge's sake, and further that knowledge is so complicated that it cannot be articulated in simpler terms, then the question would be as to the point of such knowledge. Why should there be public funding and institutional support for totally useless, esoteric knowledge is a legitimate question. In any case, one would like to have some sense of the social ontology with which these scholars/experts are operating. And if it is in principle possible, the layman has a right to expect, even at the risk of loss of precision, that the humanist scholar and the social scientist take him into confidence as to their epistemic labours. This situation, I should say, 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.

IV

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. In order to answer this question, if we follow the path I have suggested, one has to first ask as to 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.

Merriam Webster dictionary gives the meaning of knowledge as comprising 'information, understanding, or skill that you get from experience or education' and 'awareness of something: the state of being aware of something'. The use of "knowledge" to denote skills is well-established, and philosophers have tried to clarify a distinction in this connection between propositional or "that-knowledge" and "how-knowledge", and this extension of the notion of knowledge is not too problematic. But the inclusion of 'understanding' as a kind of knowledge or a part of knowledge (as implied in the dictionary definition) I think glosses over a deeply significant difference with enormous implications. I suggest that we go with the meaning philosophers have attached to it in their epistemological discussions and see whether 'understanding' can be clubbed with it. In other

words, I suggest that we 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. If we wish to be more Spartan, I suggest that we stick to the justified, true belief definition and agree that knowledge refers to a class of beliefs. Now, if we accept this definition of knowledge, we can clearly see that there are certain things which by no stretch can be brought under the accepted definition of knowledge, and consequently cannot, by any means, be considered as matters of beliefs. I wish to draw attention to those occasions where we find it odd to use the word knowledge, when we spontaneously reach for the word 'understanding'. My claim is that there is a good reason why we do that. I believe that we instinctively recognize the presence of 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 (if we say we know a poem, we only mean that we have read it or can identify it; it is perfectly natural to say, 'I know that poem by Wallace Stevens but I do not understand it); we understand a joke (which we sometimes describe as "seeing" the 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 cannot see the point of a story, or failing to 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 her. In that case, one might ask: why has not "understanding" been recognized as a separate category? I believe the chief reason for this 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 conceptualizing it is hard to achieve. All cognitive equilibrium ultimately relates to understanding, and therefore, to objectify it is far from easy. That is, 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 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, I feel it is possible to point to understanding rather than to articulate it.

Anyway, aside from these oblique hints, I confess that I am not in a position to define "understanding". However, I must also add that aside from my incompetence, another reason for the difficulty is that the entire history of thought has been so obsessed with the notion of knowledge that all of epistemology has been filled with that notion, leaving the notion of "understanding" without the bare minimum vocabulary to articulate it. Another way of saying this is to state 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. Let me add, however, that my insistence is not about whether or not we should continue to use the term 'knowledge' to include understanding as one of its meanings. My effort is to point out how understanding is a radically different cognitive phenomenon from knowledge, and how a careful distinction between the two would have implications for the way we look at many areas of human cognitive and creative endeavour. I think it is time we looked carefully at how 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 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 that such narrow definitions rule entire domains of human cognition out of the picture. I am not suggesting that we set aside the concepts of truth, objectivity and validity. But we must see how these concepts will have to be modulated and treated differently in the context of understanding. 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. I am convinced that unless there comes about a transformation of our basic view about our cognitive relation to reality, based on the realization 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 to say literature (as challenge to its *raison d'etre*), in terms of what kind of knowledge it provides, we cannot hope to escape the blinkered framework of positivism.

Art and literature, for instance, do *not* provide any knowledge in the sense that they do not offer any justified true beliefs, or any factual information. But it does not mean that they do not have any cognitive dimension, and that artworks or literary texts do not have any cognitive value. The cognitive value of art and literature as of all the Humanities (by the latter I mean everything other than the formal and the positive sciences) consists in providing certain kinds of understanding. The generic function of philosophy too is that of providing understanding of a certain kind. In the present context, therefore, I would say the function of the philosopher as an 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. In the remaining part of this article I shall discuss what kind of understanding the philosopher can provide as part of her intellectual function.

V

Speaking of Europe, or the West generally, the first intellectuals were, I think, the pamphleteers. Some of the figures I have in mind are Martin Luther, Blaise Pascal and John Milton. At any rate, the pamphlet was the original vehicle of the intellectual function. The earliest pamphlets might have been concerning religious matters but even in that context, the pamphlet essentially represented

not a disputation between two institutions but the response of an individual to an institution. However, to speak of individuals, Voltaire seems to me to be the first complete intellectual. I think it would be fair to say that he was probably the first individual to not only engage in the intellectual function consciously and with great deliberation and purposefulness, but was the first to force a recognition of the legitimacy and importance of that activity on a large scale to such an extent that after him, it was no longer necessary for an intellectual to explain the nature or relevance of her activity. At any rate, with Voltaire we may say the intellectual came into her own. Though Voltaire was not a typical philosopher, the way he engaged in the intellectual function fairly represents the philosopher as an intellectual. However, I will invoke some other exemplars to elucidate the essential task the philosopher performs as an intellectual.

Although ancient Greece was full of individuals with acute public consciousness, and in a sense, classical Athens represents the first public sphere, in several ways, Socrates is the first historically known philosopher who took his intellectual function seriously. We know very little about the pre-Socratic thinkers, but from what we know, their concerns were with the nature of cosmic reality than with human reality, and less so of social reality. Socrates was the first among the classical philosophers to bracket metaphysical questions and focus on the question of a good life, both at an individual as well as at the collective level. He was also the first thinker to emphasize the imbrication of the personal and the social. But more than this, he was the first philosopher to not remain content with thinking and teaching (though there is little evidence that he taught in any formal sense) but insisted on playing the role of a critic of the community and demanded recognition for that role itself. But more pertinently, Socrates was engaged in a quintessentially philosophical task insofar as he neither offered, nor was he eager to seek 'knowledge'. His insistence was always on "understanding". In this sense, Socrates set for himself, and as an exemplar set for subsequent generations of philosophers, the defining task of philosophy. From this viewpoint one can see later 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, individually and collectively, to understand the meaning of its beliefs and practices. To skip a couple of millennia, I think of Wittgenstein or Heidegger as 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. Socrates was the first thinker to have 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 for him the relation between philosophy and understanding was so intimate that he regarded it as an internal relation. In other words, for him philosophy *was* understanding. Speaking of subsequent philosophy, a reading of the history of philosophy gives the impression that philosophers more often than not realized that understanding is all they have to offer, but came to be increasingly 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. 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, understood in the ordinary sense, is of course meaningless. There can be no such thing as pursuit of truth as such. There surely can be a pursuit of whatever is true, but that is what the scientist or for that matter any truthful person engages in. If truth is a property of corresponding to facts possessed by propositions and signifies a corpus of true assertions, philosophy has little to do with the production, management or delivery of truth. What the practitioners of philosophy have failed to emphasize is that when we speak of truth in the context of philosophy, the reference is to the harmony of understanding to denote which we sometimes 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.

VI

The philosopher concerns himself broadly with two kinds of

questions: those concerning human reality and those concerning cosmic reality. 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 herself 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 her job to pursue them. We should of course remember that when these thinkers speak of questions regarding human reality, their reference is, as I indicated at the beginning, twofold: 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 a collective or community life and the determinative, as well as normative, relations between that and the life of the individual. The thing that connects the two into an indivisible dyad is *justice*. In this sense the concern of the philosopher as the intellectual is the question of justice in all its dimensions. In other words, in her *intellectual* function, the philosopher's 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.

As part of the first task, the philosopher's job as the intellectual is to clarify discourses. Contrary to what many thinkers might have said, philosophy is not a discourse. It is precisely a non-discourse — without any discursive features of its own 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 other surfaces), 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 recreate 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. In what is called conceptual analysis, or in deconstruction, this is the basic operation.

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 and 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 is 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 assumption 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 summarize 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 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 remarked earlier, she may be writing for fellow theorists, but the issue that the theorist is engaging with concerns people, on whose behalf, and putatively for whose sake, the discourse was created. Therefore, 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 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*. The doctor in his basic function as healer may use his understanding of where the idea of "healing" begins to lose meaning in some contexts of suffering. In the final analysis, the right to decide lies with the patient and the structure of that right must be determined by the patient, or at any rate by ordinary people. The doctor in his generic capacity would play the role of the intellectual when vested interests try to blur important lines or push a certain perspective on what constitutes well-being. 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 a problem situation in a larger frame of existential concerns. 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 the latter illuminates the full implications of our decision. To place a small decision in the frame of the right to dignity, or the sacredness of life, 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. This is a dimension of philosophical practice that has somewhat gone out of fashion and needs to be revived. A number of problems of individual and society are the product of fragmentariness of knowledge and outlook. The complexity of the world requires the use of special discourses to deal with different aspects of reality (here I am speaking only about human reality). As a result, what is an eminently rational decision from the standpoint of one dimension of our reality may turn out to be an unwise decision when seen from a holistic perspective. To take one example, the debates of conservation versus development remain a bitter battleground of mutual incomprehension largely because a larger, cohesive framework comprising some sense of our ultimate axiological constants is not available to conduct the debates. This is not to say that the philosopher has a master framework at her disposal and that others should take the benefit of her superior holistic wisdom. But the philosopher is aware of the interconnected of things, she *remains* aware of that interconnectedness because she is not totally engrossed in any particular dimension. There are specific rationalities that characterize different viewpoints, different angles of vision that we use to understand the different dimensions of social reality. The economist for instance offers solutions from the point

of economic rationality; similarly, the technologist does so from the vantage point of technological rationality. But life is not a mosaic of these fragmentary perspectives. A good life for the individual or the society must be understood from a framework that somehow reconciles these different limited rationalities into a wholesome vision. The philosopher's task is to keep drawing attention to the need for such a vision. I can anticipate an objection here: the question would be whether I am not tempting the reader towards one absolute grand narrative. Not at all. What I am saying here is not incompatible with a plurality of worldviews informed by different cultural traditions and ways of life. The philosopher neither possesses one particular worldview nor would she press it on the others. As I said at the outset, the intellectual's task is not to offer positions. Her task is only to point out what is needed. The philosopher's job is only to draw attention to the need for a worldview.

At another level, the task of the philosopher as the intellectual would be to offer the spirit of dialogue and open-endedness of enquiry as a way of life 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, and for their consonance with fundamental normative convictions of that individual or society. This is essentially a negative task, but this very feature makes the philosopher's contribution to the ensemble of intellectual functions significant. The very fact that the philosopher has no position to defend, that there are no conclusions he is anxious to preserve, no beliefs in which he has an emotional or cultural investment, give her an opportunity to perform this task as no others can.

Some or all of what I have said above may have been too clumsily articulated to be intelligible. Let me try to elucidate what I have tried to say with the help of an example.

VII

Let us take the issue of secularism. Presumably, for all of us who live in India, 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 on 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 on the ground we are) to be a secular republic — are questions not for experts and sophisticated thinkers to deliberate upon and announce their conclusions to the people who will duly accept them. 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 after all *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, as I mentioned earlier, 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 that there is another problem we have not mentioned: 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. Now I am not suggesting that the philosopher in the sense of the professor of philosophy (for that is practically the only mode in which philosophers exist today) can or must perform this task. But someone must. And the task is essentially a philosophical task and constitutes a part of the intellectual function. The essential 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 intellectuals, in my view is that anyone at all must take the initiative from wherever they are 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, and to do so 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. To be more specific, I would say that today every person who has had the advantage of a formal education must see herself as under obligation to play the role of the intellectual.

Speaking of the philosopher, more than any other task, such as pointing out the pitfalls of language, to expose the logic of conceptual structures, or to emphasise the need for a unified vision of life, I would like to emphasize what you might call a meta-task of the philosopher as an intellectual. If there is one thing philosophy teaches, it is that there is no humanity without conversation. When we abandon the way of dialogue we lose our essential humanness. Sometimes it is important heuristically to put things in extreme terms. Employing this mode, I would say that in the final analysis there are only two options: dialogue or extremism. Hence, it is the duty of the philosopher (and indeed all those engaging in the intellectual task) to preserve against all odds, the possibility of conversation, to tirelessly and without despair, keep reminding that there is no road other than dialogue.

As for the philosopher, given the fact that, as I have pointed out,

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 and stand firm as the exemplar of the intellectual function.

References

Chomsky, Noam. February 23, 1967. "The Responsibility of Intellectuals", in *The New York Review of Books*.

Foucault, Michel. 2002. 'Truth and Power' in *Contemporary Sociological Theory*, edited by Craig J. Calhoun et al. London: Blackwell Publishers. pp. 203-210.

_____.1977. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, edited by Donald F. Bouchard, translated by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Kant, Immanuel. 1996. "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment", translated and edited by Mary J. Gregor, in *Practical Philosophy*, edited by Mary J. Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 11-22.

Plato. 1997. "Republic", translated by *G.M.A. Grube,* and *rev. C.D.C. Reeve,* in *Plato: Complete Works,* edited by John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, pp. 971-1223.

Popper, Karl R. 1994. *The Myth of Framework*, London: Routledge.

Said, Edward D. 1996. *Representations of the Intellectual.* By Edward W. Said New York: Vintage Books.

Whitehead, Alfred North.1967. *Science and the Modern World.* New York: The Free Press.