What is Policy to the Philosopher?

Winston C. Thompson

University of New Hampshire

Francis Schrag's "Philosophy for Policy Makers?" is an important paper that asks philosophers of education what role we might play in engaging political and ethical elements of policy planning and analysis. In a few brief pages, his article manages to engage with an existing stream of scholarship and communicate many fine insights regarding the expectations and limitations of normative philosophical work on educational policy. I would like to engage a small subsection of those insights, in order to highlight what I see as the foundational strength of the work, while also pressing against a few generative elements of the analysis.

Schrag's shift towards an alternative framework for philosophical preparation in decision-making is encouraging. Schrag highlights the challenges of making decisions in a realistic context, characterized by persuasive reasons on multiple sides of an issue (such that consensus is elusive), insufficient information (defined either as information that happens to be presently unknown or is necessarily unknowable in the present), and a socio-political project in which decisions are embedded (such that strategic considerations might impact choice on a particular issue).

To my mind, Schrag is quite right to draw philosophers' attention to these issues (though I will suggest that this is the beginning of an investigation into these issues, rather than a culmination). By taking into consideration the degree to which these features impact the *character* of the circumstances in which decisions are made, Schrag reframes the central issue of decision making by focusing on the *characteristics* of the decision-maker. Schrag's work here provides a rather novel way forward for investigations into the role that philosophers might have in assisting decision-making in educational policy. The embodied, real world characteristics a person needs (and I think that Schrag's work makes clear that we run the risk of losing sight of *persons* under existing approaches to philosophical work on policy) to navigate circumstances of choice, cannot be overlooked. Perhaps the greatest strength of Schrag's article is its ability to call our collective attention to questions of philosophy's role(s), and what it might productively be or attend to, in policy domains. That said, I do wonder if the analysis moves too quickly away from the types of principled approaches it critiques. To better understand the alternative framework that Schrag provides, I would like to identify a few areas of consideration for future work at this intersection of philosophy and educational policy.

First, in advancing a framework that asks what type of person we wish a policy decision-maker to be, we will need to entertain the limitations of that orientation *as an approach to policy*. That is, if the focus upon the characteristics of the decision-maker is a response to the limitations of policy considerations that presume ideal circumstances, in what ways might the focus on characteristics present its own limitations in that domain?[1] While this approach may result in a desirable (or, at least, defensible) ethical framework for approaching policy and assessing a person's behavior

or status in making decisions, it is unclear whether this approach will necessarily result in an ethically sound decision being made (as a desirable or defensible policy approach). It is possible to imagine a policy decision-maker who embodies all the characteristics that Schrag suggests, yet makes a choice that we (rightly?) find morally objectionable. Schrag's approach might find us attempting to ensure that persons are "good" actors in the decision-making process (i.e., appropriately morally engaged in the thinking and feeling of the issues), but real circumstances may require us to entertain the fact that "good" persons can make "bad" choices. It is unclear how this observation might impact a character-based response to educational policy-making, but philosophical work on the subject might wish to distinguish between 1) moral engagement with the process of decision-making and 2) deciding to endorse moral policy configurations.[2]

Secondly, Schrag seems to position his alternative framework as a response to an overly formulaic approach to decision-making. While I do think he is right to press against approaches to decision-making that reduce the process to a mere calculus (some species of "effective altruism" as applied to policy questions might fit the bill), I am unsure whether the views that he identifies are good examples of that category of approach. A focus upon the guidance of principles need not be read as presupposing the fully automated execution of an ethical algorithm.

Identifying principles that ought to guide one in recognizing the salience of particular aspects of a decision need not result in an avoidance of the "agony of thinking and the torment of feeling." Instead, principles might be invoked to clarify and thereby better engage one's thinking and feeling relative to the complex and vexing issues of educational policy that Schrag presents. Philosophical work on this subject might do well to identify how one ethically leverages these or similar principles under real world circumstances. This may further develop and distinguish Schrag's approach from existing philosophical work on policy and the (lack of) results it obtains.

As it stands, Schrag's exploration of the character-based approach to educational policy may, in fact, result in some of the limitations that he identifies in the existing principle-based approach. According to Schrag, in both approaches, it may not be entirely clear how the decision-maker ought to act or whether she has adequate information to make a decision. Both views give her an indication of how she might approach her decision-making. If the decision-maker in both frameworks runs into similar ends, philosophers may need to describe why or under which circumstances one approach is more advantageous than the other. Perhaps these are two different, yet generally equally desirable, ways of choosing policy?

Finally, Schrag ends his paper by asserting that "no matter how well-crafted the principles, they cannot be sufficiently fine-grained to actually guide decision-making in real contexts."[3] I would like to pursue this sentiment in two ways. First, even if the set of principles that he highlights do not result in particular and inescapable conclusions, they might help to identify desirable actions/arrangements. Philosophical work that takes seriously the fact of real world circumstances often posits that one can productively pursue the reduction of injustice.[4] Similarly, principle-based

approaches to educational policy may identify which of the available options ought not be engaged. Instead of selecting a particular option for her, these principles may allow the decision-maker to avoid particular "bad" choices. Perhaps this view of things sidesteps some of Schrag's objections to principle-based approaches as guides in educational policy. This possibility leads to my second point regarding these final words.

What does (and what should) the philosopher take "guidance" to entail in policy discussions? In some sense, this is to ask the foundational question of Schrag's article, in that it calls our collective attention to questions of philosophy's role(s) in policy domains. Is philosophy of real value to policy if its role is the broad service of providing a general sense of direction? Or must it be as precise as determining a particular course of action? Ought it focus upon process? Outcome? Both? Neither? As philosophical scholarship on the real-world circumstances of educational policy and action intensifies (in many of the streams of analysis and theory that Schrag identifies), philosophers may need to determine the fine lines, limits, and spaces for alternative approaches in response to these and similar questions. Thankfully, Schrag's illuminating paper opens these conversations in a productive and quite encouraging manner.

---

1. Contrary to Schrag's statement in his article, I take his approach to differ in what is needed to decide the case. I read Schrag to suggest that judgment is required for deciding the case, rather than the calculation that he interprets in the existing policy framework.

2. Of course, these two will very often overlap.

3. Schrag, this volume.

4. Here, I draw upon but do not directly engage the non-ideal theory invoked in Schrag's article.