

Responsibility of Intellectuals – Redux

As seen by a Plebeian.

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What indeed is the responsibility of intellectuals to the people? We already know what the intellectuals have themselves proclaimed it is - without adding the word "peoples" to their description. Let's quickly review. My favorite description comes from Vaclav Havel:

"I too think the intellectual should constantly disturb, should bear witness to the misery of the world, should be provocative by being independent, should rebel against all hidden and open pressure and manipulations, should be the chief doubter of systems, of power and its incantations, should be a witness to their mendacity. For this very reason, an intellectual cannot fit into any role that might be assigned to him, nor can he ever be made to fit into any of the histories written by the victors. An intellectual essentially doesn't belong anywhere; he stands out as an irritant wherever he is; he does not fit into any pigeonhole completely." (Vaclav Havel: 'Disturbing the Peace', A Conversation with Karel Hvizdala, quoted by Mark Chmiel in 'Elie Wiesel and the politics of Moral Leadership')

In Havel's self-apportioning of responsibility to intellectuals, himself being one, there is no mention of why the intellectual must have such responsibilities. Why does he or she needs to be an *'irritant'*, why must he or she *'rebel against all hidden and open pressure and manipulation'*, and be the *'chief doubter of systems, of power and its incantations'*? Why may the intellectual not be an exponent of Machiavelli in the service of the powerful, of *'power and its incantations'*, telling 'Nobel Lies' to serve the ruling interests? After all, those who run

'systems' also need intellectual and doctrinal backbone to carry them out, don't they?

Isn't it but manifest empiricism that since the Renaissance that preceded the industrial revolution, with the waning of kingdoms and aristocracies, feudalism and servitude, and the arrival of plebeian norms and free thinking that were the precursors of modern day 'populist democracy' in the West, new forms of plebeian intellectual regimentation and willing control (despite that being a nonsequitur) were invented in astute political philosophy to serve the interests of the ruling elite? From Machiavelli's "Prince", through Nietzsche's "ubermensch", to Strauss' "Nobel Lies" of modernity, are of course all intellectualism too, and in the very distinguished service of the ruling interests. So what's wrong with such intellectualism?

Havel provides no keen philosophical insights in his prescription of '*irritant*' being the sole role of an intellectual, apart from axiomatic assertion, perhaps borne from some internal (unstated) moral sense. But different people have different internal moral sense, and hence that's not a universal axiomatic description unless it can either be rationally proved, or a recourse to some absolute external source of morality is made, and nor is it a profound basis for moral intellectualism. If it were, this would just be a simple truism, as in any religion borne from unexamined axioms handed by an absolute divinity, and not very intellectually profound as a philosophy, or even an original contribution by Havel. Prophet Moses preceded him by at least three thousand years with the Ten Commandment axioms. No empirical political philosophy has yet been founded upon its teachings in the West since the Renaissance (we'll just forego the periods before that to be nice and focus mainly from the onset of rationalism in the West).

So let's look at someone even more distinguished for guidance who is '*arguably the most important intellectual alive*' in the entire Western Hemisphere, who wrote the seminal piece on responsibility of intellectuals in the later half of the 20th century titled "Responsibility of Intellectuals", and other derivative works (see [here\[4\]](#), [here\[5\]](#), and [here\[6\]](#)):

"It is the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth and to expose lies"
(Responsibility of Intellectuals)

"the responsibility of a writer as a moral agent is to try to bring the truth about matters of human significance to an audience that can do something about them." (Power and Prospects)

Once again, why must an intellectual '*speak the truth*' and '*expose lies*'? Why must he or she bring the '*truth about matters of human significance to an audience that can do something about them.*'? This isn't just a pedantic question. It is the crux of the matter.

The distinguished Noam Chomsky further notes:

"Intellectuals are in a position to expose the lies of governments, to analyze actions according to their causes and motives and often hidden intentions. In the Western world, at least, they have the power that comes from political liberty, from access to information and freedom of expression. For a privileged

minority, Western democracy provides the leisure, the facilities, and the training to seek the truth lying hidden behind the veil of distortion and misrepresentation, ideology and class interest, through which the events of current history are presented to us...." (Responsibility of Intellectuals)

Sure the Western intellectuals living in free societies *'have the power that comes from political liberty, from access to information and freedom of expression.'* So why must they not use it in the service of the ruling elite, and instead *'seek the truth lying hidden behind the veil of distortion and misrepresentation'*? How can the plebeian tell the difference what the scholars are doing? It was indeed Plato, wasn't it, who portrayed the rule of the virtuous 'know it all', the 'ubermensch', leading the sheep to their manifest destiny - a virtuosity of supermen, that some like Leo Strauss interpret it, a Nietzschean morality that is beyond good and evil, one that is wholly utilitarian in serving some vested interests.

Once again, no Occam's razor like clarity is provided by Noam Chomsky either. You may review all three references cited above, and will only come away with the unremarkable comprehension that the intellectual field has been carved up between the exponents of the ruling elite, whom I shall dare refer to as the "high priests" openly serving the interests of power, and Havel-Chomsky self-proclaimed responsibility of being *'irritants'* to that power, whom I shall dare call the "dissenting priests". It is almost as a kids' game of dividing into two teams to play off against each other, or as in high school forensic tournament of champions having the Affirmative and the Negative, or as in the Parliament having Government benches and its Opposition - both around *'systems of power and its incantations'*, one positing it, the other doubting it, with the people left wondrously watching, often quite uncomprehendingly. A cynical view? Please read on.

There is no a priori reason to believe claims to morality by the intellectual, as asserted by Chomsky with the banal phrase *'the responsibility of a writer as a moral agent'*. It is not entirely self-evident why such an assertion must be axiomatic. Or indeed how can it be shown to be continually true beyond mere continued axiomatic assertions.

Except of course, if such self-apportioned responsibility by the intellectual is merely a tool to serve an end, and not an end in itself. Just as it is a tool in the hands of the Machiavellian espousing the morality of supermen, if it becomes a tool in the hands of the intellectual espousing the banal morality, one not beyond good and evil, but specifically only intended to serve the plebeian.

The only rational and comprehensible basis for moral responsibility upon an intellectual, is if they wish to serve the interests of the plebeian peoples, as opposed to merely opposing the elite peoples. The two are not synonymous. One may oppose the ruling elite for many reasons, including personal ego, self-interests, personal guilt, as an intellectual contest, as an academic lost in the ivory tower of academe writing histories of past crimes that are now faits accomplis, none of which necessarily have anything to do with serving the contemporary interests of the plebeian except as a side effect. Only when the first-principle is serving the plebeian, and only

-serving the plebeian over one's own self-interests, then, and only then, does such a moral responsibility delve upon the intellectual, and only if they take it upon themselves, and proclaim to do so. And even when they conscientiously take this upon themselves primarily to serve the best interests of the plebeian, there is no assurance that they are telling the truth in order to serve the plebeians' best interests. Indeed, there is no a priori reason to assume one is telling the truth and not merely playing the Ezra Pound game of being part of two or more sophisticated (or simple) lies keeping the plebeians busy guessing which of them might be true.

Thus an intellectual claiming to be a moralist in the interest of serving the plebeian, must always be under scrutiny by the plebeians - no differently than for a politician claiming to do the same - to ensure that the intellectual is indeed serving the plebeians' best interests, and not their own self-serving ones. Just merely self-proclaimed claims to morality, while perhaps sufficient for one's own conscience, is not a sufficient credential in public life for anyone, as per rational commonsense. Why should an intellectual make any more claims to morality, than any other ordinary person in society?

Thus, what then is indeed the public responsibility of the self-proclaimed moral intellectual - making the deliberate distinction between one proclaiming morality exclusively in the service of the peoples, and any other intellectual. By definition, the former is associated with the "dissenting priest" who claims to serve the interests of the people by dissenting with the ruling elite, the latter is the "high priest" who is quite clearly and visibly aligned with the interests of the *'power and its incantations'*. And they are indeed "priests" because they each respectively claim axioms of their own.

Only in the public examination of their axioms can they lose claims to priesthood and be stripped naked as either genuine moralists worthy of public following, or Machiavellis deserving of public stoning.

So what indeed are the "dissenting priests'" responsibilities towards moral intellectualism? And what are the responsibilities of the plebeian to ensure that the intellectual priests are continually stripped of their unexamined axioms to keep them honest? As one Jewish moralist once put it, albeit in a different context, but I would like to take the liberty of borrowing that very convincing and idiomatic diction here:

"Although the Holocaust inflicted horrible injustice upon us, it did not grant us certificate of everlasting righteousness. The murderers were amoral; the victims were not made moral. To be moral you must behave ethically. The test of that is daily and constant."

The *'test of that is daily and constant'*. Indeed. The test however is only self-administered when one is concerned with one's own conscience. But a scholar's soul is of no concern to the plebeians - how can any outsider ever peer into the blackened abyss of another's soul? The latter may have none! Thus the test is not self-administered when public responsibility is

proclaimed by the "dissenting priests", but one that must be '*constant*', and '*daily*', and administered by the plebeians themselves.

So let's succinctly take the responsibilities of each in turn. This is what a rather pedestrian plebeian, me, demands of the moral intellectuals who appear to be "dissenting priests". If they purport to serve my interests, then they must cater to my expectations of them. There are obviously no plebeian expectations from the "high priests" of the ruling elite, for they make no bones about whose interests they serve. It is indeed the "dissenting priests" who are of most concern to the plebeians, for they may also be the Trojan Horses deliberately cultivated, like the proverbial sleeper agents of intelligence intrigues, to create a more convincing shadow play for the free-willed plebeians who can otherwise become quite dangerous for the interests of any elite in free democratic societies.

Responsibility of the "dissenting priests" as "moral agents".

What is my primary expectation from them? To be a moral compass on knotty and vexing issues du jour. I don't expect them to be activists or policy advocates. I expect them to be the moral voice without paying heed to the impracticality or efficacy of bringing about any change or transformation. They need to chart the course for the society in what is indeed the '**right and moral and just thing to do**' space. As they endeavor to identify the convolutions on the lies and bear witness to the mendacity of power of faits accomplis, I need them to prevent new criminal faits accomplis of monumental injustices from occurring, especially when such criminal acts can be contemporaneously co-opted by an informed plebeians taking the right course of action that is seeded by an unequivocal moral compass. If the moralists are themselves co-opted by pragmatism, exigency, expediency, political reality, then how are they any different from politicians? A moral intellectual who is a moral agent purporting to '*bring the truth about matters of human significance to an audience that can do something about them*' can only do so first and foremost, as an unequivocal moral compass for his peoples, and only secondarily as the revolutionary.

An intellectual can certainly be an hands-on activist seeded by that axiomatic moral compass, his or her own, to create on the ground advocacy if he or she possesses the physical energies and the charisma. Many plebeians possess physical energies, and many leaders of men possess charisma, but not many possess the mental acumen of the profound intellectual, which is why their seeding a moral compass justly and truthfully is of indescribable primal significance which can eventually lead to **Moral-Activism** by their plebeian activist followers. Without moral compassing, any flock is quite simply, and almost always, 'lost in the land of Canaan', figuratively speaking. And higher the pulpit, larger the flock, greater the responsibility, and yes, greater the accountability to the plebeians. Conversely, greater the priest leading them, greater the responsibility upon the plebeians themselves to create Moral-Activism that is justly seeded by the moral compass who was faithful to his own responsibility as an honest intellectual of the plebeians.

Responsibility of the Plebeian looking up to the dissenting priests as "moral agents".

The "dissenting priests" aren't really the spokesperson for god who may not be challenged. So what must the plebeians do to keep their priests honest? Examine their axioms! If a "dissenting priest" takes on axioms in contemporary matters of great '*human significance*', refuses to examine them unhyppocritically in public, refuses to convincingly explain why the same arguments that were applied in the past by him are not being applied in the contemporaneous present to the same qualitative issue of the mendacity of power and its incantations, then there is a gigantic red herring in the works. Application of the Rational Golden rule of morality - also called the Biblical Golden Rule by some - can also often help adjudicate a "dissenting priest's" position on emotional matters where there may be potential self-interests at play.

Examination of unexamined axioms, and judicious use of the Golden Rule in unraveling hidden self-interests, can keep any public person honest, from politician to the self-proclaimed dissenting intellectual moralist, even including the real priests.

In my humble plebeian view, it is only that very accountability to the plebeians, and which must be extracted by the plebeians, that brings an Occam's razor's clarity to the matter and constructs any commonsensical genuine moral Responsibility of Intellectuals - one that is owed exclusively to the plebeians. The rest is merely the intellectual stroking of the mind by the intellectuals, their own and others, and of only happenstance and incidental benefit or harm to the peoples, no differently than any other unaccountable member of society.

Thank you.

The author, an ordinary researcher and writer on contemporary geopolitics, a minor justice activist, grew up in Pakistan, studied EECS at MIT, engineered for a while in high-tech Silicon Valley (patents [here](#)), and retired early to pursue other responsible interests. His maiden 2003 book was rejected by six publishers and can be read on the web at <http://PrisonersoftheCave.org>. He may be reached at <http://Humanbeingsfirst.org>.

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- 05: "An Exchange on 'The Responsibility of Intellectuals' - Noam Chomsky debates.. April 20, 1967" <http://www.chomsky.info/debates/19670420.htm>
- 06: "The Responsibility of Intellectuals - Noam Chomsky, Feb 23, 1967" <http://www.chomsky.info/articles/19670223.htm>
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