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Society for Applied Philosophy

Academic Activism Revisited

Bas van der Vossen

(Forthcoming in the Journal of Applied Philosophy)

ABSTRACT: Academics are, or ought to be, engaged in an impartial search for the truth. Many academics also are, but ought not to be, engaged in political activism. I defend a moral duty for academics to refrain from such activism. Ben Jones' article in this journal rejects such a duty. This article responds to his objections, thereby more carefully formulating when and why political activism is morally problematic, and what burdens it may imply.

Many academics today engage in political activism. And this is true especially of those who work in fields that study political issues. Many academics engage in activism during their spare time. Many also do so during their academic activities. Some even see their work as a continuation of their political activities. They might see their research as working out the foundational or ideological underpinnings of their political commitments. They see the classroom as a place to proselytize their views about social justice, democracy, and progress.

Despite being widely accepted, this state of affairs is deeply problematic. Academics whose work has a significant political dimension have a *prima facie* duty to avoid political activism.¹ Thus, political philosophers and theorists, as well as many sociologists, economists, psychologists and many others ought other things equal to stay out of politics.² Doing this is just part of what we ought do anyway: search for the truth in an intellectually honest manner.

The reasoning behind this is fairly straightforward. It has an empirical and a moral component. The empirical component is the claim that political activism biases our thinking about political issues. The moral component is the claim that academics ought to think about those issues in an unbiased way (or, better: in as unbiased a way as can be reasonably expected). This incompatibility between activism and avoiding (avoidable) bias implies a duty to avoid activism.

The suggestion that there is such a duty has not proven popular. That's probably not surprising. Again, political activism runs rampant in the academy, and especially among those whose work has a political dimension. Those who engage in political activism often see it as central to their identity and mission. They wear their activism as a badge of honor. The apolitical academic is very much the exception.

Obviously, opposition to activism does not mean the academy should be out of touch with society or social issues. That would be a ridiculous view. Nor is it always wrong for academics to do non-academic work or try to implement their ideas. Mine is not an ideal of dispassionate research, in some old-fashioned sense bordering on the aloof. It is clearly appropriate, even desirable, for academics who work on political matters to be passionate about their work. And our work should be relevant and in contact with the social and political realities we face in society. The problems begin when being passionate about finding the truth gives way to political fervor.

The main culprit here is partisan activism. What the duty I defend rules out are commonsensical forms of activism, including things like donating to political campaigns, canvassing, fundraising, or attending the rallies of political parties, and so on. These forms of

activism are problematic precisely because they tend to deepen and worsen our biases about political questions, something that's demonstrated by ample empirical evidence.³ (More on this below.)

1) The intuition: against having a stake

Ben Jones disagrees. He thinks academics can keep up their activist ways. It's not that he ignores or denies the empirical evidence that activism is biasing. Rather, he objects to the moral component of my argument. According to Jones, the duty to avoid activism is unacceptable.⁴

Jones invokes the American Political Science Association's professional ethics guidelines.⁵ The document heartily endorses academic political activism, except in those cases where it draws people away from the work. Only when academics stop showing up for meetings or class, it seems, will the APSA entertain judging their conduct professionally unacceptable. Unethical activism is treated as isomorphic with breach of contract. (It is an indication of just how favorable the current academic view of activism is that it only considers a *full-time* dedication to politics as a dereliction of professional duty.) To Jones, the APSA document gets things roughly right. And this might seem to illustrate the implausibility of a duty to avoid political activism in the academy.

But even if Jones is right and the APSA has intuitive plausibility on its side, it's worth noting that things aren't always this way. Compare the following analogous case, this time in the field of medicine. The Association of Clinical Research Professionals' guideline for professional ethics includes among its rules the guideline that members should "[a]void dual

relationships that could impair professional judgment or increase the risk of harm to others.”⁶

The point is to avoid activities that create conflicts of interest.

Consider now the following example. Suppose a medical researcher takes up a job on the side as consultant for a large pharmaceutical company that seeks to develop and sell the kind of products the researcher studies. Does this pass muster? Perhaps opinions will be divided on this, too. After all, medical research is always in need of more funding. At the same time, it does seem clear that such a dual role would create a conflict of interest. Medical researchers should have the interests of patients at heart, not the interests of whatever companies might want to pay them.⁷

The source of the conflict here is plain to see, of course. It’s problematic when clinical researchers have a personal stake in the outcomes of their research. If they do, the integrity of their research is compromised. That is not an accusation of deception or fraud. One might do one’s very best to produce impartial and accurate studies. One might even succeed in being impartial. Nevertheless, the worry remains. After all, one’s ability to impartially assess and report the evidence is compromised. And one would understand public skepticism about the trustworthiness of a profession that would allow or even encourage such dual roles.

Better, then, to insist on a separation between the two roles. To the extent that certain roles compromise one’s ability to do one’s job well, those roles are best avoided, at least as long as doing so doesn’t impose any undue burdens. Despite the fact that avoiding consultancy work may pose a significant financial setback, we can reasonably expect medical researchers to avoid such work.

The stake in question here is a financial one, of course. And activism doesn't pay (or at least not always or directly). But financial rewards aren't the only kinds of stakes around. The argument for a duty of non-activism relies on the psychological or emotional stakes that result from activism. Empirical evidence overwhelmingly shows that the more people engage in activism, the more they develop psychological or emotional commitments to their political views and positions. This is a significant source of bias. It becomes psychologically costly – causing us mental discomfort or distress – to entertain positions that conflict with (what are now) our political allegiances. And it becomes psychologically gratifying, and thus easier, to adopt views that confirm or support our activist ways – causing so-called “cognitive ease.”⁸

When we engage in activism, in other words, we become priorly invested in the outcomes of our thinking. And this severely hampers our ability to honestly and impartially assess arguments and evidence concerning our views. For academics, at least, this is a problem. Our thinking ought to be an open-minded and honest search for the truth.

At some level, we cannot avoid developing a psychological stake in the positions we accept, of course. When we adopt a view on a topic, even in the most intellectually honest and independent way, we also become invested in it. Thus, a person who becomes convinced that the only permissible immigration policy, say, is open borders will very likely suffer from similar biases in her thinking about that issue. She will become predisposed to accept views as true because they are aligned with her commitment to open borders, she will evaluate evidence for or against that view in light of how well it fits with their adopted view on immigration, and so on.

But there are significant differences between the biasing effects of beliefs that themselves are the product of an honest search for the truth, and the kinds of biases at issue here. The latter affect even the initial search for the truth, and they affect our thinking in particularly powerful and pervasive ways. The former are downstream from truth-seeking activities, and are more easily contained to particular issues.⁹ When activists join, cooperate, and identify with a group or platform that pursues a collective political agenda, they become predisposed to accept a range of positions on a variety of loosely connected issues. And they become predisposed to accept those views on grounds that have more to do with how they connect to their (powerful) political identities than with their content. This kind of biasing happens upstream from the truth-seeking activities, its effects are strong, and it affects various aspects of our thinking.¹⁰

The biases that result from simply adopting a view are unavoidable, of course. But not all biases are. The fact that some biases are unavoidable shouldn't distract us from the imperative to avoid biases that are avoidable. The truth, in the end, is a relatively simple one: we should keep our search for the truth as reliable as it reasonably can be.

2) The demandingness objection

Jones's main reason for rejecting a duty to avoid activism focuses on the moral component of my argument. To him, such a duty is unacceptable on moral grounds. His most pressing objection holds that such a duty would make unreasonable demands on researchers.¹¹

If true, that would indeed pose a powerful objection. The duty I defend holds only that academics must take *reasonable* precautions to avoid biasing activities. And not all bias-

avoiding activities satisfy that qualification. Given how pervasive and deep-seated biases are, an unqualified duty to avoid bias would mean uprooting our entire lives. At the limit, it might pose the simply inhumane requirement to avoid all social life. That would clearly be too much to ask. (Nor would throwing out the baby with the bathwater like that improve the quality of the academy.)

Now Jones doesn't say that the duty to avoid activism is unreasonable because it would require us to uproot too much of our lives. Instead, he argues that the demand to avoid activism is unreasonable as such. To him, the activist ways of academics are so central to their lives that we can't really ask them to leave them behind.

In defending this point, Jones offers several analogies. Here is one that's particularly poignant:

Consider a researcher whose child has a disability and who is active in the disability rights movement. Through this activism, their identity as a disability rights advocate becomes a core part of them. (...) For this individual, giving up their commitment to a cause they care about would deprive them of a deep source of meaning. (7-8)

Slightly less poignant, but no less important, is his example of religious persons. While a religious person might not be the most impartial judge of religious questions, religion surely is absolutely central to people's lives. And so, Jones writes, a duty to refrain from religion would be unreasonable.

This argument, he thinks, generalizes:

If a duty to avoid religious activity is unreasonable, it becomes difficult to defend a duty to avoid activism. Political identities, after all, can be just as important to individuals as religious identities. (7)

The comparison between political and religious fervor is apt. To many academics, politics *is* like religion. Certain ideas or assumptions are a matter of commitment or faith, not open inquiry. Does it follow that demanding that one avoid activism is unreasonable for them?

Not quite. The duty to avoid activism is not a blanket duty. (Only anarchists would say that *everyone* has to avoid politics.) Rather, the duty is a conditional one: *if* you become an academic working on political issues (whether it be a philosopher, social scientist, psychologist, economist, or what have you), then you ought to make reasonable efforts to avoid activism. Being conditional, we can comply with this duty in two ways: we can (a) become an academic who works on politically relevant issues and choose to avoid partisan politics, or we can (b) simply avoid that line of work and remain as wholeheartedly activist as we want.

For Jones's objection to succeed, then, it is not enough to simply point out that it might be unbearable for some people to give up their activist ways. What has to be true is that facing the choice between *either* giving up their activism *or* giving up their academic aspirations is unreasonably demanding. That is, it must be so destructive of important values in people's lives to face that choice that no one should ever be forced to face it.

Nothing Jones says goes to establish that point. And, frankly, I cannot see why one might think this choice is overly demanding. After all, in many fields we consider it perfectly

acceptable. Again, would anyone consider it overly demanding of medical researchers that they avoid pharmaceutical consultancy? The medical researcher might find the choice painful, too. But if it's appropriate in general to ask that people avoid certain kinds of conduct because of the profession they chose, why think anything different in the political case? It's simply the price of doing an honest job.

One reason it's hard to say that the choice is unreasonable is that it leaves open the possibility for *the activist* to study political issues in exactly the same way as an academic might. The duty defended here, then, does not imply that activists cannot permissibly think seriously about political issues. (In fact, they should, and obviously so.) What's ruled out, rather, is just one simple thing: they cannot be activists while also satisfying the demands of academic impartiality.

Does the argument generalize to religious people studying religious questions? Quite possibly so. But I'm not sure it's much of an objection. There is a difference between the academy and the seminary, after all. Does it generalize to the academic with a disabled child? Perhaps, but we might be more hesitant there as the case is far less obvious. Among other things, the matter depends on whether, and if so how, direct contact with disability biases the kinds of judgments academics are supposed to be making. And that is neither immediately clear, nor (to my knowledge) well studied empirically.

3) A spectrum

If the duty to avoid activism isn't unreasonable, might there be other ways it can be avoided?

Jones makes the following important observation:

[N]ot all activism takes partisan form. Sometimes individuals advocate for a single issue without identifying strongly with a party. Issue advocacy can, of course, increase confirmation bias in the evaluation of information related to the cause championed. But such bias may prove harmless to the research process if what a scholar advocates for (e.g. disability rights) has little relation to what they study (e.g. environmental policy).

(11)

Jones's point is that not all kinds of activism are equally morally problematic. And this is surely correct. Not all activities pose equal dangers of bias, and not all kinds of bias are equally corrosive of what the academic process is supposed to be like. Other things equal, then, activities that are less likely to deepen our biases are less of a problem, as are activities that bias in fields that are further removed from one's area of focus.

This qualification is important, and I admit it was overlooked in the original article. My main focus there (as it is here) was partisan activism. After all, that kind of activism is most worrisome – as well as prevalent among academics. It combines a number of particularly problematic things. First, it's (demonstrated to be) significantly biasing. Second, its biasing effects are particularly pervasive. That is, the biases of partisan activism tend to spread across many different issues in the ways mentioned above. It affects issues ranging from abortion rights, to gun control, to economic policy, to voting legislation, and so on. Third, and finally, political activism is rarely likely to make a real difference in the world.

The former two elements trace how harmful a particular kind of activity is to the quality of one's academic work. The greater that impact, the more strongly it will be prohibited by the duty in question. The latter element traces how beneficial one's activities might be expected to be. The greater that impact, the more likely the duty to avoid activism might be overcome. The duty in question is only a *prima facie* requirement. Thus, even when strongly prohibited, an activity's beneficial consequences might be sufficient to outweigh the prohibition.

There is a spectrum, then, of different possible activist things one might do. Different kinds of activism can be placed on that spectrum in terms of how they score on these dimensions. The problem with partisan activism is that it scores relatively high on the former two dimensions, and rather low on the last. It's very likely to bias, and this bias is very likely to negatively affect one's work as an academic. But it's unlikely to have much positive effect on the world as the marginal impact of most partisan activists is near zero. This renders activism particularly problematic.

Jones suggests we add another dimension to this calculus, drawing a distinction between partisan *affiliation* and political *activism*.¹² The suggestion being that one can be an activist while avoiding any bias-inducing affiliation. Surely Jones is onto something. Cases of isolated activism are clearly less of a concern than fully blown partisan political activism. They typically concern issues on which one's views are already quite firmly established. And insofar as they remain unconnected to partisan affiliations, their biasing effects are less likely to spill over into other parts of inquiry.

Be that as it may, any hard distinction along these lines is simply not tenable, at least if it's supposed to support the thought that the problems of the latter are significantly different

from the problems of the former. In real life, people's activism almost always goes hand in hand with partisan affiliation. Many academics engage in activism out of affiliation, and their activism strengthens their affiliation in turn. Indeed, political parties do their very best to get people who care about certain issues to develop a sense of affiliation as well.¹³

The position I defend is not that it's impossible to engage in activism without problematic bias. It's that we ought to avoid activism as a precautionary matter, to avoid the *risk* of bias that activism represents. Since most actual activists are bad at resisting bias, worsen their biases through their activism, and let single-issue concerns spill over into larger (partisan) commitments, this risk remains real even in cases of issue-activism.¹⁴ And all instances of activism still have the undesirable effect of deepening one's commitment to one's views for reasons that are not truth-sensitive. In most circumstances, for most of us, the conclusion therefore remains in place: the responsible thing, quite simply, is to refrain from activism.

4) Intellectual diversity and the health of a profession

Jones offers yet another argument against the duty I defend. It goes as follows:

Another problem with a duty to avoid political activism is that, if universally adopted by scholars, it risks hindering the overall research process. An academy without scholars engaged in politics is one that loses diverse perspectives, which could help advance research. Because activism increases viewpoint diversity, it has the potential to benefit research. (8)

Consider the following analogous argument: “An academy without scholars engaged in denying biological evolution is one that loses diverse perspectives, which could help advance research. Because intelligent design theory increases viewpoint diversity, it has the potential to benefit research.” It’s possible, of course, to spin similar arguments using other crackpot theories, straightforward lying, heinous ideological positions, and so on. Clearly, something has gone wrong. Adding people so insensitive to evidence can only harm the academy. Only certain *kinds* of diversity have beneficial effects.

Jones’s argument invokes the Hong-Page theorem. Roughly speaking, that theorem holds that, under the right conditions, cognitive diversity among people who are part of a collective decision-making process can outperform individual decision-making capabilities in terms of decision-making quality. Thus, a diverse group of good thinkers can outperform a homogenous group of excellent thinkers.

The Hong-Page theorem holds only under certain conditions, however. And those conditions make reference to the cognitive abilities of individual people. Adding people committed to making bad choices does not improve things. Page is explicit on this point. His view is that increasing diversity in a community can be either good or bad, depending on the people involved. When people’s cognitive abilities are poor, adding them to a group can indeed be a bad thing.¹⁵

For increased diversity to be beneficial, the added individuals must be relatively sophisticated, even if they need not as sophisticated as they might be. The hallmark of biased thinking is an (increased) insensitivity to evidence. It’s not at all clear, then, that adding activist

scholars will be healthy for the academy. In fact, at a certain point of bias, adding activist scholars will be a curse.

It does feel odd to cite a desire for increased diversity as a reason for adding more activist academics. Our universities are not lacking for activist types. And politically biased people tend to be actively hostile to viewpoint diversity and intellectual criticism about political matters. There *is* a real lack of diversity along this dimension in the academy, and it is truly harmful.¹⁶ But it's due to a preference for political orthodoxy, not heterodoxy. That's a preference that comes with activism, and the preference is strong.¹⁷

5) For a passionate academia

Jones's arguments fail, then. But he does raise several important points. In addition to the ones above, he writes: "A hazard of dedicating one's life to the study of politics – whether in philosophy, political science, psychology, or some other field – is developing passionate views on the subject." He's clearly right. Academics, fortunately, usually *care* a lot about their work. And they care to make the world a better place. (Even if they disagree deeply on how to do it.) It would be a bad feature of a proposed moral view if it endangered a passionate commitment to our profession.

It's equally true, though, that there are dangers associated with having passionate academics. Unfortunately, many academics today have chosen to pursue their careers *because* they were passionately political. They cared about their political goals, identities, movements, and the like, and they see academia as yet another avenue for pursuing these ends. In that form, passionate academics are at odds with academic integrity.

There is space for another kind of passionate commitment – a commitment to the honest and impartial search for the truth. Such a commitment cannot be accepted without accepting some of the burdens that come with it, including some of the burdens that one might find unwelcome. One of its burdens is to leave activism behind.

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NOTES

¹ This reply defends and works out the larger argument originally presented in Bas van der Vossen, 'In Defense of the Ivory Tower: Why Philosophers Should Stay Out of Politics', *Philosophical Psychology* 28 (2015): 1045-1063.

² It's likely that the duty, and the argument that supports it, generalize beyond this group, and include at least some students as well as other people. Here I focus mainly on those who make it their profession to think about political matters.

³ To be clear, I do not claim that unbiased partisan activism is *impossible*. We can clearly imagine someone like that. Rather, my point is that, for real people living real lives, engaging in activism almost invariably means becoming significantly more biased.

⁴ Ben Jones, 'Political Activism and Research Ethics', *Journal of Applied Philosophy* (forthcoming)

⁵ American Political Science Association, *A Guide to Professional Ethics in Political Science*, 2nd ed. (Washington DC: APA, 2012), p. 12, available at: <http://www.apsanet.org/portals/54/Files/Publications/APSAEthicsGuide2012.pdf>

⁶ The Association of Clinical Research Professionals, *Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct*. Available at: <https://acrpnet.org/about/code-of-ethics/>

⁷ For discussion, see Jonathan H. Marks, *The Perils of Partnership: Industry Influence, Institutional Integrity, and Public Health*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁸ For a review of the evidence, see Van der Vossen, op. cit., pp. 1050-1054. Jones also surveys some of the evidence and accepts that this is its upshot. See Jones, op. cit.

⁹ Does it follow from this that we become less reliable as truth-seekers over time, as we develop more and more committed views? Perhaps. But while it may be true that those who strongly hold beliefs need not be their most reliable evaluators, this force might be counteracted by other things that improve over time (such as the kind of judgment we call wisdom).

¹⁰ An editor of this journal asked whether academics cannot engage in activism once they (think they) have found the truth? Why can't such academics turn to trying to implement their views? Let's set aside the issue of when, if ever, one is epistemically justified in holding that belief. (More on this in "In Defense of the Ivory Tower.") The more important issue is that the initial problem of bias simply remains. Even if one is justified in considering a certain point as settled, engaging in activism makes one less able to revisit that belief in light of new and conflicting evidence. Nor is this effect very easily contained, as the biasing effects of activism usually spill over to other beliefs.

¹¹ Jones's other arguments don't cut against the proposed duty. For instance, Jones argues the duty wrongly implies that academia offers a relative haven from bias compared to politics. But the duty implies nothing of the kind. It's precisely *because* academics are susceptible to bias that there is cause for a duty like this.

¹² See Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 5

¹³ It's instructive to compare the uses of logos, chants, slogans, colors and rallies of political parties and sports teams.

¹⁴ Jones (*op. cit.*, p. 6) recognizes the point, citing the empirical evidence that "those less influenced by partisan biases appear to participate less in politics."

¹⁵ Scott Page, *The Difference: How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups, Firms, Schools, and Societies*. Princeton, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007). For helpful further discussion, see Jason Brennan, *Against Democracy*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016). ch. 7.

¹⁶ The best discussion of this remains J. L. Duarte, J. T. Crawford, C. Stern, J. Haidt, L. Jussim, P.E. Tetlock, 'Political diversity will improve social psychological science', *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 38 (2015): 1-13. Needless to say, there is a lack of diversity among several other dimensions, too.

¹⁷ Diana Mutz, *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).