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# In Defense of the Ivory Tower: Why Philosophers Should Stay Out of Politics

## Comments

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## **In Defense of the Ivory Tower: Why Philosophers Should Stay Out of Politics**

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*(Forthcoming in Philosophical Psychology)*

Karl Marx wrote that the point of philosophy is not to interpret the world but to change it. (Marx 1975, Thesis 11) Plato thought that philosophers should be in charge of governing society. (Plato 2004, book VI) Marx and Plato expressed an ideal of the philosopher as a politically engaged person. Philosophers should be directly involved in solving social problems, implementing their theories through political activism. In similar spirit many now complain that university campuses resemble an Ivory Tower. Universities, they lament, have become academic in the pejorative sense – removed from society, focused on esoteric questions. The ideal university is bustling with social and political activity. The ideal academic is socially concerned and politically engaged.<sup>1</sup>

I believe this picture gets things exactly wrong. As I will argue, it is morally wrong for certain academics to be politically active or engaged. In fact, it is wrong for precisely those academics that work on politically relevant topics, most prominently among them political philosophers. For them, the university should become more like an Ivory Tower, not less.

I am interested here in showing the problems with political activism or engagement understood in a relatively common-sense way. There are interesting and complicated questions about what exactly counts as political activism, but I will not consider these here. (Fraser 2008)<sup>2</sup> My aim is to convince you that there are real problems with a number of standard political activities in which many academics do, and think they ought to, engage. Thus, when speaking of

political activism, I will have in mind things like being a member of a political party, campaigning during elections, making political donations, volunteering in advocacy groups, political community organizing, putting up yard signs, bumper stickers, promoting a political party at dinner parties, generally rooting for one side or another, and so on. As will become clear, the problem with these activities is that they encourage us to think about ourselves in partisan terms. And this is incompatible with our academic professional responsibilities.

Most of the discussion below will mention academic political philosophers. In part this is for a reason unrelated to the argument. I am a professional political philosopher myself, and it helps to formulate one's critical arguments in ways that relate to one's own life. But I also focus on academic political philosophers because they represent the archetype of the case with which I am concerned: those who are serious about thinking through political issues. That being said, my conclusions are not limited to political philosophers alone. Those who do not get paid to think about politics, and those who are engaged in other disciplines (sociology, political science, economics, gender studies, psychology, and so on) are subject to the same ethical demands.

My argument relies on three simple claims. Each of these is defended in a separate section. Section 4 discusses some potential objections.

### **(1) The importance of doing a good job**

The first claim of this argument concerns what we might call professional morality, or the ethical demands of taking up a certain role or profession. Consider the following two examples:

**Sam** is a surgeon who is scheduled to perform major surgery on a patient early tomorrow morning. Sam knows this. Sam also knows that he knows he generally performs better after a good night's sleep. Yet Sam goes out drinking with his friends the night before. Sam turns up for work on a few hours' sleep, hung over, to perform the surgery.

**Claire** works as a chemist in a laboratory. Her experiments need to run for eight straight hours and require her to be present to record results every three minutes. This means she cannot leave to have lunch. Claire knows that her laboratory should remain as free from pollutants as it can be. Yet, around lunchtime, Claire decides to eat a sandwich at her workplace. While eating, she continues to monitor the experiment.

What should we say about these cases? One thing that is clear is that we should disapprove of the way in which Claire and (especially) Sam are behaving. Both are taking serious and unnecessary risks. Sam may very well end up seriously harming his patient. Claire may mess up her carefully constructed and expensive experiments, producing faulty results. And both could have easily avoided doing so. A morally responsible person, someone who takes his or her professional responsibilities seriously, would not do these things.

However, to explain why their actions are wrong, we cannot just refer to the nature of Sam and Claire's actions as such. After all, Sam and Claire are hardly doing things that are morally wrong in and of themselves. Generally speaking, it is perfectly permissible to go out for drinks with one's friends or eat a sandwich at one's workplace. Moreover, the wrongness of their actions also is not adequately explained by referring to the harm they cause. After all, Sam

might end up performing well despite his hangover, and Claire might succeed in catching all the crumbs.

What makes Sam and Claire's behavior wrong, then, are the circumstances imposed by their respective professions. Both have a responsibility, and a moral one at that, to perform their professional tasks well. Sam and Claire are not living up to this responsibility. This suggests a moral principle associated with our professional responsibilities. I will call it the principle of responsible professionalism (RP). We can state it as follows:

**RP:** People who take up a certain role or profession thereby acquire a prima facie moral duty to make a reasonable effort to avoid things that predictably make them worse at their tasks.<sup>3</sup>

RP is a precautionary principle. It requires that those who take up a certain role or profession, like that of a surgeon or chemist, take reasonable steps that protect them against doing a bad job. Sam should take reasonable measures to make sure he does not mess up his surgery, and he fails to do so by going out drinking. Claire should take reasonable measures to make sure she does not mess up her experiments, and she fails to do so by eating a sandwich in what should be a clean test environment.<sup>4</sup>

This principle RP needs to be qualified in certain ways. For example, it seems plausible that RP applies only to those roles and professions that are morally acceptable. It makes no sense to say that the hitman has a moral duty to be good at killing people. But this will not affect our discussion since we can take it for granted that the profession of a political philosopher is morally acceptable. Another possible qualification may be that RP applies only to certain professions, and not to all ("mere") jobs. Perhaps people do not have an obligation to

take the reasonable precautions for avoiding being bad at flipping burgers, cleaning the floors, or issuing driver's licenses. Perhaps RP applies only to those professions that have a kind of public dimension – like medicine, research, public office, or teaching. I do not think this is plausible, but will accept it here as it does not affect my argument about the profession occupied by political thinkers.<sup>5</sup>

One thing to keep in mind about RP is that it only requires that we avoid those things that predictably make us worse at performing our tasks. In this sense RP is modest. It requires only that we take certain precautions. This is the point about Sam and Claire. As a precaution, Sam should have gone to bed on time and sober. And as a precaution, Claire should arrange for some other way to eat her lunch so as to avoid needlessly polluting her experiment.

RP therefore does not require that we be perfect at our tasks. It does not even require that we be very good. Even a well-rested Sam may end up harming his patient. And even a more careful Claire may botch the experiment. Perfection is not the point. In fact, perfection is not enough to satisfy RP. Sam might perform the best surgery of his life despite his hangover, and Claire might succeed, somehow, in keeping crumbs from falling in her test tubes. They would still violate RP. Sam and Claire would have been lucky. But they should not have taken the risk.

RP is modest in another way as well. It does not require that we take all precautions we can. We only have to take those precautions that are reasonably available to us. Perhaps Sam could also increase the chances of doing a good job if he never watched any television. And perhaps Claire could keep her test environment even cleaner if she were to shave her head. But that might be asking too much of our surgeons and chemists. The principle expressed by PR

does not require that we forgo the ingredients of a normal human life. The expectation that Sam skip a night of drinking and Claire postpone her lunch until are not unreasonable in that way.

This principle of course does not just apply to surgeons and chemists. It applies to a variety of roles or professions, including that of the political philosopher.<sup>6</sup> To know what the implications of RP are for political philosophers, we have to ask what their professional task consists in.

## **(2) The truth about politics**

The answer, I submit, is straightforward: the task of the political philosopher is to seek the truth about politics.

If that sounds jarring, consider again the case of Claire. The problem with Claire's eating a sandwich, we said, is that it significantly increases the risk of her results becoming distorted. Eating a sandwich introduces pollutants (breadcrumbs) into a test environment that should remain as clean as it can reasonably be. Claire needs such an environment to find out the nature of the chemical reaction she is studying, and not the other type of reaction brought about by the pollutants. The problem, in other words, is that Claire increases the risk that her findings do not reflect the truth about the reaction she is studying.

Claire's position is a model of the position of professional thinkers or academics in general. Academics and thinkers are in the business of finding out the truth about their subject matter. Although no doubt a simplification of their respective fields, chemists seek the truth about chemical reactions, psychologists seek the truth about the human mind, biologists seek



the truth about living nature, physicists seek the truth about the physical world, and so on. Similarly, the job of those who investigate political issues is to seek the truth about politics. Some do this descriptively – figuring out how politics really works – some prescriptively – figuring out how politics really should work – and some combine the two.

This is not to deny that there are important differences between philosophical inquiry and the kinds of research that chemists, physicists, and others undertake. Philosophy, and especially political philosophy, can involve evaluative or justificatory judgments that other disciplines might avoid. But those judgments are subject to standards of correctness as well. Good political philosophy involves understanding, interpreting, and perhaps weighing different political values and considerations in the right way. It involves capturing their proper nature, significance, and relations.<sup>7</sup>

Bearing these points in mind, then, we can say that the professional task of political philosophers is similar to Claire's. Political philosophers should seek the (complex, evaluative) truth about politics. This is the second claim of my argument. The truth about politics, we might say, is the *telos* of political thinking. It is that at which we ought to aim.

To see this, consider two further imaginary cases. Imagine someone whose research focuses on normative political principles, call her Phoebe the political philosopher. Suppose Phoebe sets out to develop a normative political theory that she is quite sure contains a number of fallacies and consequently prescribes the opposite of what politics should be. What should we say about Phoebe? It seems clear that she is at least being dishonest, if not worse. Phoebe is writing books and articles that represent the facts about political philosophy in misleading ways, and aim to convince others of things that are wrong (and not just wrong in the

sense of false, but also wrong in the sense of unjust). Phoebe knowingly introduces bad arguments into the philosophical debate, thus moving the debate away from recognizing what should really be done politically.<sup>8</sup>

This example is extreme. But many of us are familiar with milder cases. Suppose that Phoebe has strong libertarian leanings. She assiduously studies the works of John Locke, Adam Smith, Robert Nozick, Friedrich Hayek, Murray Rothbard, and other noted libertarian thinkers, but refuses to consider or even read the works of Karl Marx, John Rawls, G.A. Cohen, Ronald Dworkin, or anyone else who has objected to libertarian ideals. Phoebe refuses to study these authors because they are not libertarian. They are wrong, she thinks, so why bother?

Here too, it is perfectly clear that Phoebe fails to adequately carry out her professional responsibilities.<sup>9</sup> The search for the truth requires that researchers do their best to honestly assess and evaluate all the relevant available evidence. This is true of political philosophy as much as it is true of chemistry, physics, or any other discipline. Thus, Phoebe ought to be open-minded, consider all relevant sides of the debate, and carefully weigh the arguments pro and con. She should honestly try to find out which normative political principles are true, and which are false. She should not settle for reaffirming how she was right all along.

In both these cases, Phoebe does not do what she is supposed to do: genuinely seek the truth about politics. In the first example, Phoebe fails to do this by developing theories that are intentionally false. In the second, by using research methods that do not reliably bring us closer to the truth.

When we combine the claim that the task of political philosophers is to seek the truth about politics with the principle PR, it follows that Phoebe's actions are prima facie wrong. We can thus formulate an applied version of PR:

**PR (applied)** Political philosophers (and others like them) have a prima facie moral duty to make a reasonable effort to avoid those things that predictably make them worse at seeking the truth about political issues.<sup>10</sup>

As before, the point here is not about perfection. Phoebe's work need not be actually true lest she violates her professional duties. That would be implausible. Virtually all theories that have been formulated on virtually all topics are false. Newtonian physics showed Ptolemaic systems to be false. Einstein showed that Newtonian physics was mistaken. And it is likely that at some point General Relativity will be refuted as well. But the point of these theories has always been to find the truth. They were part of a debate in which academics aim to discover the way things really are. And that is how it should have been. The same applies to Phoebe. She should make an honest effort at seeking the truth about politics.

The applied version of PR suggests some familiar conclusions. We should speak our minds and honestly represent the conclusions that we think are true – even if this might upset our audience, friends, or colleagues. We should use reliable methods and be open about how we have reached the conclusions that we defend. And this is true irrespective of the truth of our conclusions.

But there are other, less commonly recognized ways in which political philosophers can violate their professional duties as well. This includes being politically active.

### **(3) The effects of political activism**

Political activism violates the professional duty of political philosophers not to impair their ability to seek the truth because it biases our thinking about politics in important ways. Over the past decades psychologists have uncovered many biases shared by people like you and me. These biases commonly lead us to adopt beliefs and commitments on grounds that have less to do with an honest and rational assessment of the available evidence, and more with things such as how well they fit with what we like, already believe, or the framework in which they are presented. Our minds like taking shortcuts, and these shortcuts bias our views away from what would be warranted on the basis of the available evidence in predictable ways.

Daniel Kahneman describes forms of biased thinking as involving a process he calls “substitution”. Substitution happens when our minds use the answer to an easier question (one that is readily available in our minds) to answer the more difficult question that we are actually asked. (Kahneman 2011, 12) To see how this works, consider an experiment in which participants were asked to evaluate their general happiness and dating life. The participants were presented with the following two questions:

- How happy are you these days?
- How many dates did you have last month?

The order in which these questions appear should have no bearing on our answers of course. But it does. If the questions are asked in the order above, there is almost no correlation between people’s responses to them. When they are switched around, a very strong correlation appears. This is substitution at work. If we already have in mind a view of our love

life, we use this easily available answer to respond to the second (and harder) question about our general happiness. (Kahneman 2011, 101-2; Strack et al. 1988)<sup>11</sup>

The process of substitution occurs in politically active people. In fact, a number of studies suggest that the dominant force in people's belief-formation about political matters is their belief of the position adopted by the party with which they identify. That is, activist people support policies not on the basis of their assessment of the policy's virtues, but on the basis of the position of the group or political party with which they identify.

Cohen (2003) presented groups of liberal and conservative people with one of two versions of a welfare policy proposal. One version provided generous benefits, whereas the other version provided stringent benefits. When no other information was supplied liberal participants preferred the generous policy, conservatives preferred the stringent one. Cohen then added the additional information whether Republicans or Democrats proposed a certain policy. He found that this information is the most significant factor in determining people's support or opposition for the policy. Liberals generally support the generous policy if told that Democrats support it, yet support the stringent policy if told the opposite. Conservatives generally support the generous policy if told that Republicans support it, yet support the stringent policy if told the opposite. Policy content had no significant effect on people's responses in these cases.

Cohen found that we base our support or opposition to policies primarily on "our" party's position. The bias at work here is in-group bias. Our reasoning is strongly sensitive to the social groups to which we think we are accountable. (Haidt 2001; Haidt 2013; Leary 2005; Lerner and Tetlock 2003) Instead of thinking for ourselves about the issues, we adopt the

beliefs that we think others in the relevantly same group hold. That is, instead of doing the hard work of thinking about a welfare policy ourselves, we use the group's beliefs as a substitute.<sup>12</sup>

In a similar experiment, Westen (2008) asked committed Democrats and Republicans to evaluate the behavior of politicians as consistent, hypocritical, trustworthy, and so on. He found that the more politically involved participants engage in the most seriously biased reasoning. When asked to judge the missteps of politicians from the parties they support, partisans are prone to forgive and look for excuses. When asked to judge similar missteps of politicians from parties they oppose, partisans are prone to condemn severely. As with Cohen's experiments, Westen found that politically involved people's judgments are heavily influenced by party affiliation. Their views conform to what their preferred politicians and groups say or do.<sup>13</sup> (Cf. Fischle 2000, Lakoff 2009)

These findings are not just the result of in-group bias. Other political biases strengthen these effects. One is called the affect heuristic or motivated reasoning. This bias occurs when people substitute what they like and dislike for what they believe is true. In these cases, our "judgments and decisions are guided directly by feelings of liking and disliking, with little deliberation or reasoning." (Ditto et al. 2003; Ditto et al. 2009; Kahneman 2011, 12; Kunda 1990;) Another example is the halo-effect, which leads us to interpret facts in ways that make them cohere with other parts of the context in which we are invested. Thus, personal approval of the President, say, and approval of his policies tend to go hand in hand. (Kahneman 2011, 82) The availability heuristic, third, makes things with which we are familiar seem more plausible. Politically active people to have fresh in their minds the solutions proposed by those from

“their” side, and this by itself makes those proposals seem better. (Tverski and Kahneman 1973; Schwarz et al. 1991; Zaller 1992) And so on.

Empirical studies of voter behavior support these findings. Lenz (2012; See also Bartels 2002; Jacoby 1988; Logde and Hemmel, 1986; Rahn 1993) studied the conduct and expressed preferences of voters in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands. Lenz found that the policy positions of politicians do not significantly influence election results. Voters rarely shift their votes so as to pick the politician who agrees with their views about what policies to pursue. In fact they usually do the exact opposite: they adopt the views their preferred politicians espouse. Lenz summarizes:

[V]oters first decide they like a politician for other reasons, then adopt his or her policy views... Voters don't choose between politicians based on policy stances; rather, voters appear to adopt the policies that their favorite politicians prefer. Moreover, voters seem to follow rather blindly, adopting a particular politician's specific policies even when they know little or nothing of that politician's overall ideology. (Lenz 2012, 3)<sup>14</sup>

The biasing effects of political activism have an important implication for political thinking. Once we view ourselves as having a certain political bend or affiliation, we become invested in that self-image. We naturally come to think of ourselves as liberals, conservatives, libertarians, greens, or what not. We come to like the views that we hold, we come to like the people who hold similar views to ours, and these likings negatively affect our ability to honestly and impartially weigh the evidence. Instead of rationally evaluating the case for or against a certain position, we base our views in part on how “our” group thinks, how it makes us feel

about ourselves as partisans, and other biasing grounds. Political activism, in other words, biases our thinking about political issues.

Suppose you think of yourself as a liberal and sympathize with the Democratic Party. You endorse that party's views on various issues about which you have carefully thought such as, say, the appropriate manner and level of taxation, foreign policy, and social issues. However, you have not seriously considered the issue of gun control. Suppose now that this suddenly becomes the politically issue of the day. Upon hearing that the Democratic Party is in favor of tighter regulations of gun ownership, you are likely to adopt the belief that this, or something close to this, is the correct policy. Despite not seriously thinking about the issue, you will form a certain view about it.

This affects our thinking in a number of ways. The views we adopt in these ways function as starting points for our thought. We attribute some initial plausibility to them and, as such, these views affect our future thinking about this issue. Moreover, because these views are now part of how we see the political or moral universe, they affect our thinking about other issues as well. They become part of the larger context in which we try to fit our theories.

For philosophers, biasing our thinking about such issues on the basis of mere political affiliation violates the demands of professional responsibility. It interferes with our ability to honestly seek the truth about politics. Activist political philosophers, then, are relevantly similar to Claire the chemist. Claire's decision to eat her sandwich at her workplace was irresponsible because it increased the risk of polluting the experiment and corrupting her findings. For political philosophers, activism does the same. Activism risks polluting our thought and



corrupting our findings. Just as Claire should not eat her sandwich at her workplace, political philosophers should stay away from activism.

Perhaps you think a milder stance is called for. Perhaps philosophers simply have a duty to try their best to avoid or undo their biases? It is certainly true that our biases are not inescapable. We can fight them by actively seeking out dissenting views and opinions, by forcing ourselves to put opposing positions in their strongest light, by actively engaging and talking to those who disagree with us, by focusing on the strengths of their views rather than their weaknesses, and so on. (Lewandowsky et al. 2012)

Certainly philosophers have a duty to try and correct their biases. But it would be a serious mistake to stop here. Consider again Claire and Sam. It is not enough for Claire to just try her best to catch all the breadcrumbs before they fall into the test tubes. And it is not enough for Sam to just take a cold shower and drink lots of coffee to overcome his hangover. Claire and Sam still violate their professional duties. They act wrongly because of the risks they took – Claire and Sam made success unnecessarily unlikely. The same point applies to activist political philosophers. Avoiding bias is not impossible, but it is really difficult. We are typically biased without noticing it and we tend to fall back into bias even when we are aware of it. (Lilienfeld et al. 2009; Pronin et al. 2002) Correcting bias requires active vigilance on an ongoing basis, and this is hard work indeed.<sup>15</sup> Being politically active thus involves seriously exacerbating the risk of becoming biased about political issues. This is the sense in which activist philosophers violate their professional duties. They make seeking the truth about political issues needlessly difficult.

Does not the method of philosophy prevent biased thinking?<sup>16</sup> After all, philosophers have to formulate logically valid arguments and spell out the premises on which their conclusions depend. Unfortunately not. Bias does not just affect the conclusions we are likely to accept. It also affects our assessment of the evidence, and thus the premises we are likely to accept. We evaluate the importance, credibility, and relevance of evidence for and against a certain view depending on whether it supports or contradicts the views we already hold. You are more likely to positively judge evidence that supports views you hold, and negatively judge evidence against it. Kahneman (2011, 103) explains:

Your political preference determines the arguments that you find compelling. If you like the current health policy, you believe its benefits are substantial and its costs more manageable than the costs of alternatives. If you are a hawk in your attitude toward other nations, you probably think they are relatively weak and likely to submit to your country's will. If you are a dove you probably think they are strong and will not be easily coerced.

Consider again the example of gun control. If "your" party supports tighter regulations, your assessment of the evidence will be affected in favor or against such regulations. You are likely to think guns are dangerous, perhaps because you end up focusing on stories in the news that involved harm. And you are likely to be unimpressed by their potential benefits, perhaps because you discount news stories that involve people protecting themselves and exaggerate the quality of police-protection. Similarly, you are likely to be sympathetic to the regulatory and risk-reducing functions of the state. And you are likely to be unimpressed with the recreational value of gun ownership. If "your" party holds the opposite view, your assessment of the

evidence will be affected accordingly. This effect harms even our ability to interpret simple statistical evidence. (Kahan et al. 2013) As a result, biased people can come up with remarkably sophisticated rationalizations for why, upon reflection, their earlier unreflective views turn out to be more or less correct. (Haidt 2013; Kuhn 1989; Kunda 1990; Mercier and Sperber 2010; Nickerson 1998; Pyszczynski and Greenberg 1987; Shaw 1996)

For philosophers even provisionally adopting biased beliefs is dangerous, therefore. Once those beliefs are in place, they become difficult to dislodge. When we (tentatively) take a stand on certain conclusions, we also take a stand on what premises we are willing to endorse as true. Kahneman uses a telling term for this – he calls it the primacy of conclusions. For political philosophers primacy should lie with the arguments.<sup>17</sup>

The correct response to this problem, then, is not to invite these biases in the first place. If we have no party or movement that is “ours”, we cannot be biased on the basis of our allegiances. We should replace the ideal of the political philosopher as socially engaged and politically active, with another ideal: that of the political philosopher as the disinterested seeker of the truth.<sup>18</sup>

#### **(4) Some objections**

Let me summarize the argument so far:

- (1) People who take up a certain role or profession thereby acquire a prima facie moral duty to make a reasonable effort to avoid those things that predictably make them worse at their tasks
- (2) The task of political philosophers is to seek the truth about political issues

- (3) Therefore, political philosophers have a prima facie moral duty to make a reasonable effort to avoid those things that predictably make them worse at seeking the truth about political issues
- (4) Being politically active predictably makes us worse at seeking the truth about political issues
- (5) Therefore, political philosophers have a prima facie moral duty to avoid being politically active

Anyone who wants to resist the conclusion will have to resist at least one of the argument's premises. I have made a case for each of them. This section discusses some possible objections.

**(A)** A first possible concern is that something is missing from premise (4). The principle in (1) requires that we avoid political activity only if doing so can be reasonably expected of us. But (4) does not say that avoiding political activism is reasonable. Might it be unreasonable to expect philosophers to avoid political activism?

One reason why the demand might be thought unreasonable is because it puts excessive burdens on political philosophers. But this is hard to maintain. Many people stay out of political activism and they do just fine. Activism is not a necessary ingredient of a good life. And philosophers who stay out of politics will have more time to spend on other things they care about and make life worthwhile. Of course it may be that certain philosophers simply love their activism so much that they cannot bear the idea of giving it up. But that does not make the demand unreasonable; it makes them unfit for political philosophy.

Another reason the demand may seem unreasonable is because of the burdens it would put on society. Now in one sense the impact of philosopher withdrawal would be negligible.

Philosophers make up a very small segment of the population, incapable of making a noticeable numerical difference. And many people in even the healthiest democracies around the world are not politically active and, in the grand scheme of things, these democracies seem to do just fine. But there is another, more sensible worry here. Perhaps withdrawal by political philosophers from activism would harm the political process not because of the quantitative difference it would make, but because of its qualitative difference. Perhaps, that is, a healthy polity needs philosopher activism so that their ideas become part of the public debate.

Suppose we agree. That still does not mean that philosophers themselves must be politically active. Philosophers can introduce good philosophical ideas and reasoning in ways that do not involve their personal activism and allegiance. They can publish in academic outlets. They can write non-partisan op-ed pieces. They can talk to politically active people. And so on. The demand that philosophers refrain from personal activism is not a demand for removing good political philosophy from the public realm or debate.

Moreover, if philosophers have a duty to do their jobs well, the same is true of political activists. Responsible activists should make sure they push for genuine improvements to society. And this requires informing oneself of the best available evidence about political principles. Activists, in other words, should familiarize themselves with the best available political philosophy.<sup>19</sup>

I am urging, then, for a division of labor. It is the job of political philosophers to find out the correct principles for politics. It is the job of activists to implement these. The focus of each should be firmly on their own task. Activists should not produce political philosophy but consume it. Philosophers should produce political philosophy worth consuming.

We tend to accept this division of labor in our assessment of activists. Few think the David Axelrods and Karl Roves of this world are morally lacking because they do not undertake serious political philosophy. We understand that they cannot be expected to do this. They do not have the time, knowledge, or ability. And we accept, even, that it might be imprudent for them to engage in serious philosophy – it might make them less effective as activists because of the doubt that it typically creates. But if this is good enough for activists, it should be good enough for philosophers too.

**(B)** A second objection holds that the conclusion of my argument cannot be true because the principle of responsible professionalism mentioned in premise (1) is suspect. The worry about this principle is that it prevents people from doing things that they should do as good citizens. Political activism is part of civic virtue<sup>20</sup> and what is virtue for some cannot be vice for others.

In one sense it is true that what is virtue for some cannot be vice for others. If generosity is a virtue for some then it is a virtue for everyone. But it is false to say that if an act is virtuous in one case, it must be virtuous in all cases. Suppose you want to start a business and need to apply for a permit. It would be generous for me to pay your application fee. But this does not mean that the bureaucrat who waives the application fee of his friend is generous as well. Virtue needs to be exercised with sensitivity to circumstances and context. Doing the outward act that in most circumstances constitutes virtuous behavior under other conditions may not be virtuous, and is sometimes vicious.

So it does not follow from the fact that political philosophers should display civic virtue that they must do so in the same way as others do. Roughly speaking, civic virtue requires that

one be a good member of the community, someone who contributes to the common good. This can be done in a variety of ways, not all of which involve political involvement. We can display civic virtue by volunteering for charitable organizations, by helping to solve local problems in our communities, by offering our service to people who lack the means to purchase it, and so on. The argument above implies, then, that political philosophers should exercise their civic virtue in these ways.<sup>21</sup>

**(C)** Finally, consider premise (2), the idea that political philosophers should seek the truth about political issues. Some take Marx's remark that the point of philosophy is not to understand the world but to change it as the rejection of this premise. In fact, there are a number of different ways to challenge this point. I will consider four versions of this objection: (i) the need for social change trumps the imperative to find the truth, (ii) there is no truth to political philosophy, (iii) the profession as a whole ought to seek the truth, but not individual philosophers, and (iv) the philosopher cannot uncover the truth about politics without personal activism.

The problem with the first version of this objection is easy to spot. Suppose that the need to make the world a better place really does trump considerations of truth. That raises an obvious question: how should we go about this? In order to make the world a better place, we first need to know what would make it better. But to ask this question is to ask the central question of political philosophy. And to answer it we need to know the truth about political philosophy. In this sense, truth cannot be avoided.

But what if there is no truth in political philosophy at all? Surely political philosophers cannot have a duty to seek the truth if truth does not exist. This objection cannot be so readily

dismissed. After all, those of us who seek the truth about politics might simply be mistaken about what we do. But the objection does not bode well for the profession of political philosophy. If there is no truth to be discovered about political principles, then what exactly are political philosophers supposed to be doing? What is left of the “theories” and “arguments” we develop? And why would developing these theories and arguments, with all their intricate detail and sophistication, be worth our time? With the truth out of the window, little of importance seems to be left.<sup>22</sup>

I do not mean that truth is the *sine qua non* of a worthwhile academic discipline. Perhaps those who specialize in music, theater, or dance do not seek to uncover truth (although this is to overgeneralize considerably). Yet these endeavors seem worthwhile nonetheless. However, these disciplines aim at something else of value, such as beauty or entertainment. Political philosophy without truth does not have a similar aim. It sounds more like therapy than an important line of inquiry.<sup>23</sup>

The third variation of this objection holds that even if the profession of political philosophy as a whole should seek the truth, this does not mean that individual philosophers should do so as well. The idea here is analogous to John Stuart Mill’s famous defense of free speech. Perhaps the community of philosophers is most likely to find the truth if many different views, including mistaken ones, were allowed to be voiced. Does this not mean that philosophers should be unabashed partisans? (Cf. Muirhead 2006; White and Ypi 2011)

This is implausible. While Millian rights to free speech protect us even when we say things that are false, stupid, or hurtful, they do not justify us in saying such things. People with rights to free speech still have the moral duty to refrain from deception and lies. The same goes



for philosophers. The search for philosophical truth is immensely difficult. And no doubt the best we can do as a profession is to allow all philosophical voices in the debate, including biased ones. But this is no call for biased philosophy. A good debate requires good participants, and it is hard to see how the debate should aim at the truth while its participants do not.

A final version of this objection holds that seeking the truth about political issues in fact requires personal activism on the part of the philosopher. Ypi (2011) has argued that the activist “avant-garde” plays an especially important role for political philosophy because first-hand political involvement reveals important issues, details, and nuances for political philosophy. These will be overlooked by those who do philosophy from the armchair, so to speak. Based on observations like Ypi’s, it might be thought that understanding the truth about political philosophy requires political activism on the part of the philosopher.

Even if Ypi is right about the importance of the “avant-garde” that does not mean that philosophers should be activists. There is a difference between saying (a) that political activism provides crucial insights for political philosophy that would otherwise not be available, and (b) that one cannot access these insights without engaging in activism oneself. The former may be plausible, but the latter is not. To see this, compare the example of slavery. It seems plausible that we cannot understand the full depths and complexities of the evils of slavery from the armchair. Responsible philosophical reflection needs to take into account the experiences and insights of those who have been slaves, and pay close attention to their narratives and demands. But it does not follow that anyone who has not been a slave cannot understand what makes slavery wrong. If that were true, few in the West could still understand the evil of slavery

today. The wrongs of slavery are moral wrongs, wrongs of degradation, humiliation, oppression, and more. And these wrongs are universal across humanity and time.<sup>24</sup>

The lesson of Ypi's argument about the "avant-garde," if successful, therefore is that political philosophers should pay special attention to the insights of political activists. It is not that they must be activists themselves.<sup>25</sup>

## **(5) Conclusion**

Political philosophers have a prima facie professional duty not to be politically active. The conclusion, no doubt, is paradoxical. Those who are most serious about thinking about political issues should be the least politically active.

As a profession, we do a poor job in living up to this standard. Many academics I know donate to campaigns, put signs in their yards, tell students what to think about the issues of the day, and are politically active in other ways. The argument of this paper shows that this is not a responsible attitude. Marx and Plato can be forgiven for their psychologically naïve views. We should do better.<sup>26</sup>

As political philosophers, we find ourselves in a precarious situation. For many of us it is difficult to separate our activism from the reasons why we became attracted to thinking about political issues in the first place. We choose our professions, fields, and topics because they matter. And so we may begin our philosophical journeys with a number of judgments and principles already in mind. As a result, we start in inevitably biased ways. But while this is understandable, it does not mean we can afford to ignore the ways in which continued activism

might lead us astray. Once we undertake that journey, we must leave some of our initial baggage behind.

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<sup>1</sup> For just a few examples, see Walzer (1993, 2002), Williams (2012), Feltham (2013). Note also that at many universities “community-engaged scholarship” is now among the criteria for tenure.

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps this common-sense idea of activism is misguided and activism includes much more. In that case my argument should be read as showing that a range of such activities are morally problematic for political philosophers.

<sup>3</sup> The duty is “prima facie” because it can be overridden or outweighed by more important and countervailing moral considerations. The principle demands precautions against things that risk making us worse at our tasks compared to a situation in which we did not take those precautions.

<sup>4</sup> Of course no test environment is ever entirely clean. But this does not change the point that Claire should avoid introducing unnecessary pollutants. As will become clear below, very much the same is true of political philosophers.

<sup>5</sup> The principle PR is a role-based principle. So while I will talk throughout about jobs, professions, or vocations, nothing in my argument depends on having a job title or being paid to think about political issues. That said, people who do get paid to think about political issues are likely under an additional duty to the same effect. They may have fiduciary duties to their employers to take the precautions mentioned in RP. This bolsters my conclusions.



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<sup>6</sup> Recall, while I speak of political philosophy, my argument is directed at anyone who studies politically relevant issues, regardless of discipline.

<sup>7</sup> This does not mean that there must be a *single* right understanding, interpretation, or weighting. Perhaps the truth is that there are a number of ways in which political societies can be organized, each no more correct than the others.

<sup>8</sup> Of course it can make sense sometimes to present a fallacious argument in order to make a point, say about that style of argument or the particular fallacy it contains. But that requires that we announce that the argument is fallacious and explain the mistake. Phoebe, we are imagining, does no such thing.

<sup>9</sup> The same problem, of course, arises if Phoebe were to do the reverse.

<sup>10</sup> This claim does not rely on any particular theory of the truth about politics, or truth in general. One might believe that things are true if they correspond to the way things actually are, if they cohere in some relevant way, or something else. And one might hold that the truth about politics is “out there” to be discovered, (partially) the result of our justificatory practices, or something else. Whatever truth in these cases might come to, my claim here is that philosophers should seek it.

<sup>11</sup> Similar effects are found with other irrelevant influences, such as the weather. (Schwartz and Clore 1983)

<sup>12</sup> In-group bias is nasty. Tajfel (1981) conducted experiments in which he randomly assigned subjects to groups. He would then tell subjects that members of other groups shared some imaginary frivolous trait. Tajfel found that subjects quickly developed strong positive feelings

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toward members of their own group, and distrust toward members of other groups. See also Tajfel (1982), Taffel and Turner (1979). For a detailed study of the effects of in-group bias on political reasoning, see Haidt (2013).

<sup>13</sup> Worryingly, magnetic imaging of the brain that such biased reasoning is in fact pleasurable, making it hard to resist. (Westen, Blagoc, Harenski, Klits, and Hamann 2007; Haidt 2013, 189)

<sup>14</sup> The one exception to Lenz's findings concerns relatively objective measures of economic performance.

<sup>15</sup> Kahneman (2011, 28) suggests it may be more demanding than is good for us. In general, people do not like to correct their biases. Mutz (2006) shows that politically engaged people are less likely to surround themselves with those who have politically dissenting views. We find political disagreement uncomfortable and this reinforces the processes of bias. Moreover, correcting bias has its own problems. It can lead to overcompensation and thus bias in the opposite direction. (Nyhan and Reifler 2010)

<sup>16</sup> We are neither too smart nor too educated to be biased. Intelligence is at best a poor guard against bias. (Kahneman 2011, 49; Brennan 2011, 104) In fact, smarter people are less aware of their biases. (West, Meserve, and Stanovich 2012) Nor does education protect us against bias. (Perkins et al.; Haidt 2013, 94-5)

<sup>17</sup> The problem is especially serious given that the dominant method in political philosophy ("reflective equilibrium") puts a prize on conclusions fitting our intuitions. (Daniels 2011)

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<sup>18</sup> Activism may lead us to violate other professional responsibilities as well. Ideological bias seems to negatively affect hiring decisions, for example. See Inbar and Lammers (2012) and Rothman et al. (2005).

<sup>19</sup> Of course they too should try to avoid being biased. But, not being philosophers, they are not under the same special obligation to do so.

<sup>20</sup> Some defend the even stronger view that partisanship is part of civic virtue. (Rosenblum 2010; Muirhead 2006)

<sup>21</sup> These are public, non-political ways of displaying civic virtue. Brennan (2011, ch. 2) argues that even non-public, non-political actions can be part of civic virtue.

<sup>22</sup> Note that if this objection somehow gets philosophers off the hook (without destroying the value of their profession), the same is not true for academics asking descriptive questions about politics. Presumably there is a truth about the way the world *is* even if there is no truth about the way the world ought to be.

<sup>23</sup> A milder version of this objection would see the task of political philosophy as mapping conceptual space, not seeking the truth. But this fails to remove the problem of political bias. Our biases affect not only our ability to judge the veracity of propositions, but also our understanding of the terms and concepts involved. We frame ideas that conform to our political leanings in ways that make them sound better and cohere with other plausible beliefs, and vice versa. Political activism also impairs our ability to correctly map conceptual space.

<sup>24</sup> Trivially, of course, first-hand experience might be necessary for knowing “what it’s like” from the inside, so to speak, to be a slave. But that kind of knowledge is not necessary for understanding what makes slavery wrong.

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<sup>25</sup> Note that, even if I am wrong about this, and seeking the truth about politics requires personal activism, that still does not license unbridled activism. The problem of bias still exists. We need, then, to balance the drawbacks and alleged benefits of activism. Most likely this would mean that activism is permissible for only those who work on topics for which activism is particularly likely to yield insight.

<sup>26</sup> In fairness, a number of psychologists have started taking these and related concerns seriously. See e.g. Tetlock (1994), Mullen et al. (2003). See also Jonathan Haidt's writings on the topic, available online at <http://people.stern.nyu.edu/jhaidt/postpartisan.html> (accessed at 6/21/2014). To my knowledge, however, philosophers, political scientists, and really anyone else, have so far either ignored or actively denied my conclusion.