

# Teaching political philosophy and academic neutrality

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## ABSTRACT

Should lecturers who teach political philosophy hide their personal political beliefs? This question becomes interesting when lecturers face what seems to be morally repugnant policies, such as massive human rights violations. In such cases is there a conflict between a lecturer's civic and political obligations and their academic and pedagogical ones. This article argues that while university lecturers should not adhere to academic neutrality, they should be impartial. While arguing such a distinction is drawn between paternalism and empowerment through teaching.

KEYWORDS *academic neutrality, empowerment, impartiality, objectivity, political philosophy*

## INTRODUCTION

### *Background*

IN 2002, WHILE I was teaching in Israel, I was very worried about the immorality of Israel's policies towards the Palestinians. A group of several colleagues and myself initiated a petition. The petition set out our position, *as university lecturers*, on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. It was published in the press and we were interviewed about the moral grounds for our view.

The next day, when I entered my MA seminar on 'Political Philosophy and Practice', one of the students challenged me: 'How dare you tell us that political philosophy can change the world if you, Israeli political theorists, have failed to put forward the argument that would stop the occupation?' Many students joined him, saying that academics in general, but political theorists in

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particular, were having rather little impact on the state's policies. As if this was not enough, when I left the classroom I bumped into an ex-student of mine. He was furious:

I am so disappointed. You exploited your position as a university professor when you signed this petition as 'Professor so and so'. You must distinguish between your political opinions and your position as a university professor. This is the opposite of what you have always taught us about the profession of teaching politics.

'Is that what I taught them?' I thought to myself while rushing to my room; 'Can't be'. I looked at the textbooks they had read in their first year of undergraduate studies. Indeed, they discussed academic objectivity and neutrality. Funny, because I had been feeling during the years following the collapse of the peace process in the Middle East, that political philosophers couldn't afford the luxury of not referring to the 'situation'. They were even obliged to put forward their moral arguments and provoke the students to use the tools we had given them, such as concepts, theories, and the like, to reflect more profoundly on these issues. In fact, political philosophers were doing so in any case by the very fact that they were teaching political philosophy in the context of the conflict. So were the books wrong?

This very question is the topic of this article: when we teach political philosophy, do we inevitably become engaged in politics? Or can we hide our personal political positions? However, if we can, *should* we? If political philosophy differs from science because it is normative by definition, can it still be neutral? This group of questions is, in fact, part of a larger 'family' of questions with several cousins and nephews, such as questions about truth, truthfulness and objectivity, and, as I shall argue, a very close cousin called impartiality. However, I shall refer only to some of these concepts simply because I lack the space to refer to all of them. I focus, though, on the question of academic neutrality.<sup>1</sup> Most of the works that do touch upon this issue refer to teaching in schools (Gutmann, 1987; Brighouse, 1998; Levinson, 1999; Macedo and Tamir, 2001; Reich, 2002). This article, though, refers to teaching adults at university.

#### *Structure of argument*

After defining academic neutrality I analyze two arguments, which have been raised by others, about why political philosophy cannot be neutral. I suggest that they fail to justify this position, or that they do not fully explain why political philosophers should not be neutral. The first such argument is that political philosophy cannot be objective and therefore it cannot be neutral. Distinguishing between being objective and being neutral I conclude that

objectivity does not necessarily lead to neutrality, and is not a necessary condition for it. The second argument about why political philosophers can't be neutral links neutrality with multiculturalism. I distinguish between two such claims: 'normative multiculturalism' (represented here by Bhikhu Parekh's works), according to which neutrality is a form of domination, and 'empirical multiculturalism' (represented here by works of the political theorist Daniel Bell) according to which neutrality is methodologically mistaken. The former, I claim, is far fetched, whereas the latter does not establish whether academic neutrality is *morally* acceptable.

I therefore put forward a third argument for why political philosophers' neutrality is morally wrong. I claim that it is irresponsible, and that the very fact that they are trained as political philosophers implies that political philosophers have a special responsibility, and therefore have to take sides. I elaborate on this, distinguishing between empowerment and paternalism. Finally, I argue that Bell's position suggests that political philosophers should be impartial. After extending Bell's notion of academic impartiality, I explain why political philosophers should be impartial.

#### ACADEMIC NEUTRALITY: THE LIBERAL POSITION

There is a widespread position on the question of the political philosopher's political commitment, which I shall call the 'liberal' position (although, admittedly, not all liberals espouse it): political philosophers elucidate concepts and conceptions and answer normative questions. However, they do so from a position of academic (to be distinguished from state) neutrality. They must not write and teach aiming to have an influence in this or that direction. In fact, they should strive not to have an influence. By 'influence', I mean influence their political views and behavior. (One could influence one's students in other ways, e.g. to become more careful reasoners.) Notice that the emphasis is on the philosophers' motivation, or goal. 'Being academically neutral' is intentional. In addition, it is usually *ad hoc*, because it always means neutrality between several possible actions or positions.

So a neutral political philosopher, according to this liberal position, is one who, in the stage preceding their research, tends to raise questions that are interesting philosophically and follow recent developments in philosophy, rather than questions that are interesting politically.<sup>2</sup> This philosopher's motivation in asking these questions is to have a better knowledge of things, in Strauss' terms (1959: 11–12), who distinguishes between knowledge (philosophy) and opinion (politics): knowledge should be free from political bias and prejudices. It seems to me that it is fair to say this approach characterizes much of contemporary political philosophy:<sup>3</sup> people write dissertations and articles

and teach seminars about questions that are philosophically interesting, aiming to prove that a certain philosopher had it wrong, or trying to distinguish two conceptions of liberty from one another, or whatever. Their goal is to contribute to our knowledge rather than to relate *directly* to the world of politics.

Not much has been written on academic neutrality. However, in what has been published several concepts are discussed, some of which are distinct from neutrality, and too many confused with it. Before proceeding I want to clarify these concepts. Liberals often argue that academic neutrality goes hand in hand with open-mindedness. This is not necessarily so. One could be neutral but not open-minded, and one could decide to omit neutrality because s/he is open-minded.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, several authors have gone out of their way to distinguish neutrality from indifference, and yet 'academic neutrality' might involve – at least sometimes – some degree of indifference. To see why, consider Alan Montefiore's attempt to distinguish academic neutrality from indifference: academic neutrality is a situation in which in any conflict one should do one's best to help or to hinder the various parties involved to an equal degree (Montefiore, 1975: 5). He goes on to say that

in the limiting case (. . .) this may be construed as doing one's best neither to help nor to hinder the other party or policy in question in any special way; that is, to act exactly as one would anyhow have acted had the party or policy never existed. (Montefiore 1975: 5, n1)

This is to say that if I already hold a view about a certain issue, neutrality means that I don't change my views if changing them would help one side or the other. This looks bizarre: can't we change our minds? Remember open-mindedness. But Montefiore claims that even in cases where I am not indifferent to the outcome of a conflict I could be neutral by deciding to help both sides equally. This raises the question: why, if I am not indifferent, should I be neutral? Moreover, I suggest that Montefiore's definition sounds odd because it misses the point about the object of academic neutrality. Montefiore's principle implies that academic neutrality is directed towards people or groups of people, and means not helping any of them (for example, an English person might be neutral between Labour and the Tories), rather than towards positions. This contradicts the principle that in *academic* debate we distinguish between the argument and the person making the argument, and judge the argument itself. Thus, academic neutrality should be directed towards opinions and positions rather than persons.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, Montefiore's definition relates to neutrality towards actions, whereas academic neutrality should be actually directed towards the motivation for action or inaction. As such, academic neutrality is not so distinct from indifference. But can we be neutral anyway?

‘NEUTRALITY IS IMPOSSIBLE BECAUSE THERE IS NO  
OBJECTIVITY IN ETHICS’

*Objectivity*

There is a growing belief that we cannot be objective in ethical judgments, and that therefore we can never be neutral when we teach political philosophy. I do not agree with the former, but my wish here is not to dismiss anti-objectivism. Instead, I want to argue that, even if we accept that objectivity is impossible, it does not follow that we cannot be neutral.

What does it mean to be objective in moral and political reasoning? This is often understood to mean that (i) one is not content with one's first impressions of things, but tries to formulate them in a broader, less self-centered way;<sup>6</sup> and (ii) one puts forward arguments that are free from one's wishful thinking. This points to an important distinction, that between *objectivism* and *truth*. The former does not imply the latter. For example, when I claim that a certain administration, Q, are doing more for the least advantaged than the previous administration, in order for it to be true it is necessary that

1. In the world, Q's policies have the features and characteristics which I ascribe to them;
2. That the least advantaged people are indeed better off; and
3. That they are better off as a result of these policies.

But in order for the argument to be objective, it is necessary that I can describe these features and characteristics as existing independently of my thoughts and analysis, as well as independently of my wishful thinking about them.<sup>7</sup> Notice that 'truth' relates to the content of my argument, whereas 'objectivity' relates to the method that I apply to advance this claim or to sustain my argument. This, then, is what I'll emphasize about objectivity for the purpose of the discussion here.

*Impossibility of objectivity and implication for being neutral*

There are many arguments about the impossibility of objectivity in political philosophy. Some people subscribe to the view that the model of scientific, objective research does not apply to political issues because when we discuss such matters we use concepts that are inevitably controversial and have more than one meaning. A more sophisticated argument is common among feminist theorists, who attack the notion of 'objectivity' in social sciences (Anthony and Witt, 1992., and Nussbaum's review, 1994). Many of them claim that the gendered structure of society constitutes the way political

philosophers have reflected upon any social issue, be it gender relations or justice, liberty, what have you. So, for example, Rawls' notion of the individual is of a self-centered, egoistic person, rather indifferent to notions and feelings such as care, thereby reflecting male values. (Steinhilber, 1984; Benhabib, 1985; Okin, 1989). Other feminists (Young 1989, 2000) claim that you cannot understand what it is to be, say, a woman, unless you are a woman having certain experiences. This lack of objectivity revealed that we were not and could not be neutral, until, that is, we liberated ourselves from our gender roles, just as Marx and later Myrdal (1969) claimed, that since we were trapped in class consciousness, a classless society was a precondition for objective science.

Perhaps the best-known attack on objectivity, combined with the claim that political philosophers therefore cannot be neutral, has been put forward by Richard Rorty. According to Rorty, the objective, scientific model of reasoning does not suit the experience of philosophy, which is all about the quest for solidarity. In fact, Rorty argues, scholars who wish to be in touch with the nature of things, not by interpreting their community's opinions but by some 'objective' measure, are grossly mistaken. So much do they want to be in touch with the, so to speak, 'objective' nature of things that they lose touch with their communities, with the real world, with 'solidarity'. This model of objectivity has been sought so that people could construct on it economic and political institutions which would be 'in accordance with nature', argues Rorty. But, he continues, it is wrong to look for something which transcends us, our very basic way of living, what we have been saying about ourselves (Rorty, 1991: 92). Instead of objectivity Rorty suggests the notion of 'unforced agreement' (Rorty, 1991: 38). Truth for that matter is defined by a community consensus rather than by reference to a non-human reality, and is, basically, what it is advisable for us to believe in. If Leo Strauss distinguished between knowledge and opinion, the latter being politics and the former being pure philosophy, for Rorty this distinction is false. Knowledge can be distinguished from opinion only as a level of certainty: what we believe in does not need further justification (Rorty, 1991: 24).

From the unfeasibility of objectivity, Rorty arrives at the position that neutrality is impossible as well. The claim to have reached objectivity, he argues, is nothing but *deception*, as it is a deviation from the search for solidarity. With a solidarity position one cannot be neutral – one is, in fact, arguing about oneself and one's group. In fact, the philosopher of, say, liberal democracy, 'is not thereby justifying these institutions by reference to more fundamental premises, but the reverse: he or she is putting politics first and tailoring a philosophy to suit' (Rorty 1991: 178). How does the philosopher do this? By using 'articulate' argumentation. This (and only this) distinguishes philosophers from non-philosophers.<sup>8</sup>

Needless to say, I have not fully covered the debate about objectivity; however, my aim is to discuss the implications of those positions for the question of whether political philosophers can be neutral. So I now want to argue that objectivity does not imply neutrality and that therefore the impossibility of objectivity does not imply the impossibility of neutrality.

It is important to distinguish between two questions: whether it is possible to arrive at knowledge which is not biased, and whether it is possible not to consider myself party to a political dilemma or a political conflict when I reflect upon it. One can act politically in defence of certain values. This implies that one is not neutral, in other words, that one does consider oneself party to a political conflict when one reflects on it. But there is no reason why one could not do so objectively, if, for instance, one's argumentation is not self-centered, and if one puts forward the arguments regardless of one's special attachment to the position one is adopting (if, for example, one argues that this position derives from reason).

In fact, not only is objectivity distinguishable from neutrality, but also the two are not necessary conditions of one another. Those who do believe in objectivity and write objectively do not thereby practice neutrality. You may believe that the position you hold can be objectively proven, but this does not imply that you did not raise this question because you wanted to make an impact on policies, or, say, you thought that the government's policies were morally appalling. The issue of whether your position may be objectively proven has to do with the question of *how we know* that, for example, the government's policies are appalling. So, for instance, you might (if you believe in objectivism) argue that the government's policies contradict a certain moral imperative that derives from reason. However, the idea that you should remain neutral has to do with your *motivation* in discussing these principles or policies: do you ask whether the policies are morally appalling because you are interested in the concept of 'morally appalling', or because you want to reform the policies?

Thus, those who are skeptical about objectivity and conclude that political philosophers cannot be neutral confuse two very different steps in the process of philosophical inquiry. The source of their confusion between objectivity and neutrality is that they fail to distinguish between motivation and method. When we say that the political philosopher is neutral we say something about their motivation in putting forward their argument. Put in another way, objectivity is the ability to reach a position where I realize that the world does not center on me; neutrality, if it is possible, is the ability not to be motivated by matters that are politically important to me when I write and teach.

‘SINCE UNIVERSAL REASONING IS IMPOSSIBLE, SO IS  
ACADEMIC NEUTRALITY’

The second skeptical position about the neutrality of political philosophers derives from the relationship between neutrality and universalism, or truth. How are neutrality and universalism related? Liberals often hold that political philosophy is about finding, defining, or revealing universal principles and that philosophers are neutral because their motivation is to search for truth. Truth, then, is by definition universal. Recently, several authors have challenged this view while writing about multiculturalism.

*Two versions of multiculturalism*

I want to first distinguish between two rather different claims about multiculturalism. The first I would call ‘normative multiculturalism’: a claim that it would be good if people lived in (even more) multicultural societies, or societies that took cultures seriously. The second is ‘empirical multiculturalism’: taking as a sociological fact of life, that we happen to live in multicultural societies with various ethical codes, ways of life and so on. The two positions share a very strong claim, namely, that a stance of neutrality on the part of the political philosopher is at best pretentious and, at worst, yet another means of domination. This is because, in order for its claim to universalism to be true, it would have to be assumed that all communities holding views other than the universal ones are simply mistaken (or even ‘archaic’).

However, these two versions of multiculturalism imply two very different sets of arguments about academic neutrality in university teaching. Normative multiculturalism is usually taken to imply value pluralism. Empirical multiculturalism implies plurality mostly with regard to *arguments* that support our values. So, to come back to the claim that the political philosopher cannot be neutral, normative multiculturalists argue that there is a wide and varied list of legitimate goods and ideas of the good life, or value pluralism. This is not an open list; some positions are immoral; but there is no clear hierarchy of values and ways of life within these wide boundaries of legitimate values and positions. Thus political philosophers cannot be neutral; they always argue from a standpoint. As a result, advancing arguments in the name of ‘neutrality’ is morally wrong because it is nothing but domination. Empirical multiculturalists would claim that sometimes we all share the same values and norms, but there are various ways of arguing for them, justifying them philosophically, and therefore, while we cannot (methodologically speaking) be neutral in our reasoning, we could still compensate for this by being impartial. This is a rather important difference, which I want to elaborate on.

*Normative multiculturalism and the plurality of values*

Normative multiculturalism implies value pluralism: it argues that we should favor multicultural societies because within their own cultures people can flourish (sometimes this is expressed as a claim that cultures are a precondition for flourishing) – they can attach meaning to their experiences and norms, and they are likely to feel less alienated (people need particularistic cultures to identify with; they would get lost in universal contexts, had they existed).

Indeed, these psychological assumptions have normative significance. One such implication is about how we analyze the role of culture when we assess its values. According to Bhikhu Parekh, it is quite wrong for political philosophers to assume that a set of values can be assessed independently from the attitude to them of the culture that holds them. But many political philosophers do just that, Parekh complains. When they claim that a certain value is central to, say, Western society but is weaker in, or even absent from the ethical codes of non-Western societies, they are likely to dismiss the latter as inferior systems of belief (Parekh 2000: 93–94), as is the case when philosophy pretends to be neutral in its reliance on, so to speak, ‘human nature theories’ (Parekh, 1996).

Moreover, Parekh argues, there is a question of interpretation involved. Let us assume we do live more or less similar lives: we all love, and make love, we all enjoy food, laugh, play, listen to or read stories, sing, we all wake up in the morning and go to work – we are all basically human. The point, however, is that we not only experience these events and feelings, but we interpret them and theorize about them differently, according to our cultures. We attach different meanings and significance to the same event. The fact that we interpret and theorize about events differently makes this rather unified world, in which many of us share rather similar experiences, unbelievably and surprisingly diverse. This, I believe, is Parekh’s main point in his reflections on the Rushdie affair (Parekh, 1990). The tragedy of this debate, Parekh argues, was that people were not sensitive enough to the fact that different cultures interpret concepts, experiences, and so on, differently, and that this might lead to gross misunderstandings. Therefore Parekh argues that political philosophers who make claims in the name of universalism appear to be trying to dominate other cultures.

I cannot deny the force of this argument, but I am reluctant to accept it. I cannot deny its power because it is rather intuitive. No matter how much we want to be able to sympathize and empathize with others, we might be limited in our ability to do so because some experiences cannot be translated into concepts and words. However, from a normative point of view, we should also

recognize the limitations of this argument. If we accept it, we in fact hinder any genuine possibility of debate and communication about norms, values and practices. We must allow room for the debate not only to continue, but also to deepen and flourish.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, some of these claims about domination seem to be far-fetched, in two ways. First, although this is above all an empirical question, it seems that most universal political philosophers are far from trying to impose their views on or to dominate other cultures. They are just not those types of persons. But perhaps if I took this approach, some students would answer 'Well, that's your experience, but this is not ours; if you were us you would feel differently.' Perhaps. Still, we must be reasonable about these claims. For example, suppose it is true that consistency and rationality were first suggested by Western male philosophers, this does not make them improper for others to use. One should distinguish between what originated with Western men and is therefore biased and should be rejected (there may be a lot that falls into this category) and what originated with Western men but is nevertheless indeed universal. In fact, I would argue, consistency does not serve to dominate; on the contrary, it liberates. It is with consistent arguments that we can establish our case; it is with consistent arguments that we can make sense, so that people will listen to us.

Of course, this last claim might be controversial, or at least require further elaboration. However, I do not wish to embark on that journey. For the purpose of this article suffice it to claim that, while the rejection of universalism and therefore of academic neutrality as a form of domination seems, *prima facie*, a very powerful argument, it is rather far-fetched in many cases, and therefore I would like to look for a different argument against academic neutrality.

*Empirical multiculturalism and the plurality of arguments for holding values*

According to Daniel Bell (2000, 2001) people live in a variety of communities and they have different 'local traditions'. Interestingly, Bell does not claim that we necessarily have different values or that our positions are irreducibly heterogeneous. Plurality of values is experienced.<sup>10</sup> However, people in different societies and ethnic groups often share values and political positions, but, at the same time, use a plurality of reasoning about these values. This plurality of reasoning is the aspect of multiculturalism that presents an obstacle to the political philosopher's attempt to be neutral.

Notice that Bell's contribution to the debate about multiculturalism is rather unique. While most authors refer to a plurality of values (e.g. Galston, 2002), Bell would, perhaps, endorse a version of 'normative multiculturalism',

but emphasizes the plurality of arguments used to support and defend shared values and positions. His theory is that in different circumstances different arguments serve better to support certain positions or values. In fact, if only political philosophers were more open to the possibility that their own cultures were not superior to others and that therefore their own arguments were not necessarily better than others', they would be able to gain a better understanding of other cultures.

The problem is that many political philosophers find plurality of arguments threatening to their positions. Funnily enough, even when we all want to further more or less the same policies, political philosophers tend to stick to arguments derived from their own culture, even though if they used arguments derived from the other culture they would find it easier to convince the other side, or to defend the values that they wished to defend.

There is nothing objectively better about that or this argument, claims Bell, apart from the fact that it is often more likely to open the philosopher to understand the other, and in addition win over, or at least not alienate, the philosopher's audience, because the audience feels already somehow attached to and familiar with these arguments.<sup>11</sup> Bell (2000) tells a rather amusing story about teaching a course in political thought in Singapore. He was hired to teach the history of political thought in this multicultural and multiethnic state. He started from where he was: a Canadian and a graduate of Oxford University. He thus chose to open the course with teaching Machiavelli. But he soon realized that he could not teach only Western authors, so he found a Machiavellian author of Chinese origin – Han Fei Tzu – who argued more or less on similar lines as Machiavelli (in fact Bell claims that Han Fei Tzu was more Machiavellian than Machiavelli himself). But as soon as he introduced this text, he was criticized by the Indian and Muslim students for not presenting 'their' authors. Eventually he found an Indian author (Kautilya) and a Muslim one (Ibn Khaldun) to represent the same thoughts about 'politics without morality'. Bell concludes that the course was much better when he taught texts and arguments from different cultures that supported the same political position. This was an experience of mutual learning, involving enriching one's starting point, and better philosophical communication.

The key question to understanding the importance of Bell's argument is why political philosophers fail to do as he suggests. Bell does not claim political philosophers have dishonorable intentions, only that they are blind to the possibility of using arguments from other cultural traditions. But what makes them so? Philosophical and political debates are by their nature aimed at persuading. Philosophers are so eager to demonstrate that their values are right that they use arguments with which they feel at ease. Like all human beings they feel at home with arguments that are theirs: we are all products

of our various cultures and hence we use our own culture's arguments. Thus, not only do philosophers fail to be neutral, but they also fail to be impartial. Impartiality here means that when one chooses arguments to support one's position, one does not regard arguments derived from one's own culture as necessarily superior, just because they are one's own. One is, thus, open to choose others' arguments if they are consistent and can do the job of persuading. This failure to be impartial is very unfortunate, because not only is impartiality morally justified, but it is also beneficial. We debate because we want to convince others that our values are right; but the other side is more likely to be convinced if we apply its reasoning rather than ours, so the arguments we use should be determined by the context, our goal and the audience.

Let me explain why I find this argument, about the plurality of reasoning rather than the plurality of values, so important. If Bell is right, political philosophers cannot be neutral. They fail to be neutral because of their motivation in debating, teaching and writing. Yet Bell also seems to subscribe to the view that there is something unfair about it, and that it might lead the teacher or author not only to neglect other people and their cultures – to the extent that these people are likely to feel patronized – but also to miss the chance of a real, genuine, and fruitful discussion that leads to persuasion and mutual understanding. Thus, political philosophers have to compensate for their inability to be neutral, and they should do so by being impartial, in a very basic way: they should not prefer their own culture's texts and their own culture's arguments when they want to sustain a claim. Indeed, since multiculturalism is empirical – it is out there – it offers a great opportunity for us to be open, to learn more, to see that there is more than one way to prove one's point and defend one's position.

However, neither Parekh's nor Bell's arguments are adequate in order to dismiss academic neutrality. Parekh's reason for rejecting academic neutrality is normative, but seems rather far fetched. Bell, on the other hand, finds academic neutrality mainly *methodologically* mistaken, whereas we are looking for a *normative* reason to dismiss academic neutrality. So I want to suggest a third argument for why academic neutrality is wrong.

ACADEMIC NEUTRALITY: WHY DOES IT NOT GO HAND IN  
HAND WITH DEMOCRATIC RESPONSIBILITY?

My suggestion is that if political philosophers care about the democratic culture of their society in general and the impact of their political philosophy in particular, then they should not only be open about their political positions and beliefs when they teach, but they should also aim at making an impact

on their students' attitudes to politics. But let me immediately add that this might sound as if I preach for indoctrination, which is far from what I do. So I shall soon modify this by explaining that the goal is not to transform students from, say, conservatives to liberals, but rather to transform them from apolitical to political, from indifferent to being critical, alert and engaged.

First let me clarify two of the concepts I use: responsibility and empowerment. By 'responsibility' I mean what Scanlon calls 'substantive responsibility'. This refers to the question of whether a person can rightly complain about burdens or obligations that result from one's position or choice (Scanlon, 1998: 248–295). This is to be distinguished from asking whether it is right to blame or praise a person for a certain action. Now, people often resent the idea that the philosopher should be 'responsible' because they take it to imply that the philosopher is paternalistic: the audience is the naive and vulnerable princess, whereas the philosopher is the wise, gentle but powerful prince, arriving on a white horse to save her. This image is, admittedly, arrogant and paternalistic. However, this is very far from what I want to suggest. There is a huge difference between *paternalism* and *empowerment*. The former intends to supply answers, and in that sense only reinforces one's *inability* to find answers independently and autonomously. In contrast, empowerment is aimed at magnifying one's capability to supply answers, to think critically and to reach substantive conclusions. Empowering, then, is transferring the focus of the debate from the philosopher to the audience – students and readers. In that sense it is about the audience becoming more rather than less capable, and more rather than less autonomous. My suggestion, then, is that academic neutrality is irresponsible because it fails to empower the audience and in that sense turns a blind eye to the philosopher's political obligations.

But how does academic neutrality disregard the philosopher's obligations? The clue to the answer is the message that is conveyed by political philosophers. Is the philosophical debate nothing but an exercise? Is it only 'academic'? Does it have no political relevance? Does it make no impact on real life? If the answer is 'yes', then the message to students and readers of political philosophy is: 'stay away from politics; do not bother to apply ethics to politics,' whereas if the answer is 'no', then the message is: 'get critical, get involved, challenge your politicians, using the tools of political philosophy.'

Now, what I have earlier called 'the liberal position' (admittedly, not all liberals adhere to this position) is indeed that philosophers should not be committed politically when they teach, not even to the idea of participation as good. It assumes that we can construct a partition between the philosopher as a political person and the philosopher as a teacher. It assumes, then, that such activities can be separated, that when one teaches normative reflections on politics one does not necessarily get involved in politics. Thus, neutral

political philosophers' message is that political philosophy is not necessarily relevant to politics in the sense that it's going to really change anything. Politics has nothing to do with philosophy because it is about power: it is a game of interests, where considerations of morality are not necessarily significant. Perhaps less radically, the message is that politics is conducted at a low level of morality: it involves opinions, biases, and people who cannot detach themselves from their *ideologies*. 'We, political philosophers are different,' these liberals assert: 'Ours is a high-level reflection on political issues. We don't mess with interests, power, and such down-to-earth matters.'

Now, why should it bother us if this is the message in the classroom? It is because this message has practical consequences. People who become accustomed to such discussions of politics gradually revise their conception of the political and their understanding of what politics is about. They either become uninterested in politics and in what the public really thinks because it is too distant from their abstract moral reflections, or they adopt a distorted notion of politics. In addition, they learn that one should choose which questions to further investigate according to how scientifically interesting they are, rather than according to how much they bother the public. As a result many students of contemporary politics take it that the political philosopher's goal is to find the idea behind its appearances, which might vary with time and circumstances. But when one has such an image of political philosophy, when one 'celebrates the purity of categories' instead of looking at questions of practice, the outcome is not a better understanding of politics. It is, regrettably, what Benjamin Barber calls the 'conquest of politics by philosophy' (Barber, 1988: 11) or what I would call the pushing aside of politics by philosophy. The academic debate focuses on what is considered scientifically important and thereby becomes de-politicized. Consequently, these philosophers' audience knows less about how to engage in real life discussions of political questions, and is less likely to criticize (in an applied and relevant manner) the politicians and the decision-making processes, if only because it is not competent to do so.

In that sense such debates are nothing but an obstacle to the public's empowerment, and therefore they contribute to what might be called the *de-democratization* of political philosophy. Often we see a vicious circle. The more abstract and detached philosophers' questions become, the more politicians, activists, and the public in large overlook their theories; the more, then, those philosophers feel that they are neglected anyway, and assume that philosophical inquiry and politics are two distinct worlds; the more, therefore, they concentrate on their scientifically interesting questions, hence they are furthermore disregarded by the public, and so on.

The latter has an impact on the public in general as well. In 2003 European

leaders gathered in Copenhagen and decided to open the door for many new members to join the European super-state. This was, as a matter of fact, a huge historical event. The last partitions between eastern and western Europe were shattered. Economically speaking this was a great risk or an enormous hope, depending on how you look at it. I interviewed several high school children from both state and 'independent' schools in Oxford. To my question of whether this event was discussed in school, most of them replied: 'Well, our teachers must not discuss politics in school.' It turned out that the event was not even mentioned by the teachers in any of the schools. Many of the children had no clue about what had happened in Copenhagen. Indeed, many liberal countries experience 'politics without citizens', and this is at least partly due to the fact that they have politics without political philosophy, and political philosophy that seems irrelevant because it is practiced as if it could and should be detached from politics.

At this point liberals may nevertheless insist that the message the neutral philosopher conveys is to be preferred to the one conveyed by the non-neutral philosopher. They justify such a position by claiming that they respect the audience's autonomy, or, as it has been put to me many times, they take the audience 'seriously'. So taking somebody seriously would mean not imposing your own views and letting them form their own views independently (that is to say, sticking to neutrality). However, the opposite is true. Taking your audience seriously involves arguing your positions openly and genuinely and trying to convince your audience.

To see why, imagine you are walking in the mountains. You want to reach a certain mountain hut and it is raining like hell. On your way you meet somebody and he tells you he is going to this mountain hut as well. However, you seem to be going in different directions. What would be a right way of 'taking him seriously'? You could 'respect' him and say, 'well, that's what you think; I won't try to convince you that you are wrong.' But if you genuinely care for him and about him, you must tell him that in your view the road he is taking will not lead him to this mountain hut. The same goes for teaching. 'Going to a mountain hut' is analogous to 'trying to lead a morally good life'. All people – except for crooks – want to be moral and good, but some of us happen to be mistaken from time to time about the question 'which is the way to the morally good life?' If I think my student is taking the wrong path with regard to, for example, the rights of minorities – say, because he fails to distinguish between the majority's interests and moral arguments – then I should tell him so and supply a good argument. Notice that by no means do I claim that the teacher is *right*. However, the teacher believes s/he is right, and so should make his/her thoughts known. Two comments, though: First, it goes without saying that the student is also expected to respect the teacher

and explain why s/he thinks the teacher is wrong, and why, in the example above, s/he believes that certain issues override minorities' rights. Second, in the students' early stages philosophers should be more careful not to make too much of an influence, and not to block the students' enthusiasm and ability to develop their own ideas at a later stage.<sup>12</sup>

This leads me to my next argument, which is that political philosophers have a special responsibility, as political philosophers, and that therefore academic neutrality is often to be condemned. Admittedly, sometimes circumstances might prevent one from taking sides (Kolakowsky, 1975: 74). However, one cannot allow oneself the luxury of saying that since one lectures in the university one is neutral with regard to, say, gender relationships, or the discrimination against the Ogoni tribe in Nigeria. As a political philosopher, one is trained to be sensitive to acts of discrimination, to gender relations, and to reflect upon ethnic relationships and their ethical aspects, and so one is supposed to be the first in society to notice discriminatory policies, and the first to realize in what sense they are unfair.

However, does it stop there? Of course the political philosopher cannot limit his/herself to announcing that this policy is indeed discriminatory. Imagine the following scenario, often used in moral reasoning to describe responsibilities. Three persons are walking by a river and notice that a child is struggling against the choppy water. Now, one of these three persons is an experienced and skilled swimmer, the other two are not. It seems fair to say that the swimmer would be the first one to realize that the child is not swimming but rather drowning. This is the equivalent of the political philosopher's responsibility to be the first to spot discrimination in the above example. It derives from the swimmer's and the philosopher's competency. However, should our swimmer be content only with notifying his or her friends about the drowning child? It is clear that the swimmer has the most urgent additional responsibility to jump into the river and try to save the poor child. This swimmer, as the one with the most developed relevant skills, has a responsibility to change things, to improve the situation. It is because s/he is a good swimmer that they have this responsibility. Similarly, it is *because* the political philosopher is a political philosopher (that is, a person who knows how to criticize political institutions and policies) that s/he has to take a position and criticize discrimination. Referring to the same example, Bob Brecher (forthcoming) writes:

To know more and/or to be able to think more critically brings with it a greater degree of responsibility: for not only does 'ought' imply 'can', but – on a cognitive account – 'can' implies 'ought'. Only if I am able to do so is it the case that I ought to try to save the drowning child; but it is also the case that if I can (try to) save the drowning child then I ought to do so. And the more one can, the more one ought.

This implies that since political philosophers are capable (and even more capable than others) of critically reflecting upon policies and their moral grounds, they have to do so. Now, one could immediately object and say:

But what if this political philosopher, by taking a position and suggesting policies, only makes things worse? Suppose, for example, that by criticizing the morality of a president's personal affairs our political philosopher questions the legitimacy of the president's party and its candidates and therefore contributes to the rise of the other candidate, who is morally speaking a much worse choice!

In reply let me clarify: the political philosopher's contribution to society should be evaluated, not according to their success in criticizing this or that policy or this or that politician, but according to their ability to empower the audience, towards making students and readers more sensitive, more attuned, more accustomed to arguments and reasoning, more capable of putting forward theories and arguments of their own, and so on.

Thus, political philosophers should strive to ensure that their students adopt an approach, which is both rational and critical, hoping that if they adopt this approach they will also come to support more ethical political positions. Of course, the political philosopher does not try simply to convert the students. Rather, s/he tries to make them more rational and critical, more involved and caring. In fact, the combination of rationality and ongoing criticism is what distinguishes political philosophy from other disciplines. The latter can also be motivated by the desire to make the world a better place. For example, an ecologist who studies pollution may also be motivated by the search for a better (cleaner, more stable) environment, and in that sense they are not neutral. However, the way political philosophers should not be neutral is even more profound, because the criticism here is directed at the very foundations of the way we live, the basic assumptions and theories that lie behind our social and political institutions.

In addition, the political philosopher has a special responsibility to ensure that this critical attitude is not a mere pose, as if political philosophy were a sort of a game. Arguments and words are potentially harmful weapons, and therefore the philosopher cannot just play with ideas. While students should get the message that they should be curious, open-minded, and very critical, they should also be taught that this obligation to be critical carries with it a special responsibility and seriousness. We cannot afford an 'anything goes' attitude. If, say, a student defends contemporary modes of slavery or Nazism, political philosophers should explain why this is wrong, not only politically, but also simply in the sense that it is not true: there is no way Nazism can be justified. A professor (and students) should profess what they believe to be true, but also *only* what they believe to be true.

So far I have argued that political philosophers' capabilities imply that they

have a special responsibility to take sides and empower their audience. However, other people, who do not happen to be political philosophers, might have such capabilities; so why is it that political philosophers have such a responsibility?

One possible answer is that their responsibility is a function of who they are, or what their role is. Bob Brecher takes this line (Brecher, forthcoming). The train driver has a greater responsibility not to get drunk while at work than the university lecturer, because s/he is a train driver, and since the lives of so many people depend on her/him being sober. Although I do not disagree with Brecher's explanation, such an explanation is vulnerable to a quick reply by the liberal. Our liberal might say:

Such roles are defined by society; or they can be defined by the contracts academic political philosophers have with their teaching institutions, which might conceivably require neutrality. It so happens, that our (liberal) society and our liberal academic institutions define the role of political philosophers in such a manner that they should remain detached and neutral.

So what is the additional element that establishes that political philosophers have a special obligation to go beyond their analytical contribution and to take sides? The answer may be regarded as rather naive, but I hope many people will find it difficult to resist. Political philosophy is humanity's collective reflection on itself, and as such it derives from, and is based on, empathy and sympathy (Nussbaum, 2000b). Political philosophy has always been a tool for helping people resist exploitation by the powerful. People who are articulate, who are capable of producing arguments to defend themselves, are more likely to avoid exploitation by the powerful. Political philosophers can help people to become more competent, fluent, expressive and articulate. Political philosophy can help people to understand what the political debate is about, and notice when they are being deceived. It seems, then, that if indeed political philosophers have special skills, if they have acquired an expertise, they should add this to the most basic human attitude of help and care, of sympathy and empathy with humanity, which has traditionally been the moral and practical motivation for political philosophy. In other words, because they know how, and because they belong to a long tradition of care for humanity, they should speak out loud and clear.<sup>13</sup> Some might indeed see this position as rather naive, but we must not forget what political philosophy is all about: it is not only about institutions; rather it is about the people who live according to these institutions.

Let me summarize then: academic neutrality is morally wrong because it conveys the wrong message about the place of philosophy in politics, which, in turn, might lead to a bizarre conception of politics, and because it is politically speaking irresponsible.

THE PLACE OF ACADEMIC IMPARTIALITY

I have argued that political philosophers should not be neutral, but that they should be impartial. But what is academic impartiality? What we learn from Daniel Bell<sup>14</sup> is that impartiality refers to the process of argumentation. I shall review this here, and then extend the definition.

Academic impartiality begins with refraining from regarding arguments derived from one's own culture as superior just because they are one's own. This entails choosing certain arguments, not because they derive from the philosopher's own culture, but because, as well as being coherent and consistent arguments, they are the most relevant ones in the sense that they are most likely to convince. So when the political philosopher decides to teach a certain question, s/he should be impartial when choosing texts; s/he should give equal respect to those texts which derive from other cultures but might still demonstrate the point s/he wants to make. We should, though, extend this definition: the philosopher should refrain from any bias with regard to the groups s/he teaches and whose texts s/he reads. Moreover, she might even pay equal respect to texts which, *prima facie* might lead to wrong conclusions, in the sense that s/he should teach them and analyze them carefully. (Of course, once s/he proves the texts mislead, s/he should not *evaluate* them equally.)

These extensions suggest that academic impartiality is closely related to some form of equality or equal respect. Indeed, philosophers often find (state) impartiality associated with some sense of equality. Brian Barry (1995), for example, regards impartiality as rooted in the equal worth of human beings, and Thomas Nagel (1987: 215) associates impartiality with treating or counting everyone equally. This, though, might be taken too far. So I should add that academic impartiality does not entail that literally any person or idea should be equally treated and considered. Some ideas are so out of touch with our basic moral principles that they do not pass the threshold of basic, reasonable, moral principles and therefore do not deserve impartial consideration.<sup>15</sup>

How is this impartiality practiced? The technique of forcing oneself into an impartial position should be rather simple – it is by generalization. As Kolakowsky puts it (1975: 72): 'I am impartial if I evaluate the conflict and the rights and the wrongs of both sides by assessing the situation in terms of more general rules that I accept independently of this particular case.' The reason is that if I fail to generalize, to consider the case as one of a large group of similar cases, I let my personal preferences influence my judgment.

Now we come to the second extension of the definition. So far we have discussed the process of argumentation. But what if the philosopher discovers that their position was wrong? Suppose that the political philosopher practices their conceptual analysis and philosophical examination of some normative

question, and reaches conclusions that do not tie in with her political commitments. What should s/he do? Maybe try again, or hide the result, assuming that since this contradicts his/her political convictions, there must be something wrong with these results, and refrain from publishing it in an article or book. S/he would then be loyal to his/her political standpoints; but s/he would be wrong to do so, because it would be partial towards other people and their arguments. In other words, the philosopher's impartiality is closely related to their intellectual integrity. Now, since this integrity is the basis of any decent political debate, refraining from publishing these results would be not only a sort of obstinacy and dogmatism, academically speaking, but bad citizenship as well.

To return to the distinction between impartiality and neutrality: we could now relate them to different steps in the process of philosophical exploration. Neutrality is related to the first step, one's motivation; impartiality, like objectivity, is related to the second step, that of the research itself, and its method. In addition, impartiality relates to the third step, that is, reporting the results of one's research.

An interesting point emerges from this discussion. I have argued that the political philosopher should not be neutral and should remain loyal to her political commitments. However, it now seems that the philosopher has two simultaneous commitments: political and academic. From what we have argued so far, it seems, at least *prima facie*, that when teaching and research contradict the philosopher's political commitments they must subject the latter to parameters of truthfulness. This – academic commitment – is often regarded as a commitment to one's fellow teachers. It is thought to be part of a professional code. If so, how do we decide between two commitments – the academic (to 'truthfulness' and to a professional code) on the one hand, and the political (to one's political positions) on the other?

To answer this, it is not necessary to regard the impartiality commitment – now understood as a commitment to truthfulness – as professional only. In fact, it is a political and democratic commitment as well. It is a responsibility that university teachers have as citizens towards citizens. In fact, it is a *democratic* commitment, one of empowerment, since, as argued above, learning how to debate empowers. A philosopher who is impartial at the stage of argumentation empowers the citizens by listening to them, respecting them equally, even if they seem to be wrong, and by not alienating them. In addition, a philosopher who is impartial at the stage of reporting about the research empowers the citizens by showing that they are transparent, and by educating to be self-critical. Notice, however, that this political philosopher is not necessarily neutral: not only does she support democracy, but also her philosophy is intended to have an impact on people's lives and on politics.

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NOTES

1. One very important question is about power relations in the classroom and whether this can be avoided. I take the liberty to hereby assume that they can be avoided and that they are marginal. Many would argue that this is not a very accurate empirical assumption; however, since I have seen and witnessed cases in which it is so, I allow myself to assume that power relations are not, and should not be part of teaching and learning *by definition*.
2. This is a rather controversial assertion. One could argue that one could select the questions one teaches because of their political interest, but nonetheless refrain from taking sides. However, let me emphasize that I refer here to one's *motivation* to do research and teach. If one chooses certain questions because they are politically interesting, one is already not fully neutral. For example, if one chooses to reflect upon the war in Iraq and whether it was, for example, moral to use weapons to solve the crisis, one is at least partly not neutral because one doubts the state's position. If one, though, chooses to raise the question and not to make any impact, politically speaking (and assuming that this is possible) then one would be forced to switch to questions that are by nature less important, *politically* speaking. The issue becomes more complicated when we have in mind the consequences of our research. Suppose one's motivation is neutral, and all one wants to examine in the case above is, say, the boundaries of the concept of 'sovereignty'. Still, the results might imply an approval or a critique of the war. However, this is a different issue. I refer mainly to one's motivation to engage in such questions.
3. R.M. Hare argued that teachers should teach the formal and logical aspects of morality, as if students are taught the language only (Gardner, 1989). In a different mode, Gerlad Gaus (1990) argues that public justification is liberalism's core and therefore philosophers should offer a strong liberal moral epistemology (Gaus, 1996), which will be universal. For him philosophers' task is the quest for truth, not political usefulness. Philosophers who hold such views fear that any retreat from the quest for truth might lead to the subordination of philosophy to horrible political regimes. Nicholas Rescher's book (1993) is a good reply about why consensus is not required for the pursuit of truth and why the demand for consensus is epistemologically and politically wrong.
4. A good example is Oakeshott's book (Oakeshott, 1933), published in the year Hitler started his notorious career as head of the German state. Oakeshott

declared that philosophy relating to practice ceased to be philosophy: the philosopher had to be neutral, otherwise he would abuse his profession: it would be a 'holiday excursion'. Philosophy was to be 'independent of the futile attempt to persuade'. I wonder: is this open-mindedness? An open-minded philosopher would see that this was the time to cease being neutral.

5. It could well be the case that in politics the distinction blurs, since helping one side in its arguments might help this side win votes, etc. However, in academic debate this is not the case.
6. See Haskell (1998: 149). For Nagel (1996: 4–6, 68), objectivity is a view of the world in which one's self is only one object among many. It should be mentioned that Nagel's picture is rather complicated. For example, he dismisses the idea that it is only the 'objective' which is 'real'.
7. Frank Cunningham (1973: 4) writes about independence from one's 'desires' about the act.
8. See the discussion of other concepts such as a professional code and their impact on the relationships between philosophers and the public, in de-Shalit (2000, Chapter 2).
9. Although, arguably, because of the problem of power relations in the classroom, it is sometimes best to bracket areas of difference and move forward to more meaningful issues.
10. Bell claims that many political theorists in the West assume – without proper empirical evidence – that all human beings, by virtue of being rational, desire the same political goods – for example human rights as they are characterized in the West – and that regimes which do not 'supply' this 'demand' are therefore to be condemned. Bell maintains that this is a methodological mistake. He even finds it paradoxical that, while these theorists suggest that such human rights are universal, they base their claim on anthropological evidence that is taken only from the West.
11. Providing, perhaps, the philosopher does not use *only* the other group's reasoning, because if s/he does, he/she might appear, if not be, insincere.
12. To be fair, the liberal could still claim that there is a difference here: the question of the right way to the mountain hut can be answered unequivocally, but this is not the case with political and moral questions. This throws us back to the question of moral relativism, truth, objectivity and the like. What I should say, though, is that it seems inconsistent to be a liberal and to put forward such radical relativistic claims simultaneously.
13. At this point one could still insist that this is a very paternalistic approach. So let me clarify my position here. The political philosopher's responsibility is to criticize evil and say what is wrong; it is not necessarily to say what is *right*. Of course, political philosophers tend to do the latter, and they should do so if they think they have a robust argument about why this or that policy is right. However, their primary responsibility is to subject policies to critical scrutiny, not to tell the public in a paternalistic way what the right policy is.

14. Bell does not use the term 'impartiality'. However, it seems fair to describe his argument this way.
15. This is rather an important comment. It implies, for instance, that a philosopher cannot use racist arguments to convince racists about something, simply because such arguments might work. While in political rhetoric this might be acceptable (although I doubt it), philosophy must not use arguments that do not pass this threshold.

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