Ivory Towers and Concrete Flowers: On the Relationship between Political Philosophy and Activism

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Abstract

The relationship between political philosophy and real-life politics is one that is heavily contested. On the one hand, it has been argued that political affiliation is a biasing force that stands in the way of our ability as political philosophers to maintain an objective perspective (Van der Vossen, 2015; 2020). On the other hand, it has been argued that political philosophers run the risk of bias whether they are politically active or not (Jones, 2020). In this paper, I nuance the debate at hand: I specify what kind of activism we should be concerned with as a biasing force, elaborate on what biases we should aim to mitigate as political philosophers, as well as what tools we have at our disposal in combatting biases within the discipline. This allows me to argue that participation in certain forms of political activism can be a powerful method for avoiding the most pernicious and pervasive biases we are prone to, namely biases against marginalised groups, and in favour of the political status quo. This has the implication that we must avoid a blanket ban on political activism within political philosophy, and instead recognise the epistemic merits of political activism where it is due.

A concrete flower is essentially a weed that grows between the cracks of poured concrete, as in a sidewalk. Sometimes the crack is so small the flower appears to be growing directly out of the concrete. I have seen several that look to be growing seemingly from nowhere. A couple of things are distinctive about these flowers. They give the impression of being strong, survivors. After all, they, and often they alone, have managed to grow through concrete. On closer inspection, however, many concrete flowers are fragile and clearly starved for basic nutrients. They are, after all, growing in an environment that was never meant to sustain their existence. In fact, a concrete flower grows in spite of its environment. Malnourished and threatened on all sides by the concrete that would indifferently snuff the

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life from them, concrete flowers exist on grisly ground. If they were to flourish, they would produce a different landscape.
Kristie Dotson (2011, p. 408)

1. Introduction

The relationship between political philosophy and real-life politics is one that is heavily contested: should political philosophers mainly deal in armchair philosophy, or should they be actively engaged in politics as it happens on the ground? In which case, to what extent? On the one hand, it has been argued that political affiliation is a biasing force that stands in the way of our ability as political philosophers to maintain an objective perspective (Van der Vossen, 2015; 2020). On the other hand, it has been argued that political philosophers run the risk of bias whether they are politically active or remain within their academic ivory towers, and that abstention from politics is not always an option (Jones, 2020). In this paper, I nuance the debate at hand: I specify what kind of activism we should be concerned with as a biasing force, elaborate on what biases we should aim to mitigate as political philosophers, as well as what tools we have at our disposal in combatting biases within the discipline. This will allow me to argue more strongly that participation in certain forms of political activism and partisanship can be a powerful method for avoiding the most pernicious and pervasive biases we are prone to, namely biases against marginalised and oppressed groups, and in favour of the social and political status quo. This has the implication that we must avoid a blanket ban on political activism within political philosophy, and instead recognise the epistemic merits of political activism where it is due.

This is where the metaphor of the concrete flowers becomes relevant. I rely on feminist epistemology to show that marginalised groups have access to unique knowledge about their marginalisation, despite the barrage of rationalisations that accompany the biases and prejudices held against them. This knowledge exists in the same way that concrete flowers do: against the odds, in an environment hostile to their existence. Thus, this knowledge must be recognised, nourished, and protected if we are to access it. Certain kinds of political activism allow for this. I therefore conclude that instead of severing the ties between political philosophy and political activism, we need to establish a plurality of relationships between

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political philosophy and political activism if we are to counteract biases within the discipline. Thus, I am not arguing that political philosophers should necessarily be political activists. Instead, what I seek to show is that we should avoid a blanket ban on the existence of political philosopher activists in the service of academic objectivity. Relatedly, I argue that a blanket ban on philosopher activists strikes at the heart of philosophy's diversity issue.

This paper will proceed in the following manner: in section 2, I explain the idea that participation in political activism may lead to unwanted bias when doing political philosophy, and I then nuance the concept of political activism under debate. In section 3, I challenge the idea that remaining insulated within academia protects one from pernicious biases that shape the way we do political philosophy. In section 4, I expand the discussion of which biases we should be concerned with as political philosophers, and in section 5, I explore the bias-fighting methods available to us, including certain forms of political activism. In the conclusion I thereby nuance further the way we should think about the relationship between political philosophy, biases, and political activism.

2. Bias in Political Activism

In this section, I discuss the case for the existence of bias in political activism. Political activism is defined by Bas van der Vossen (2015) as consisting of the following activities:

> Being member of a political party, campaigning during elections, making political donations, volunteering in advocacy groups, political community organising, putting up yard signs, bumper stickers, promoting a political party at dinner parties, generally rooting for one side or another, and so on. (Van der Vossen, 2015, p. 2)

Political activism (as defined above) entails holding and advocating for a specific, partisan political position. Activism therefore encourages the creation of ideological silos,[1] and belonging to such a silo

[1] In a survey of the literature, Terry Eagleton mentions no fewer than 15 common uses of the term 'ideology' (Eagleton 2007, p. 1). In this paper, I am interested in this term insofar as it denotes the range of ways in which participation in mainstream social practices may contribute to sustaining a social order that is oppressive to one or more groups of people who live

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makes us more vulnerable to bias. An ideological silo is a situation in which 'individuals primarily interact with fellow partisans in ways that make their partisan identity more salient' (Jones, 2020, p. 238), and therefore also makes beliefs associated with that identity more salient. In other words, the claim is that when surrounded by politically like-minded people, this reinforces our own political beliefs and makes us more impervious to perceiving the potential merits of opposing political beliefs, which in turn also makes it harder to recognise our own blind spots and biases (Sunstein, 2009; McGarty *et al.*, 1994; Unsworth and Fielding, 2014). Thus, Van der Vossen (2015; 2020) argues that political philosophers should stay out of political activism. This is because it threatens our ability to meet our professional responsibilities to objectively and rationally evaluate arguments for any given political position. Since participation in political activism is avoidable, it should therefore also be avoided.

However, Van der Vossen's definition of political activism, although deliberately vague in seeking to capture the link between political commitments and ideological silos, is also a narrow one. In what follows, I show that it only strongly holds for certain instances of political activism, but not for others. First of all, this is because Van der Vossen does not distinguish between the political activism that happens through social movements, and the activism that which happens within the confines of the party-political system. While there is often an overlap between the two (social movements can exist in favour of a political party and have overlapping aims and priorities), they are distinct. According to Michelle Moody-Adams:

> [...] a social movement is a sustained, organized endeavor in extra-institutional 'contentious politics' through which a group either (a) asserts an unaddressed need; (b) demands attention to an insufficiently acknowledged interest; or (c) seeks respect for the dignity or worth of some marginalized or excluded group or project, with the goal of changing relevant institutions, policies, and practices. (Moody-Adams, 2022, p. 24)

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under it. Thus, I do not here use the term to denote political systems of thought, such as liberalism, socialism, or conservatism, or systems of social analysis and critique, such as feminism or environmentalism. These have in common that they are systems of social and political thought that one consciously commits to, whereas I am interested in the term insofar as it denotes the way in which dominant social practices and structures often unwittingly shape our beliefs.

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In other words, this is a kind of political activism that operates independently of the party-political system, and which seeks to put pressure on it, or challenge the political status quo in a variety of ways. It may be single-issue movement, such as fighting to implement a new law, or it may provide a more systematic critique of the political status quo, as was for instance the case with Occupy Wall Street. Either way, social movements may gather people under a single cause whose paths would otherwise not cross politically. For instance, the parents of disabled children might band together to fight for better support and educational provisions for their children, but otherwise support different political parties. Thus, in this case, it is not obvious that the activism would have the same potential biasing effect as being a member of a political party whose task it is to tow one larger party line, and to win over other political parties. Social movements both have the capacity to host more diverse points of view, and they are often more motivated to be epistemically virtuous. This is because they are closely invested in providing a truthful analysis of the political problems they seek to address, so as to arrive at genuinely satisfying solutions to them. This, however, does not mean that bias does not exist within social movements. Indeed, they can in some cases become echo chambers of their own. Instead, my claim is that party-political activism somewhat more reliably runs a risk of creating epistemically pernicious ideological silos than looser, single-cause social movements do.

Secondly, within party political activism, we need to distinguish between partisanship and factionalism, both of which are usually found in the party-political system. Lea Ypi and Jonathan White show in their book, *The Meaning of Partisanship* (2016), that when we discuss partisanship, we often conflate it with factionalism. While the two phenomena are often overlapping, they are distinct. According to White and Ypi, partisan groups are normative agents, determining what they think the future *should* be, i.e., they are not just concerned with the political game (White and Ypi, 2016, p. 210). Political factions, on the other hand, are primarily concerned with winning over other factions in order to achieve political dominance. Thus, while partisan groups might become political factions, this is not always the case. Partisan groups might be intent on arriving at some sort of general will that advances everyone's interests, rather than seeking ways to defeat those in other groups. Thus, partisan groups are more likely (though not destined) to be epistemically virtuous, as they are sincerely seeking to arrive at the best way to achieve a common good. Factional groups, on the other hand will seek to defeat criticism at the cost of epistemic virtue, in order to advance

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the power of the group. In short, there seems to be a variety of forms of political activism one could participate in, and with a variety of potential biasing effects. Van der Vossen's concern about ideological silos created by political activism seems to most strongly hold for the case of political factionalism. The other forms of political activism could also be vulnerable to bias, and to ideological siloing, but this is not a given in the same way as it is for political factionalism.

3. Bias in Ivory Towers

Furthermore, even if we should be concerned about the biasing effect of all forms of political activism, retreating to ivory towers is a dissatisfying response to avoid these biases; it implies that academia offers a haven from bias compared to political activism. This is not at all a given. For instance, research shows that academics are not immune from bias and political partisanship when judging each other's works in what is supposed to be rigorous review processes (Abramowitz, Gomes, and Abramowitz, 1975; Mahoney, 1977). Moreover, academics who have remained insulated from politics, but made a career defending a specific point of view, will still also be less likely to genuinely consider alternative positions. Thus, it does not seem that there is something inherent to being an academic, i.e., to being someone who supposedly deals in reason, that makes one more obviously impervious to bias.

Moreover, it is unclear that ivory towers in their current form offer a genuine break from political activism. Universities themselves are large sites of political contestation, both being subject to policies contingent on the political party in power, and politically determined funding constraints. Universities are therefore also sites where such politics is resisted. Indeed, the sector-wide, long-running, and acrimonious dispute over pensions and pay cuts, and deteriorating work-conditions within universities in the United Kingdom is a key example of this. It has forced many academics into political activism in order to protect their own interests, but also to fight for larger political values, such as challenging the marketisation of education and research, challenging systematic discrimination within the education sector, and seeking to shape adequate institutional responses to climate change.

Further, irrespective of the above observation, the idea that political philosophers should abstain from political activism in order to protect their ability to fairly hear 'both sides' rests on two contradictory arguments: the first is that exposure to difference of opinion

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leads to less bias and better, more objective, reasoning. The second argument is that one needs the protection of ivory towers to avoid undue and biasing partisan political influence. However, as I will show below, while the first argument seems uncontroversial, the second argument undermines the former in practice, as it only trades one kind of ideological siloing for another.

The idea of exposure to difference of opinion as epistemically and politically beneficial is deeply ingrained in liberal political theory from John Stuart Mill (2011) to Hannah Arendt (2006) and Jurgen Habermas (1989), to mention a few key figures. The idea is that one's epistemic horizon is broadened through hearing a variety of ideas and perspectives. Through being exposed to ideas that might challenge our own we either come to realise the demerits of our own ideas, or we are forced to sharpen the arguments that we give for them, and indeed, it is argued that there is evidence that this is what happens (Mutz, 2006, pp. 63–66). Thus, it makes sense to draw the inference that exposure to a difference of opinion is epistemically beneficial, and consequently that ideological siloing, which prevents this exposure, is epistemically harmful.

Diana Mutz argues that although exposure to diverse political viewpoints may be widely advocated in theory, it is rarely sought out in practice. She shows that '[w]hile diversity is a much-lauded public goal in the aggregate, few individual people live their everyday lives so as to maximize their exposure to difference' (Mutz, 2006, p. 10). Indeed, Mutz demonstrates that, paradoxically, those who are most likely to be exposed to cross-cutting political conversations are members of marginalised groups, as they cannot insulate themselves from the opposing opinions of others. The frequency of conversations with those who disagree declines as income and education increases (Mutz, 2006, p. 20).

This brings me to my concerns about the second argument: political philosophers, who are an overwhelmingly demographically homogenous group (white, male, middle class),[2] as well as highly educated and fairly well off, already constitute a socially homogenous group. Moreover, through wealth,[3] education, and other privileges, this group is further insulated from a broader variety of opinions from outside political philosophy, if we are to rely on Mutz's extensive research. As a result, it appears that political

[2] https://blog.apaonline.org/2020/06/11/diversity-in-philosophy-departments-introduction/ (accessed 20.06.2023)

[3] At least for those in permanent employment.

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philosophers remaining within ivory towers, rationally discussing amongst ourselves, are particularly insulated from views that diverge radically from the overarching consensus within our field. Thus, remaining within ivory towers to avoid political activism is not an obvious solution to overcome biases which make us less able to 'hear the other side'.

4. Bias and Marginalization

In this section I investigate in more detail which biases we should be concerned with mitigating as political philosophers. I establish that there are two related concerns that we should have with respect to bias within our field. First, there is the legitimate concern that Van der Vossen discusses about our ability to fairly hear and assess arguments for all political positions. However, secondly, I also raise a larger concern about bias, which is much more pervasive, namely our general bias in favour of the existing social system,[4] and against members of marginalised groups. Notwithstanding the harm of systematically treating marginalised groups in a biassed manner, there are two further consequences of this bias that we should worry about as political philosophers: the first is that it makes us less likely to seriously consider well-founded political propositions that challenge the political status quo, and the second is that we fail to seriously consider the unique knowledge that marginalised and oppressed groups may have about their own marginalisation and oppression. In the section following this one, I will show how political activism, at least on the part of the members of the marginalised groups themselves, can be vital to access often untapped knowledge about the marginalisation or oppression in question.

Implicit (or unconscious) biases have a tendency to keep knowledge about unjust and oppressive social phenomena obscured from us, and also make us behave in accordance with oppressive social systems, even when we take ourselves to be critical of them. The following are well established examples of implicit bias that are proven to systematically occur within present-day Western societies: we tend to differently evaluate the same CV whose only difference is the perceived ethnicity of the applicant, indicated by the name at the top (Dovidio and Gaertner, 2000). Individuals were found to be more likely to 'shoot' Black men with weapons than white men

[4] As held not only within our profession, but the population as a whole.

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with weapons in a computer simulation (Park, Glaser, and Knowles, 2008). Men tend to dislike women who are in a superior position to them, for instance at work, and prefer when they are in an equal or inferior position (Richeson and Ambady, 2001).

What underlies all these instances of implicit bias can be described as associations stored in memory that can influence behaviours and judgements (Amodio and Mendoza, 2010). Instances of implicit bias play a part in automatic cognitive processes that often kick in when we are under time pressure, or when we are distracted, and this renders them difficult for the agent to identify and report on (De Houwer *et al.*, 2009). It is worth noting that these cognitive mechanisms are not inherently bad; indeed, they are there to help us make good and rapid decisions under conditions where there is neither the time nor the resources for more thorough deliberation. In so doing we rely on a set of assumptions about the world that we have established through having had them confirmed repeatedly. However, this also means that our prejudicial assumptions, even those that we may have without acknowledging them, come to expression in all sorts of decisions and actions, because they may happen 'under the radar' of conscious decision-making, but still play a part in such decision-making processes. Thus, for instance, if a group is constantly denied jobs, we may be disposed to perceive job applicants from this group as inherently less likely to be professionally apt, as we are not used to relating to them in a professional context. However, this also means that we are further disposed to not hire them. This is not because we have explicit beliefs that members of these groups are incompetent, but because they do not fit our stereotype of the kind of person that has the kind of job at hand, and this may influence our decision-making processes, especially when decisions need to be made relatively fast.

Most crucially for my purposes, implicit biases shape who we believe, whether we have reason to believe them or not. Miranda Fricker famously argues that when we fail to take people's testimony seriously because of systematic prejudice held against them, this constitutes an injustice in and of itself. She names this phenomenon 'testimonial injustice'. Testimonial injustice happens when a speaker is given less credibility than deserved because of a prejudice held against them by their audience, as a result of an identity characteristic, such as race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, or age (Fricker, 2007, p. 16). Such injustices are systematic, in that they are connected, via common prejudice, with other injustices. However, Fricker argues that it is important to recognise that testimonial injustice differs from other injustices in that it involves being wronged

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in one's capacity as a knower. Thus, ignoring victim testimony both excludes victim input from political decision-making processes, with the consequence that eliminating injustices does not become a political priority. Moreover, ignoring victim testimony is also an injustice in its own right.

In short, implicit biases make us less motivated to notice or acknowledge injustice; it disposes us to process the potentially unjust practices we observe simply as 'the way of the world', and it prevents us from asking questions that challenge these practices. Furthermore, it makes us treat members of marginalised groups as less credible, which itself is a form of injustice. Thus, while our tendency towards implicit bias does not make it impossible for us to notice and conceptualise potentially unjust social practices, it makes us cognitively indisposed to do so.

Further, it is not only stereotypes regarding members of specific social groups that may diminish our ability and motivation to notice injustices. System justification theory (see Jost, 2019) argues that people tend to defend the social status quo because we are generally biased in favour of existing social systems, even when they are deeply critique-worthy. Moreover, it shows that we not only internalise system-justifying beliefs through passive social learning; we actively participate in justifying the system. In short, we are predisposed to justifying the social structures that we live within, even if they produce unjust outcomes, and even if this knowledge is available to us. Why we do this cannot simply be explained by our tendency to defend our own personal interests, or the interests of the group to which we belong; people are disposed to justify existing social, economic, and political arrangements at the cost of individual and collective self-interest (Jost, 2019, p. 263).

Through a meta-analysis of the literature, Jost (2019) has identified a non-exhaustive list of scenarios that tend to cause system-justifying behaviour in most people. First, people tend to be more accepting of unwelcome social outcomes if they are perceived as inevitable (Kay, Jimenez, and Jost, 2002; Laurin, Gaucher, and Kay, 2013; Laurin, Kay, and Fitzsimons, 2012; Laurin, Shepherd, and Kay, 2010). Similarly, perceived longevity, i.e., the sense that the system has 'always' been like this also has this effect. For instance, in the West, we tend to perceive the capitalist system in these terms, when capitalism as we know it is a relatively recent historical occurrence (Blanchar and Eidelman, 2013). Another cause is that system justification serves a palliative function (Jost, Pelham, and Carvallo, 2002; Hammond and Sibley, 2011; Napier, Thorisdottir, and Jost, 2010; Vargas-Salfate *et al.*, 2018). For instance, religious people, and

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politically conservative people self-reported higher levels of happiness. Status quo systems have the benefits of already making sense to us, and challenging them requires a bigger cognitive load (Hussak and Cimpian, 2015).

Thus, if we are concerned about the implicit biases that political philosophers might be disposed to without noticing, then we should not only be concerned with the biasing effect of political factionalism, but also our general disposition towards biases in favour of the political status quo, and against marginalised and oppressed groups, which makes us less system critical and less knowledgeable about oppression and marginalisation. One proposed solution would be to pay closer attention to what marginalised groups have to say about their own experiences of marginalisation and oppression. This is because one might expect members of marginalised and oppressed groups themselves not to hold status quo biases, and biases against their own groups. Indeed, it would be reasonable to expect that they would have direct epistemic access to the truth about the marginalisation and oppression of which they are victims, simply because they directly experience it. If this is the case, our inability to hear them is not only bad because it is a harm in itself, but because we miss out on crucial information about injustice, how it manifests itself, and the repair that is required.

However, victim access to this information may be unreliable for several reasons. First, this is because we cannot rely on victims to not hold implicit biases against themselves and their peers. We might expect victims to be better equipped to resist implicit biases, at least against their own group, simply because their experiences of themselves and their peers would not match the stereotypes held against that group. However, Jost *et al*. argue that we cannot rely on this to be the case; indeed, the pendulum could swing the other way. As many as 40% or 50% of disadvantaged groups, and sometimes even more, exhibit implicit (or unconscious) biases against their own group and in favour of more advantaged outgroup members (Jost, 2019, pp. 277–78). In support of this finding, further studies that show that poor people and obese people implicitly evaluate rich people and normal weight people more favourably than their own groups (Horwitz and Dovidio, 2017; Rudman, Feinberg, and Fairchild, 2002); many members of the LGBTQ community implicitly evaluate straight people more favourably than their own groups (Hoffarth and Jost, 2017; Jost, Banaji, and Nosek, 2004); in Chile, Hispanics and dark-skinned Morenos implicitly evaluate Caucasians and light-skinned Blancos more favourably than their own groups (Uhlmann *et al*., 2002); black and coloured children favour whites in

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South Africa (Newheiser *et al.*, 2014); in the United States, minority college students implicitly evaluate white students more favourably than their own groups (Ashburn-Nardo, Knowles, and Monteith, 2003; Jost, Pelham, and Carvallo, 2002; Jost, Banaji, and Nosek, 2004).

Thus, while members of marginalised groups could potentially be better disposed to resist implicit biases about their own groups by virtue of knowing their community intimately enough to not have their stereotypes about members of this group constantly affirmed, the sheer stigma of being the member of a marginalised group could lead to a lack of self-confidence that makes one wish to be a member of a different group, and hence evaluate one's own group in worse terms. Thus, marginalised groups do not necessarily evaluate their own social disadvantage in less prejudicial terms than non-marginalised groups, and they are therefore not necessarily motivated to investigate the ways in which their differential treatment may be unjustified.

Further, Jost argues that the number of marginalised people who do participate in system justification is surprisingly high, given that the system works against them (Jost *et al.*, 2017; Manstead, 2018). Specifically, marginalised groups may be particularly susceptible to participate in system justification for palliative reasons, as well as to avoid a too large cognitive load. To challenge a political status quo, one must be willing to tolerate a great deal of uncertainty, and potential threats to one's safety and security, as well as the risk of being cut off from family and friends. If one is already in a precarious situation, one may be grasping at the few straws of certainty available. In addition, the sheer cognitive load of challenging the political status quo may be too much if one is already spending one's cognitive resources struggling to figure out how to keep one's head above water (Eidelman *et al.*, 2012; Friesen *et al.*, 2014; Hansson, Keating, and Terry, 1974; Lammers and Proulx, 2013; Rock and Janoff-Bulman, 2010; Rutjens and Loseman, 2010; Skitka *et al.*, 2002; Van Berkel *et al.*, 2015). Thus, there are two unique factors standing in the way of victims accessing the knowledge about marginalisation they might be privy to by virtue of directly experiencing it: first, victims may lack the requisite epistemic and practical resources, such as education, time, and energy. Secondly, victims may lack the epistemic self-confidence to trust and take seriously their own perspective, experiences, and reactions to these experiences.

Thus, not only do we tend to hold biases against marginalised groups which means we take them less seriously, or outright fail to hear what they have to say, but marginalised groups are often also

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biased against their own in a way that undermines their own capacity to be critical of the treatment they are subject to, and the system that perpetuates it.

5. Counteracting Biases

Is the above discussion cause for despair, then? Are we all doomed to irrational system justification and biases against marginalised groups, irrespective of who we are and what we do? Further, what is the relevance of the above discussion for political philosophers and our relationship to political activism if these are the biases we all have to grapple with? In the following section, I first show that we have a larger variety of tools at our disposal for counteracting biases than retreating to ivory towers. Then, I show that members of marginalised groups, despite their specific epistemic challenges and vulnerabilities to bias, do have privileged access to knowledge about the injustice they are experiencing, even if there are barriers to this access. Moreover, I argue that this access often depends on certain forms of ideological siloing and political activism on their part. As a result, there is a form of political activism that not only does not have a biasing effect, but in fact also has a potential bias *debunking* effect. Thus, political philosophers should both engage with the knowledge that is produced through this form of activism, and they should also not be prevented from participating in this form of political activism, and to draw on insights from this participation in their theorising.

Van der Vossen is focussed on one particular way to counteract biases, namely individual philosophers minimising their exposure to bias through retreating to ivory towers (Van der Vossen, 2015, p. 15). As already argued, this is a dissatisfying response to the problem at hand. Moreover, this is not the only method available for preventing or combatting the formation of biases. In terms of minimising individual uptake of biases, intergroup contact, i.e., consistent exposure to people of different background and opinions, is also a method that has proven effective (see Aberson *et al.*, 2008; Dasgupta and Rivera, 2008; Anderson, 2010, for discussion), especially if they have equal status in the interaction. Thus, this is an argument for diversifying political philosophy, rather than simply retreating from politics into ivory towers in their current socially homogenous form. Relatedly, counter-stereotype exposure is also a bias-fighting method that has proven successful (Blair *et al.*, 2001; Dasgupta and Greenwald, 2001). It entails increasing individuals' exposure to images, film

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clips, or even mental imagery depicting members of stigmatized groups acting in stereotype-discordant ways (e.g., images of female scientists). Again, this is an argument for focusing on diversifying academia, both in terms of people and in terms of content. Another method for managing biases within political philosophy would be to be less worried about individual exposure to biases, assuming that most people will have them, and instead seek to design systems that encourage us to challenge and counteract them. This would entail actively structuring ivory towers to be less siloed and more inclusive, as well as fostering inclusive and constructive ways to encourage equal participation, and to fairly exchange genuinely differing arguments and opinions.

Furthermore, there may be cases where participation in political activism could be strongly recommended for bias-debunking purposes. The activism that I propose is not factional in nature, and therefore does not fall directly within Van der Vossen's realm of concern. It involves victims of oppression and marginalisation, who hold a unique access point to information about oppression and marginalisation by virtue of having direct experience of it, but equally may hold biases against their own, and may also lack the requisite resources to tap into this knowledge. The activism in question has the potential both to debunk biases and provide the requisite epistemic tools to systematically access victim knowledge.

It is at this stage that I encourage thinking of victims of oppression and marginalisation as epistemic concrete flowers: not many succeed in gaining reliable knowledge about the oppression they experience, given the hostile environment for epistemic growth and inquiry that they find themselves in. However, some do, despite the odds. Although these may seem robust, they often acquire this knowledge at a high personal cost, and communicating this knowledge is risky at the best of times. For instance, Frederick Douglass explains how learning to read through getting white children to teach him when he was out and about was a pivotal moment in developing his understanding of his condition as enslaved, and the possibility of freedom. This is because he gained access to newspapers, books, and other communications that connected his own experience to that of others in different places and at different times, as well as a larger political and economic environment. However, learning to read was something he only managed to achieve through extraordinary efforts and cunning, having to do it surreptitiously in order to avoid punishment from his slave masters (Douglass, 2006). It is not a risk and effort to be reasonably expected from most enslaved people.

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The task, then, is to provide an environment that cultivates the epistemic agency of victims of oppression and marginalisation, so that not only a select (and remarkably robust) but malnourished few succeed, but so that a wider range of epistemic agents have the opportunity to fully blossom. There are two necessary conditions to meet in order to do this (though there may be more): the first is to develop epistemic self-confidence, so that victims are able to glean knowledge from their unique lived experience, rather than dismiss themselves as epistemic agents, and do the same to other people with cognate experiences. The second is to provide the requisite skill and resources to perform a rigorous epistemic investigation into previously untapped epistemic territory.

Alessandra Tanesini argues that it is necessary to have a proportionate level of self-confidence for being a virtuous epistemic agent (Tanesini, 2021, p. 6). Specifically, she argues that having a well-calibrated sense of one's own strengths and weaknesses makes one make better judgements about the knowledge one has or would be able to acquire. In other words, while there are obvious problems with inflated self-confidence, as it leads to an exaggerated trust in one's own abilities and beliefs, there are also problems with a deflated epistemic self-confidence. Having one's attention divided between self-doubt and epistemic investigation means that one has to deal with two warring factions that constantly threaten to undermine each other (Schröder-Abé *et al.*, 2007). As established earlier, one key feature of social marginalisation is the constant threat to one's own positive self-evaluation. Being the victim of oppression and injustice is a sure-fire way to have one's epistemic confidence undermined, either through repeated messages from the outside world about one's lack of credibility, or through one's own negative biases towards one's own group and palliative commitment to a system that undermines one's own agency. These biases therefore make the victim go from appropriate levels of self-scrutiny to failing to recognise their epistemic access and capacities.

This is where ideological siloing could play an important role: as established, the supposed problem with this siloing is that we tend to perceive our beliefs as more credible and dismiss outgroup views, if we are surrounded by like-minded others (Sunstein, 2009; McGarty, 1994; Unsworth and Fielding, 2014). This is obviously one of the reasons one might be concerned with siloing as a source of bias; if one belongs to a silo of like-minded others, one only has one's own views confirmed, and one becomes impervious to conflicting evidence and opinions. However, in the case of many marginalised groups, siloing could have the opposite effect: what is needed for

these groups is often a strengthening of one's own beliefs through being heard and understood, and to be made more resilient against the opinions and judgements of others. Social siloing in these cases may balance out the marginalised tendency to value one's own point of view less than that of an oppressive political mainstream, for no other epistemic reason than that they are the powerful majority, or the voice of authority. It thereby leads to a more appropriate level of epistemic resilience and trust in one's own knowledge and epistemic capacities.

It is important to note here that I do not here deny the epistemic importance of being exposed to a larger diversity in belief and opinion. Instead, I argue that minority knowledge often needs the special protection and bolstering that partisan political activism and ideological siloing brings in order to provide the skills and confidence to tap into its epistemic potential. Moreover, it is important to note that this claim still allows for the fact that the ideological siloing of marginalised groups under certain circumstances could have epistemically negative consequences. It is not a given that siloing will automatically perfectly recalibrate one's epistemic resilience and self-confidence; the pendulum could swing too far in the other direction, making the group unduly impervious to outside knowledge and ideas without having a firm epistemic basis for their own. Relatedly, it is not a given that the members of the silo will have the requisite skill and resources to boost their epistemic capacities in tandem with inflating epistemic self-confidence. Thus, the group runs a risk of inflating epistemic self-confidence disproportionally to their epistemic capacities. The negatively self-reinforcing nature of certain online cultures could be thus categorised. For instance, men's rights activists may have legitimate grievances about specific issues that men face, but spend most of their time aggressively identifying themselves as anti-feminists, rather than arriving at a rigorous analysis of contemporary gender relations (Nagle, 2017).

I therefore wish to modify the claim I am making here: I do not argue that any form of ideological siloing will be beneficial to members of marginalised groups. Instead, I am arguing that in some cases, certain forms of ideological siloing provide a necessary but insufficient condition for overcoming the biases marginalised groups hold against themselves, and it helps boost their epistemic self-confidence. This also makes them more capable of advocating for themselves politically, and to explicitly challenge and debunk biases and prejudices held against them across society. Further, under certain circumstances, this siloing allows for groups to practise and develop their epistemic skills, and to safely explore their

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experiences, thoughts, and feelings, in a way that might make it possible to harness the knowledge these might unlock. Thus, in these cases, siloing is not only a necessary condition for boosting epistemic self-confidence, but also for acquiring the requisite epistemic tools to reliably harness the unique knowledge they may have about the marginalisation they experience. Yet, this kind of siloing should only be treated as an epistemic starting point which is subsequently paired with other ways of sharing perspectives and engaging with others. This is necessary to bear in mind if we are to avoid the potential epistemically negative effects of excessive ideological siloing.

As a case in point, consider the feminist consciousness raising groups of the 1970s: consciousness raising as a method for developing epistemically well-founded claims about female oppression arose from a range of women's discussion groups in the 1970s. Consciousness-raising groups aimed to provide a space where women could discuss their experiences openly, and without judgement. This was partly achieved by the groups excluding men from participating. What drove women towards consciousness-raising groups was not an explicit sense of needing to politically organise on the basis of women's oppression. Instead, it saw that '[i]nteractions usually overlooked as insignificant if vaguely upsetting proved good subjects for detailed scrutiny' (MacKinnon, 1989, p. 89). Consciousness-raising groups simply provided a space where women could vent their frustrations and grievances in a non-judgemental environment that aimed to take women's testimony seriously, when voicing these frustrations or grievances would otherwise be dismissed as petty or irrational, even by the woman herself (MacKinnon, 1989, p. 91).

Moreover, consciousness-raising groups provided a space in which these testimonies could be cohered. By not attending to each testimony in isolation, the extent of women's domination, and the ways in which it was maintained became more evident. If a certain type of upsetting experience was recognisable by several group members, this gave basis for thinking that there might be structural causes behind it; it could not simply be dismissed as a consequence of individual circumstances. Thus, experiences of gendered injustices, such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, and rape were all discovered as systematic features of women's experiences, rather than merely instances of individual misfortune (Brownmiller, 1999). Thus, in this context, the ideological siloing of women allowed them to simply vent, and thereby cover topics that would not be taken seriously outside the groups, or even by individual women. If one

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woman's experience turned out to be relatable to several members, this could be the germ that allowed the group to go on to uncover and identify larger systematic gender-based patterns of oppression and marginalisation.

The development of the concept of sexual harassment and its subsequent political and legal impact is usually given as the standard example of how consciousness raising works as an epistemic process that yields information about injustices. Carmita Wood is generally credited with setting this process in motion (Fricker, 2007, p. 150; Brownmiller 1999, p. 280). Wood experienced repeated episodes of what we now call 'sexual harassment' in the workplace. This produced such a stress reaction that she became physically incapable of doing her job, and she had to quit. Because these incidents happened before sexual harassment was recognized as a specific phenomenon, Wood did not have the conceptual framework to justify to herself and her colleagues that her situation was intolerable. However, her experience was palpable, and with real-world consequences; she could not hold down her job, and she struggled to explain why she merited unemployment benefits. Not until discussing her experiences in a consciousness-raising group and realizing that this was an experience shared by other women, did she and others realize that her treatment should be characterised as a specific form of injustice. Sexual harassment was articulated as a concept denoting this phenomenon.

Another example of consciousness raising stems from the Combahee River Collective, a group of African American women who had been active in the civil rights movement, and within the feminist movement of the 1960s and 70s, but felt that both were failing to adequately represent them. They observed: 'there was no way of conceptualizing what was so apparent to us, what we knew was really happening' (Taylor, 2017, p. 17). Through a process of consciousness raising, the group identified many distinctive ways in which women of colour are discriminated against, neither of which were recognised by the civil rights movement, nor the feminist movement at the time. The civil rights movement tended to see the struggle of Black women as identical to the struggles of Black men; the feminist movement often failed to ignore the ways in which race complicated the ways in which sexism plays out for women of colour. For instance, the collective discovered that since they were all considered smart, they had also been considered ugly, as a way for Black men within the civil rights movement to diminish the reasons why their opinions, needs, and demands should be attended to. The group thereby coined the term 'smart-ugly'. This

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term expressed the ways in which Black women could only develop their intellects at great cost to their social lives, a form of oppression which did not affect black men or white women (Combahee River Collective, 2014). As a result of these analyses, it has been argued that the Combahee River Collective, through consciousness raising, developed an understanding of intersectionality prior to this becoming a mainstream academic term for conceptualising the ways in which different and multiple forms of oppression may combine to produce a novel type of oppression (Taylor, 2017).

To summarise, what consciousness raising identifies are poorly understood or ignored events, which we come to know about through examining our experiences of the event, as contrasted to mainstream narratives about the event. If it turns out that these kinds of events are experienced across a social group, this gives cause for asking further questions about whether these experiences were instances of the same type of social phenomenon, what the personal ramifications of these experiences have been for those involved, as well as for investigating potential systematic causes. Without the ability to share freely one's experiences in a closed environment of peers, the experiences in question would most likely be dismissed as petty, accidental, one-off, and epistemically insignificant. Moreover, the victim would likely not speak at all about the experience, out of fear of being dismissed (Dotson, 2011). Thus, what the siloing here provides is an environment of like-minded others that provides two crucial things: a non-judgemental environment, and the possibility of identifying previously undetected cognate experiences across a social group, so that it becomes possible to see patterns of discrimination and marginalisation rather than single instances of misconduct, or over-sensitive victims.

6. Activist Philosophers and Divisions of Labour

To summarise my discussion so far, then, I have established that

(a) bias in favour of the existing social system and against members of marginalised groups (two biases which mutually reinforce each other) prevent the discovery of hitherto poorly understood kinds of injustice;
(b) ideological siloing among political philosophers may lead to bias in favour of the existing social system and against members of marginalised groups.

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(c) By contrast, ideological siloing among members of marginalised groups themselves may facilitate the debunking of the two kinds of bias, and enable the discovery and understanding of hitherto poorly understood kinds of injustice.
(d) Political activism is necessary for the latter kind of siloing to happen.

What is the consequence of this discussion for us as political philosophers, and as potential political activists? I have several suggestions: first of all, as it currently stands, we obviously cannot treat staying within ivory towers as a method for remaining politically neutral and objective. It is within this context we are least likely to be exposed to a genuine diversity of opinions, beliefs, and bodies of knowledge. Thus, we must be prepared to engage with, and understand, a variety of social groups and political projects in order to broaden our horizon in ways that actually serve our ability to challenge pregiven assumptions and strengthen our critical capacities. This does not necessarily entail that political philosophers therefore should become political activists at all costs, but it is an encouragement for political philosophers to engage with activist groups, and learn about their political thinking, methods, strategies, and aims. This does not differ from Van der Vossen's argument as such; he does not argue that we should retreat from public debate, and he does not argue that we cannot draw lessons from activist groups. Instead, he is arguing for a division of labour, where activists do their thing, and political philosophers do something else, but each can learn from each other (Van der Vossen, 2015, p. 19). What I seek to show in this paper is that this model is not problematic in and of itself, but that it needs to allow for a larger diversity of relationships between political philosophy and activism than this. Moreover, I have shown that we should rethink how ivory towers can best serve their purpose as facilitators of unbiassed knowledge.

As a result, this discussion strikes straight at the heart of philosophy's diversity issue: the demand for a retreat away from activism and into ivory towers forces a party line of its own, in which the few philosophers from marginalised backgrounds are prevented both from actively fighting against their marginalisation, and are also prevented from tapping into the specific knowledge that they might have access to *qua* member of marginalised group, since much of this knowledge first becomes available through participation in group based political activism. If we follow Van der Vossen, this knowledge is deemed tainted or unpure, and not fit material to

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theorise with, even in cases when it provides important challenges to philosophically orthodox positions. This both forces limited thinking, as well as behaviour that is only easy to comply with for a relatively privileged segment of the population, and harder for those who are not. It also means that political philosophy misses out on accessing a larger body of knowledge and opinion that might make us less biased as a result.

I am therefore also arguing that we should allow for political philosophers to be directly engaged in political activism, and to draw on our experiences of this participation in our broader political thinking *where relevant*. If we were to draw a hard line between political activism and political philosophy, this would mean that important political thinkers would not be allowed to develop their theories. For example, Catharine MacKinnon would not be allowed to develop her seminal theory about gender oppression and state responses to it, and Frantz Fanon would not be allowed to develop his ground-breaking thinking about racism, violence, and anti-colonial political struggle. Arguably, neither MacKinnnon nor Fanon would have been able to write their most important philosophical works without their direct experience with specific forms of political activism. We need to leave space for other political philosophers to do the same. However, we as political philosophers should still tread cautiously when engaging with activist groups or participating in political activism. We need to ask ourselves what methods are being employed within the activist groups, and what sorts of epistemic functions they serve. Do they limit our capacity to fully 'hear the other side', or do they instead rather help us better understand our own side, as well as what is at stake, and what political aims and tools we need to develop in light of this insight?

7. Conclusion

To conclude, in this paper, I have argued that participation in certain forms of political activism is a powerful tool for avoiding the most pernicious and pervasive biases we are prone to as citizens, and as theorists, namely biases against marginalised groups, and in favour of the political status quo (Jost, 2019). I do not here disagree with the literature on bias in political activism and partisanship as such; having a strong political affiliation obviously means that one is biased against those that hold opposing political views. Instead, I have contested the idea that these cases have purely bad epistemic and moral consequences. Specifically, I argue that they counteract

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our tendency to justify a bad political status quo, and thus, in some cases, serve the goal of objectivity better than political abstention. This discussion therefore deepens and nuances the conversations we need to have as political philosophers about our vulnerabilities to bias, as well as our relationship to actual politics and political activism. Moreover, it nuances our relationship to our own discipline, its methodological practices, and its subsequent social and professional inclusions and exclusions.

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