

The Professoriate and the Truth: Getting the Shoe on the *Right* Foot

Kenneth R. Howe
University of Colorado at Boulder

I agree with John Kekes's general principle that the professoriate should not subordinate the truth to any political ideal. I agree, that is, if "subordinating the truth to a political ideal" means spinning, suppressing, and fabricating evidence, on the one hand, and ignoring or not seeking counter-evidence, on the other. But Kekes may mean something more fundamental than this. Although his view is not altogether clear, one interpretation his analysis encourages is that political ideals and the pursuit of the truth fall into two different epistemic domains, such that the two must be kept separate lest political ideals contaminate the truth. If Kekes does mean this, he's got trouble, for it gets him ensnared in the very same logic that he uses to criticize the relativists from the left. If there is no truth of the matter when it comes to questions that incorporate political ideals, questions such as the defensibility of affirmative action, for example, then why shouldn't the liberal left just assert its will to power in this domain? And mustn't Kekes just be asserting his when he criticizes the liberal left?

Kekes also encourages this relativist interpretation in his discussion of how the liberal left allegedly subordinates the truth to its political ideal by denying academic freedom to groups advocating things such as Protestant fundamentalism, male dominance, innate racial differences, anti-Semitism, condemnation of homosexuality, and the superiority of Western civilization. Contrary to Kekes's assertion, it is not clear to me that any of these groups are, in fact, denied academic freedom (which is not to say they are not often denied academic respect). In any case, the liberal left grants that these groups should not be censored and yet still discourages the expression of their views, including not participating in providing campus platforms for them, on the grounds that such views do not further the pursuit of the truth. In Kekes case, does he think that discouraging the expression of the views of anti-Semites, sexists, homophobes, and racists (and why not throw in Nazis, KKKers and slave traders?) subordinates the pursuit of the truth because it hinders it, or because there is no truth to be had in these matters? If he opts for the first alternative — that discouraging these groups hinders the pursuit of the truth — he needs to show, contrary to the liberal left, that anti-Semites, sexists, racists, and the like, have something to contribute to the pursuit of truth. If he opts for the second alternative — that there is no truth to be had in these matters — he is, as before, ensnared in his own criticisms of relativism.

Assuming that Kekes would want to distance himself from relativism and would thus agree that answers to politically laden questions are capable of cognitive investigation, he would also have to agree that such questions need not and should not be strictly separated from the pursuit of truth. In this vein, the demand that professors jettison any and all political ideals is impossible to live up to, for such a

demand is itself inherently political in virtue of defining what counts as legitimate political discourse for professors qua professors. Kekes himself goes beyond this most minimal political ideal by asserting that the academy should help society develop policies to solve its problems and promote its wellbeing.

The question, then, of whether a given kind of professorial behavior subordinates the pursuit of the truth to political ideals is not the question of whether political ideals are in any way implicated. The question is whether the behavior is motivated by partisan political aims such that the search for and use of evidence is distorted in the ways I described at the outset.

Having set the stage in this way, I now examine an interpretation of Professor Kekes's position in which he may be construed as charging the members of the liberal left professoriate with abusing their office by pervasively engaging in the kind of partisan behavior just described.

From my vantage point, the liberal left (and there's a problem with just who that includes, which I'll get to momentarily) is not especially guilty of political partisanship. Indeed, outside of the academy, rightist think tanks with lots of PR resources and no peer review — like the Heritage Foundation, the Fordham Foundation, the Cato Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, the Hoover Institute, and the Manhattan Institute — have garnered considerable influence these days and are quite liable to the charge of subordinating the truth to their partisan political aims. In connection with muscle flexing by the right, I've recently had some personal experience with what might be called the "new McCarthyism," in which right wing state legislators tried to shut down our little education policy center at the University of Colorado and threatened to get an untenured professor fired because they didn't like our analyses of their then pending bills on vouchers and tuition tax credits. Now that really *is* an attack on academic freedom.

Inside the academy, the liberal left may very well predominate in the humanities and the social sciences. But there is an alternative to Kekes's hypothesis that it's naked political partisanship that explains why this should be so. The alternative hypothesis is this: Professors, who are typically "intelligent and analytical," as Kekes says, have concluded, based on sustained and careful research, that racism, sexism, economic exploitation, manipulation of information, and other forms of domination provide the only credible explanations for the persistent patterns of inequality in U.S. society. To rule out this explanation a priori would, once again, be tantamount to embracing relativism.

As I intimated above, a problem that plagues Kekes's arguments throughout is just what he means by the "liberal left." He does not provide even one example. From his description we can form no more than a hazy image of a faceless mob, among whose members I presume we would find liberal egalitarians, critical theorists, critical race theorists, postmodernists, poststructuralists, and feminists of various kinds. Such a varied group is unlikely to be univocal in any of their views. Nonetheless, Kekes gives several examples of the beliefs, practices, and policies members of the liberal left mob all embrace.

The first he considers is affirmative action in faculty hiring. Conceding that the policy is controversial, he nonetheless sees fit to forego a “detailed evaluation” and proceeds, instead, to make several vague and unsubstantiated factual claims and to beg the question in his favor.

In the case of factual claims, he says that given what is now “standard practice,” it has “become mandatory that in ranking the candidates search committees assign heavy weight to race, ethnic origin, and gender.” What sense of “mandatory” is being used here, what does “heavy weight” mean, what particular institutions does he have in mind, and, in general, what’s the evidence for any of this? (At Colorado, we’re not mandated to weight anything; we’re not even provided with information on race, ethnic origin, and gender.) He also says that the result of affirmative action “is a sustained and systematic lowering of the level of teaching and research.” Where’s the evidence for this claim? (I am reminded here of what Al Franken says about being Rush Limbaugh’s fact checker: it’s a very easy job.)

He asserts flatly that affirmative action (he prefers the description “preferential treatment”) favors hiring less qualified teachers and researchers over more qualified ones. This begs a central question, for one important defense of affirmative action challenges Kekes’s conception of qualifications. On this view, characteristics such as gender and race can count as qualifications for faculty positions because such characteristics are required for effective role modeling for certain groups of students, for faculty members to play the role of the “outsider within” in research programs, and so forth. In connection with the latter, including a diversity of voices in research, particularly hitherto excluded voices, enhances, not subordinates, the pursuit of the truth.

This defense of affirmative action might ultimately fail, but that is really beside the point. For even if it did fail, that would in no way show that its supporters advanced it out of blind political partisanship instead of out of a commitment to the truth.

Kekes advances a similar line of argument against affirmative action in admissions, and it suffers from the same problems regarding what may count as qualifications and regarding the facts of the matter (the factual claim, in this case, is the alleged steady decline in the quality of students). An additional problem here concerns the use of tests of academic performance, such as the ACT and SAT, in admissions decisions. These measures are far from perfect predictors of success, and their ability to identify desert or merit is severely compromised by the fact that performance on them is so heavily determined by past educational opportunity, or the lack thereof. Thus, low-income and minority students are systematically disadvantaged when tests are a primary criterion upon which admissions decisions are made. This is unfortunate *and* unfair. And, unless Kekes wants to identify Sandra Day O’Connor with the liberal left, it is not only liberal leftists who believe this injustice may be legitimately remedied via affirmative action.

Kekes next considers the liberal left and relativism. I won’t rehearse his argument about the problem of the self-defeating feature of relativism because that should be pretty familiar. I’ll stick to several side observations.

First, once again, we have vague and unsubstantiated factual claims, for example, that relativism is “virtually the official doctrine in departments of sociology, anthropology, psychology, history, and literature and language.” What does “official doctrine” mean and what’s the evidence?

Second, although I have no problem with being designated a member of the liberal left, I do have a problem with being designated a relativist. I believe that it is important to draw a line between the will to power and the pursuit of truth, however treacherous it is to maintain. In this vein, I hold the views I do because I believe they square with the empirical evidence and exemplify the best normative philosophical arguments. I am not unusual in this regard. As I intimated earlier, the liberal left mob is not univocal, and I would say a large number of its members reject relativism. Indeed, several (such as, Amy Gutmann, Benjamin Barber, Seyla Benhabib, and Charles Taylor) have advanced criticisms of relativism in its more extreme forms, critiques that resemble Kekes’s own.

The final issue is that of including the judgments of undergraduates in running universities and colleges, a “ruinous policy” Kekes says. He gives most of his attention under this category to student evaluations of teaching. Kekes confidently asserts that students give the highest evaluations to instructors they like the best, that high course grades are associated with high student evaluations, and that student evaluations are unreliable.

As far as unreliability goes (by which he means invalidity I take it) no sensible person would claim that student evaluations are a sufficient means of evaluating teaching because students are in no position to judge whether the material is, to borrow from Michael Scriven “current, comprehensive, and correct.” The evaluation of the course material has to be done by faculty.

As far as bias in student evaluations associated with course grades and how well instructors are liked is concerned, it would be nice to know just how serious Kekes thinks this problem is. Once again, he offers only vague and unsubstantiated factual claims. I took a quick look at the empirical evidence at Colorado. The correlation with grades isn’t that high and is systematically associated with various units (for example, engineering faculty’s student evaluations are generally lower). Also, Kekes might like to know (or maybe he wouldn’t) student evaluations show a slight bias *against* minority and women instructors.

It strains credulity to assert that student evaluations tell us nothing about the quality of teaching and, as far as biases are concerned, it isn’t all that difficult to adjust for them. But let us suppose that student evaluations are as hopelessly flawed as Kekes says they are. What’s that got to do with the liberal left? Kekes answer is that the liberal left’s “politics blinds them” so that they see universities and colleges as small-scale egalitarian societies, where everyone has an equal say, from professors to maintenance workers to students. Well, this would be a pretty silly situation. But why should we believe it is an accurate description when, true to form, Kekes has provided no evidence? It certainly does not accurately depict my institution.

Furthermore, where Kekes sees liberal leftism and hyper-egalitarianism, I see rightist consumerism and market accountability. My point is that there is an

alternative, and better, explanation of why student evaluations have taken on greater importance in recent years; namely, it is explained by the trend toward greater market accountability in education. The demand of the customer, after all, is to have her preferences satisfied, and it's not up to the "provider" to decide what those preferences should be. So why shouldn't the customer demand entertainment, "relevant" material, and likeable instructors?

In conclusion, Kekes fails — quite spectacularly — to make his charges against the liberal left stick. It is not as if the problems Kekes picks out concerning affirmative action, relativism, and student evaluations shouldn't resonate at all. It is that he repeatedly proffers conclusions that breathtakingly outstrip what his evidence, if it may be called that, warrants. He gives new meaning to the concept of the under determination of theory by data.

At a more fundamental level, the dismissive attitude that Kekes displays toward women, racial minorities, and gays and lesbians; combined with the permissive attitude he displays toward sexists, racists, and homophobes; combined with the remarkable indifference he displays to the effects of socio-economic arrangements render his views retrograde in the extreme. We've learned a lot since John Stuart Mill's day about how group membership and socio-economic arrangements work together to enhance or diminish the worth of (formal) liberty.

On that note, I end by juxtaposing the quotation by Orwell with which Kekes begins his lecture with a quotation from Rawls.

Here is Orwell (from *1984*):

The obvious...and the true has got to be defended. Truisms are true, hold on to that! The solid world exists, its laws do not change. Stones are hard, water is wet, objects unsupported fall towards the earth's center...If that is granted, all else follows.

Here is Rawls (from *A Theory of Justice*):

What is just and unjust is the way...institutions deal with...facts. Aristocratic and caste societies are unjust because they make...contingencies the ascriptive basis for belonging to more or less enclosed and privileged classes. The basic structure of these societies incorporates the arbitrariness found in nature. But there is no necessity for men [and women] to resign themselves to these contingencies. The social system is not an unchangeable order beyond human control, but a pattern of human action.¹

1. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Boston: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), 102.