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Title: Do Junior Academic Bioethicists Have an Obligation to be Activists?

Running title: Should junior bioethicists be activists?

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Title Page

Title:

Do Junior Academic Bioethicists Have an Obligation to be Activists?

Abstract:

Activism and bioethics have enjoyed a somewhat strained relationship. In this paper, I consider activism specifically from the perspective of junior academics. I will argue that although there may be a prima facie duty for bioethicists to be activists, countervailing considerations for junior academics may mean that they, in particular, should refrain from undertaking activist activities. I will argue this on the basis of two key claims. First, that activism may come at a potential cost to the academics who undertake it, and that these costs are potentially of greatest detriment to junior academics undertaking activism. Second, I will argue that junior academics are likely to be less effective activists than established academics. Moreover, undertaking activism as a junior academic may prevent one from becoming an effective activist later. Finally, I will discuss the implications of this argument for activist commitments later in one's career.

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Activism, bioethics

Word count

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Do junior academic bioethicists have an obligation to be activists?

Introduction

Activism and bioethics have variously been regarded as necessary bedfellows¹ or incompatible pursuits due to the demands of each.² In this paper I will argue that although there may sometimes be a prima facie duty for bioethicists to be activists, countervailing considerations for junior academics may mean that they, in particular, should refrain from undertaking activist activities. I will argue this on the basis of two key claims. First, that activism may come at a potential cost to the academics who undertake it, and that these costs are potentially of greatest detriment to junior academics undertaking activism. Avoidance of these costs provides a self-regarding reason for junior academics to not undertake activism. Second, I will advance lines of argument similar to those found in the Effective Altruism movement, and will argue that junior academics are likely to be less effective activists than established academics. Moreover, undertaking activism as a junior academic may prevent one from becoming an effective activist later. This provides an other-regarding reason for junior academics to not participate in activism. Finally, I will discuss the implications of this argument for activist commitments later in one's career.

Definitions

Because the arguments in this paper are not intended to apply universally, it is important to be precise about to whom and to what my arguments will apply. My intended focus here is on academic bioethicists who are at an early stage in their career.

¹ L.S. Parker. 2007. Bioethics as activism. In *The Ethics of Bioethics: Mapping the Moral Landscape*. L.A. Eckenwiler & F. Cohn, ed.: Johns Hopkins University Press: 144-157

² D. Benatar. Bioethics and Health and Human Rights: a critical view. *J Med Ethics* 2006; 32: 17-20. and A. Cribb. (2010) Translational ethics? The theory–practice gap in medical ethics. *J Med Ethics*. 2010; 36: 207-210.

Terminology varies across institutions, but I am interested in those who may be considered ‘early career’ or ‘junior’ academics. This does not necessarily mean *young* academics, as many people choose to pursue academic careers later in life, or for various reasons do not progress past junior posts. Instead, I am simply referring to those who occupy posts aimed at those towards the bottom of the academic career ladder. Junior academic posts tend to take the form of teaching or research fellow/assistant/associate positions,³ and these jobs tend to have several common traits.

First, they are often short, fixed-term contracts. This means that junior academics occupying these posts are faced with precarity.⁴ Knowing that one’s contract is due to come to an end within months has an impact on one’s ability to formulate and achieve one’s life plans.

Committing to a mortgage, or planning a family are made more difficult when employed in precarious fixed-term contracts. To make matters more challenging, these posts often have very tightly-packed workloads. In order to be sufficiently competitive in a difficult funding climate, junior academic posts tend to promise a lot of work to funders in relatively little time (and it is senior academics who often make these promises to funders). A 12 month research fellow post will often include 12 months of project work, which leaves little scope for training and development, opportunities to obtain further funding or employment, or even annual leave. There is also a worrying trend of junior teaching-based posts only paying salaries during term time. Time-pressure is not unique to junior academics, and it may be the case that more senior academics experience even greater demands on their time. The combination of high workloads coupled with precarity, however, is particularly challenging. In order to remove themselves from precarity, junior academics have to develop their CVs,

³ PhD students may also be considered junior academics elsewhere, although for the purposes of this paper, I am interested in people who are *employed* as bioethicists, and this may exclude many PhD students.

⁴ University and Colleges Union. 2016. *Precarious Work in Higher Education*. Available at: https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/7995/Precarious-work-in-higher-education-a-snapshot-of-insecure-contracts-and-institutional-attitudes-Apr-16/pdf/ucu_precariouscontract_hereport_apr16.pdf [Accessed 18 Jan 2019]

which requires publications and conference presentations, grant income, public engagement and the like. It is, however, often extremely difficult to achieve these requirements within junior academic posts.

Having made clearer what I mean by ‘junior academics’, I must now clarify what I mean by ‘bioethicist’. Benatar outlines two ways in which bioethics as a field can be understood. First, and perhaps most commonly, bioethics can be understood as a broad discipline involving people from a diverse range of disciplinary backgrounds including sociology, law, philosophy, history, medicine and anthropology. Alternatively, bioethics can be understood as a branch of applied ethics, concerned with considering ethical issues from a philosophical perspective.⁵ For the purposes of this paper, I will focus my discussion on this second understanding of bioethics, so henceforth when I refer to bioethicists, I am referring to philosophical bioethicists. This is not intended to suggest that academics from other disciplinary backgrounds have a lesser role to play in bioethics as a whole. Instead, as I will discuss shortly, it is the philosophical demands of bioethics in the second sense that increase the tension between activism and bioethics. I will also narrow my focus onto bioethicists undertaking certain types of work. Some philosophical bioethicists may do a great deal of work at a deep conceptual level, without paying such attention to the more practical applications. A bioethicist could potentially argue that one account of what it means to be autonomous is more theoretically robust than another, without necessarily having to give detailed consideration to the application of this in, for example, a medical research context. Sheehan and Dunn, however, argue that academic bioethics projects must be focussed primarily on addressing a practical *ought* question in order to be bioethics.⁶ Brassington has made related claims, suggesting that philosophical ethics (and presumably by extension philosophical *bioethics*), has as arguably its primary function “not just to understand moral claims and conflicts... but to act as a source of normativity: to offer

⁵ Benatar, *op. cit.* note 2. pp.17-20

⁶ M. Sheehan & M. Dunn. On the Nature and Sociology of Bioethics. *Health Care Anal* 2013; 21: 54-69.

guidance or instruction about what to do.”⁷ Sheehan and Dunn, maybe more controversially, argue that “a piece of research or public activity is not correctly defined as bioethics unless it aims at actually convincing people to act differently or to change policy because of the arguments and answers that the bioethicist provides”.⁸ Although I need not necessarily wholly endorse their account of what constitutes bioethics, I will focus my arguments on bioethicists undertaking the sort of work described by Sheehan and Dunn (and indeed Brassington), where practical recommendations are made which offer guidance or instruction about what to do.

Finally it is also important to be clear about what I refer to as activism. Existing literature describes something of a scale of activist activity, although it is apparent that various terms are used inconsistently. It is therefore not always obvious where the boundaries lie between conventional ‘academic’ applied philosophy, advocacy and activism. Dempsey and Lister, for example, define ‘extreme activism’ as “a form of applied philosophy directly addressed to policy-makers, with the goal of bringing about a particular outcome, and measures success in terms of whether it makes a direct causal contribution to that goal”.⁹ Although they call this extreme, the method of applied philosophy suggested sounds much less extreme than, for example, environmental activists living in tree-top encampments to prevent road developments. What Dempsey and Lister describe as extreme activism falls towards the passive side of the activism spectrum and is not particularly controversial. It seems almost unavoidable for bioethicists to sometimes take a stance and argue for particular positions, and simply addressing these arguments at policy makers does not seem to constitute activism as it would normally be understood.

⁷ I. Brassington. What’s the point of philosophical bioethics?. *Health Care Anal* 2013; 21: p23

⁸ Sheehan & Dunn *op. cit.* note 6 p58

⁹ M.M. Dempsey & M. Lister. 2016. Applied Political and Legal Philosophy. In *A Companion to Applied Philosophy*. K. Lippert-Rasmussen, Brownlee, K, & Coady, D. eds. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.: 313-327

Dempsey and Lister's account of activism seems correct in terms of being goal-orientated, but fails to capture the essential *methods* of activism. Parker explains this clearly when she states that although bioethics may share with much activism the goal of promoting social justice, the usual bioethics approach of transparent ethical reasoning is 'business as usual' for bioethics. Rather, for Parker, activism seeks to disrupt business as usual, and "to cause a rupture that draws attention to systemic flaws, particularly injustice".¹⁰ Although the level of disruption required for something to be considered activism is debateable, activism as I will understand it does require the taking of action and campaigning, and making a concerted effort to make people pay attention beyond that which is required to meet one's strictly academic goals.

To give a concrete example, when publishing an academic paper regarding the ethical desirability of opt-out organ donation one may argue in favour of such a system in the hope that some people (probably academics) will read it and pay attention, but this is largely passive. Disseminating the same paper to colleagues for academic critique does not seem much like activism. Tweeting or emailing the paper directly to a policymaker might start to appear to be more like activism. And actively making that policymaker pay attention to one's arguments, by persistently trying to organise meetings, campaigning and generating public support would look a lot like activism. In short, merely publishing one's carefully constructed arguments in academic journals is not enough – activism involves taking things a step further, and getting people to pay attention and take these arguments seriously with the goal of affecting change.

Effective Activism

¹⁰ Parker *op. cit.* note 1, p146

The Effective Altruism¹¹ movement has developed over recent years and is premised on simple starting points. Although how such things should be measured is highly contestable, some charities achieve more good than others. It is also true that some charities achieve more good for less money, and are therefore more cost effective than others. Effective altruists generally believe that, given the choice between achieving more good or less good through one's charitable activities, one should choose the charities that do more good. Taken to its logical conclusion, this means that one should choose charities that achieve the *most* good. This can entail choosing charities that one may not ordinarily consider: the most effective charities seem to be ones without big marketing budgets and are therefore charities that many people will never have heard of. An example of how this can play out is that of charities aimed at supporting blind people. Training a guide dog costs a lot of money (around £45,000),¹² and will help one person who is already blind. Using the same money to treat certain conditions in the developing world will cure blindness in several people, which is arguably a much greater good.¹³ Despite this, guide dog charities receive a lot of charitable donations in the UK, whereas charities preventing blindness receive comparatively little. For effective altruists, charity is not so much about choosing charities which resonate emotionally with oneself, as choosing the most cost-effective charities. Effective Altruism is therefore sometimes described as being cold and calculating, but this is unfair: there is nothing cold about wanting to achieve more good. Although Effective Altruism is a movement broadly underpinned by utilitarianism, one need not be a committed consequentialist to accept that some charities pursue more worthwhile causes than others, or that some charities achieve

¹¹ Effective Altruism. 2019. *Effective Altruism Homepage*. Available at <https://www.effectivealtruism.org/> [Accessed 18 Jan 2019]

¹² Guide Dogs. 2019. *Sponsor a Puppy FAQ*. Available at: <https://www.guidedogs.org.uk/faqs/sponsor-a-puppy/> [Accessed 18 Jan 2019]

¹³ Giving What We Can. 2019. *What we can achieve*. Available at: <https://www.givingwhatwecan.org/get-involved/what-we-can-achieve/> [Accessed 18 Jan 2019]

more per donation than others (and that this counts in their favour when choosing to which charity to donate).¹⁴

An interesting aspect of the ‘warm and calculating’ nature of Effective Altruism is that one ought to take a relatively long-term approach to one’s altruism.¹⁵ Rather than simply donating money to charity constantly throughout one’s life, one might increase one’s ability to give money to charity if one actually spends money on oneself. For instance, training to become a medical doctor requires a significant financial commitment. But training as a doctor will increase one’s earning potential, thereby increasing one’s ability to contribute to charity going forward. A commitment to give 10% of a doctor’s lifetime salary to charity will yield a greater donation than a commitment to give 10% of an average office-worker’s salary to charity, even if the average office-worker donated for the 5 years that the doctor was training. Similarly, saving money to buy a house may detract money from the potentially donatable pot over the short term, but the long-term benefits of home-ownership versus renting may make this worthwhile. In short, actions that may appear to be self-regarding can also have robust other-regarding justifications, provided that one is inclined towards such other-regarding motivation.

This idea of effectiveness may also be a useful concept when considering activism. It seems reasonable to think that activism has the capability to achieve good, but also that there is some cost to activism. This cost may most obviously be in terms of time and effort, but as I will argue shortly, there are other potential costs involved. Given that an individual’s activist resources (broadly construed) are not limitless, it also seems sensible that one should seek to

¹⁴ Although a detailed discussion of Effective Altruism is not possible here, it should be noted that its utilitarian underpinnings may make it vulnerable to familiar criticisms regarding demandingness and impartiality. There is also debate regarding the impact of proximity on moral obligation. See, for example: S. Reader. Distance, relationship and moral obligation. *The Monist*, 2003; 86(3): 367-381.

¹⁵ B. Todd. 2017. *Which job help people the most?*. Available at: <https://80000hours.org/career-guide/high-impact-jobs/> [Accessed 18 Jan 2019]

ensure a good outcome from one's efforts. This does not necessarily mean that one's activism has to fully achieve one's goals in order to be effective (just as one's charitable donations need not, for example, completely eradicate poverty-related disease in order to be effective). Activism is effective when it is causally responsible for bringing about change in the direction of the goal. Not all activism is, or is likely to be, effective, and various factors may influence this. Just as with altruism, it seems preferable for one's activism to bring about more good rather than less. And just as with altruism, a level of prudence and 'playing the long game' may lead to more good being achieved by one's efforts¹⁶.

An argument in favour of bioethicists as activists

The fact that activism within academic bioethics is contentious in a way that activism in other aspects of academia is not (there is rarely suggestion that Professors of Literature have an obligation to be activists, or conversely an obligation to not be activists) suggests that there is something special about the role of academic bioethicists.

It has been occasionally argued that bioethicists have a duty to be activists, or alternatively that they have a duty to refrain from activism. These arguments are often grounded in the idea that the roots of bioethics are in activism, and that as a field it arose from the need to address various injustices.¹⁷ The arguments in favour of bioethicists being activists seem to suggest that in *doing* bioethics, one ought to be concerned with social justice and bringing about positive change. This does, of course, leave open the extent to which one should invest one's energies in this, and perhaps one might do enough to satisfy these demands by usual

¹⁶ Although I will not consider it within this paper, the idea of effective activism may also suggest that some activist causes are more worthwhile than others. It may be that bioethicists should pursue activist ends likely to produce the most good, although this may vary according to their abilities to bring about this good.

¹⁷ Parker, *op. cit.* note 1 pp144-157

academic methods, without resorting to activism oneself but instead intentionally supplying activists with argumentative ammunition.

As outlined earlier, I am interested in the more conventional understanding of activism of taking action to change the world for the better, and making additional effort to ensure the positions that one argues for are adopted. Some bioethicists do, I believe, have a duty to engage in activism, on the basis of the following simple argument:

Bioethicists spend time thinking about what would be a better or worse state of affairs. For certain states of affairs, when confident that one state of affairs is better than another, and they are in a position to assist bringing about change to result in a better state of affairs without unreasonably high cost to themselves, bioethicists *should* attempt to bring about the change.

Whether this argument is convincing, of course, depends upon the truth of its premises.

I take it to be uncontroversial that bioethicists spend time thinking about what would be a better or worse state of affairs. Bioethicists, at least as I have defined them earlier, are concerned with ideas of right and wrong. Although different bioethicists may underpin their reasoning with different moral theory, it is surely the case that all bioethicists argue, at some point that, for some reason or another, one state of affairs is (all things considered) better or worse than others. Even if they do not publish their positions, they must at least spend time thinking about this.

I also take it as relatively uncontroversial, that, for many aspects of their work, bioethicists are likely to be confident that they are correct in their position that one state of affairs is better than other. Disagreement on moral issues is perhaps inevitable, and many bioethicists will presumably acknowledge that other people will have different values and beliefs, but if a

bioethicist argues for a particular position, one assumes that they are often doing so because they are confident that that position is both defensible and better than others.¹⁸ It may be unwise to become so confident in one's views that one is ignorant to criticism, and one should always be open to the idea of revising one's views on the basis of compelling counterargument, but it is also reasonable to expect a bioethicist to have the ability to expose their own views to appropriate critique. Bioethicists should be able to perform 'due diligence' on their own positions.

An obvious point of contention is the claim that bioethicists *should* attempt to bring about some better states of affairs that they have identified. As stated earlier, the type of bioethics under discussion seeks to address practical ought questions. One might argue, however, that the duty of bioethicists is discharged by providing arguments to support or criticise particular states of affairs, and that no further action is required. Dreger and Bayliss suggest that some bioethicists believe that "engaging in translational or direct interventional work is the role and responsibility of others, such as lawyers, investigative reporters, professionalized activists, and administrators charged with ethics oversight".¹⁹ It certainly seems reasonable to think that this sort of work could fall under the remit of these types of people. It also seems reasonable to think that these types of people should keep themselves informed and stay abreast of academic debate, so that they can perform their roles adequately. But what if they fail to do these things? If, despite the efforts of bioethicists to publish and disseminate their work, no appropriate changes arise, can the bioethicist relax and consider their task to be complete? Dreger and Baylis seem reluctant to support this, and suggest that along with the aim of being a competent knowledge producer, "bioethicists have an attendant duty to act

¹⁸ This is not to say that this is always the case. A bioethicist could conceivably publish a rebuttal of another bioethicist's argument even though they agree that the position argued for would be a better state of affairs. Others may argue for positions that they do not genuinely believe, simply to be controversial.

¹⁹ A Dreger & F Baylis 2018. More than Words. In *Bioethics in Action*. F. Baylis & A. Dreger, eds. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: p4

(when possible) on this knowledge, in a committed and sustained fashion”. This is echoed by Danis et al, who argue that one of the core commitments of bioethics is a concern for justice, and that this commitment “is manifest in an obligation to promote health equity – to ensure that all people have full and equal access to opportunities that enable them to lead healthy lives”.²⁰ Dawson et al have similarly suggested that bioethicists have “an individual responsibility to act, and... responsibilities as part of a community, to act together on behalf of others in urgent need, especially where they cannot act in their own interests and/or are silenced by authorities”²¹

My argument above is qualified by ‘certain states of affairs’, which leaves open precisely which states of affairs a bioethicist may have an obligation to take additional action to try to bring about. It would perhaps be unrealistic to suggest that bioethicists have a duty to try to bring about every state of affairs for which they argue. The argument seems most compelling when failing to take additional action leaves people at risk of severe harm or injustice, particularly if, as is often the case, these people are vulnerable and unable to adequately represent their own interests. The argument could apply in other situations too, however. Dreger and Bayliss criticise what they term ‘intellectual punditry’, where bioethicists make careers out of analysis and commentary, without any sustained attempts to prevent the injustices, abuses of patients and the like from which they themselves are ultimately benefitting career-wise.²² For the purposes of the arguments in this paper, I need not fully specify the range of states of affairs that bioethicists have an obligation to try to bring about. The important claim is that there are some situations where bioethicists do have a duty to take

²⁰ M. Danis, Y. Wilson & A. White. Bioethicists can and should contribute to addressing racism. *AmJ Bioeth* 2016; 16: p5

²¹ A. Dawson, C.F. Jordens, P. Macneill, D. Zion. Bioethics and the Myth of Neutrality. *J Bioeth Inq* 2018;15:p485

²² Dreger and Bayliss *op. cit.* p4

action beyond normal academic channels in order to bring about a better state of affairs (or to prevent a worse state of affairs).

Although these starting points are themselves open to disagreement, I will use them as the starting points throughout of this paper. I will spend the rest of this paper considering what I believe to be the other contentious parts of this argument.

Whether bioethicists are well-positioned to bring about change is complex and will be true for some bioethicists more than others. Similarly, the costs of attempting to bring about change will be greater for some than for others. Academia can be a challenging environment for people at all career stages, but I will argue that there are particular reasons for early career academics to delay participation in activism until later in their careers. I will base this argument on two central claims:

- i) Senior academics are likely to be more effective activists than junior academics.
- ii) Participating in activism can come at a higher cost to junior academics than senior academics;

Senior Academics are Likely to be More Effective Activists

A central part of my argument for bioethicists being activists is that they are well-positioned to bring about change resulting in a better state of affairs. This can be taken to hinge on two component parts. First, that bioethicists are well-equipped to determine what constitutes a better state of affairs, and that they also have some ability to help bring about this state of affairs.

Ability

Although I cannot fully address the idea of moral expertise in this paper, I will assume that bioethicists do not have moral expertise as conventionally understood. Archard defines moral expertise as “a claim to command knowledge in respect of the making of normative judgments not commanded by others”.²³ The claim that bioethicists do not have moral expertise is therefore that they do not have access to special moral knowledge that an ‘ordinary’ person does not. A proclamation that a certain course of action is morally preferable to another should carry no additional weight simply *because* it is made by a bioethicist. The merit of the statement depends instead on the quality and robustness of the supporting argument. One might expect bioethicists to perhaps come up with more theoretically robust or clearer justifications for their positions than others, but there is no reason that a non-bioethicist could not also do this in many instances. One should expect bioethicists to have this ability, but this ability does not place bioethicists in a unique position.

An ability to devise theoretically robust arguments also does not necessarily make for effective activism. Effective activism requires more than just good, robust argumentation – (it may even be the case that activism does not need robust argumentation at all to achieve its ends, if some other form of persuasion is more effective): it also requires other people being willing to listen and take one’s arguments seriously. There are several things that will encourage others to take one’s arguments seriously, but one such factor can be broadly construed as ‘credibility’.

Credibility

Scepticism about moral expertise is closely related to the issue of credibility. Because almost everyone can *do* ethics to some extent, and because everyone normally has intuitions about

²³ D. Archard Why moral philosophers are not and should not be moral experts. *Bioethics*. 2011;25: p121.

what is right or wrong, as a bioethicist it can be difficult to elevate one's own carefully considered ethical view above the sometimes less robustly justified views of others that may dominate arenas of debate. One need only look at how ethical arguments are treated by some medical journals or by some medical professionals. Medical journals often relegate ethics-based articles to the status of 'letters to the editor', 'comment' or 'personal viewpoint'. And a cursory read through these sections demonstrates that the arguments that dominate these sections often fall short of what would ordinarily be considered a robust ethics paper.

Because of the lack of clear moral expertise, there is a risk that one's carefully constructed arguments are dismissed as *mere* opinions. This can be particularly difficult given the divisive nature of claims that bioethicists often make. It is not unusual for bioethicists to be critical of the medical profession, or at least the medical profession's way of doing particular things, and it is easy to dismiss well-justified criticism if one can refer to it as opinion.

So what can give one credibility in bioethical issues? One way of looking at this is by drawing a distinction between 'insiders' and 'outsiders'²⁴. Take the example of a philosopher who has spent her entire career in her metaphorical ivory tower focussing on complex moral theory, but now suddenly takes an interest in a bioethical issue such as conscientious objection. She has no experience of the practicalities of this issue, approaches the issue very much *as a philosopher*, yet is activating for change. It would be no surprise for those with a much greater experience of this issue to dismissively ask 'who is this person?' and regard them as an outsider whose views on this issue do not need to be taken seriously. Of course, whether it is right to think like this is extremely questionable, but people do not always think like they ought to.

²⁴ I am aware that there is a more technical literature on these ideas, but I use them in a lay sense here.

One may transition from being an outsider to an insider in various ways. One plausible way is by becoming a stakeholder in the ethical issue, either by directly experiencing it or by belonging to the more general group of people who tend to experience such issues. Having a direct insight into, for example, children with disabilities can make one an effective campaigner for change in this area. The lived experience that one gathers through *being involved* means that the perspective of these people is not only important, but also increasingly recognised by many as being important. Increased emphasis on patient and public involvement in research, and the empirical turn witnessed in some areas of bioethics highlights that experiences and perspectives are considered to have a role to play in practical issues within an academic context. There is admittedly a tension here, as experiencing challenging situations also has the potential to cloud one's judgment, remove the perception of impartiality, and make one feel personally attacked if anyone disagrees with one's accounts of one's experiences. But outside of academia it is also the case that being seen to have experienced something oneself provides an immediate response to the all-too-common criticism thrown at people with whom one disagrees (including on ethical issues): that they do not really know or understand what they are talking about.

Another way to become an insider is to be a medical doctor. It is not particularly rare for medical doctors to also have additional qualifications in ethics, but it is even less rare for medical doctors to list ethics amongst their interests. This is no bad thing in itself, as having the double benefit of medical expertise and philosophical training makes for some formidable bioethicists. But there are many medical doctors who, despite having limited or no formal training in philosophical analysis, are positioned as ethics experts. It is not uncommon to find ethics debates on the timetables of medical conferences, and to also discover that the panel consists solely of medical doctors with no training in ethics. As with the key stakeholder

group just discussed, medical doctors have the lived experience of the ethical issues, coupled with medical expertise, which makes others take them seriously.

Another way to become an ‘insider’ is to be an established, senior academic. First, simply having ‘professor’ in front of one’s name is an indicator of the esteem in which people should hold one. The title indicates that a person has a strong reputation, an established track-record and is taken seriously within academia. Additionally, as someone who will normally have been a bioethicist in the field for a long time, they will be a familiar face, and likely be known and respected amongst the people that they may seek to influence. By attending conferences, publishing in journals that clinicians read, serving on hospital ethics committees and generally becoming ‘part of the furniture’, senior academics can establish credibility. Credibility in this sense is something that is built up over time, as one gradually earns the respect of others. So while bioethicists can become insiders, it is not simply by virtue of being a bioethicist – it is instead a process that one must go through.

The problem with junior bioethicists is that they are, by definition, generally new to the field. They are likely to be largely unknown and will not yet have developed the credibility that more senior academics have. Although one would expect a junior bioethicist to have the ability to develop robust arguments, it is unlikely that they will have the credibility required to get people (and particularly the people who matter) to listen to and take their arguments seriously. This is evidenced to an extent by the types of people who are invited to take part in policy groups or (independent) advisory bodies. The Nuffield Council on Bioethics, for example, aims to inform and engage policy and media debate, and make policy recommendations, and it is no surprise to see that it consists almost exclusively of senior academics.²⁵ This is not a criticism of the Nuffield Council, as they obviously want the best

²⁵ Nuffield Council on Bioethics. 2018 *Council Members*. Available at: <http://nuffieldbioethics.org/about/council-members> [Accessed 18 Jan 2019]

bioethicists as their members, but it may indicate an assumption that most experienced implies best and most credible.

Costs of Activism for Junior Academics

Academic Credibility

Philosophy inhabits an idealised area of academic thought, where impartiality, rationality and, to some extent, neutrality are expected. Academic philosophers sometimes speak of the ‘academic perspective’ as though it is possible to detach oneself from one’s prior commitments and form oneself into an empty vessel through which rational thought can flow unhindered by one’s existing biases, preferences and false beliefs. Activism presents a potential issue here, since it tends to reflect a greater personal investment and commitment to particular perspectives in a way that runs contrary to this idealised academic perspective. The tension between academic bioethics and activism is described succinctly by Benatar when discussing human rights, who states that “an activist agenda is more likely to presuppose which rights should be ascribed (or which rights should prevail) than it is to engage, as dispassionately as possible, the question about whether these rights ascriptions are warranted. Scholarship becomes but a handmaiden to the predetermined activist agenda.”²⁶

It is these matters of ‘presupposing’ and ‘predetermining’ that are potentially problematic if one engages in activism at an early stage in one’s career. Bioethicists occupy a difficult space in academia, where on the one hand our arguments are supposed to be something more than just our personal opinions on matters, but at the same time are inevitably shaped significantly by our own values and beliefs. It is potentially problematic to think that bioethicists can completely detach themselves from their prior commitments and truly take an impartial view

²⁶ Benatar, *op. cit.* note 2, p17

on moral issues. It also seems unrealistic to require bioethicists to enter their career without an agenda of *some* sort: it does not appear objectionable for a bioethicist to have an overarching agenda to improve things.

Bioethical arguments typically rely on at least some presupposed starting points, which will not be universally agreed upon. These may be fundamental ethical (“I assume that we should promote utility”) or even metaethical positions, or they may be further down the line of reasoning and closer to the applied issue (“I assume that abortion is morally permissible”).

There is a concern that sometimes bioethicists start with their conclusions and develop arguments to support these. And the closer that one’s theoretical starting point is to the applied issue, the more vulnerable bioethicists are to the claim ‘well they would say that, wouldn’t they?’. Activism arguably commits one to starting points that are too close to the applied issue. Once one has engaged with activism on an applied issue and made the investment that such activity requires, it may be very difficult to ever go back and reconsider one’s starting points, or be open to changing one’s mind. A bioethics project that claims to know its conclusions before arguments have been fully explored does not seem ideal, but this is a risk when activism becomes involved. Being perceived as having an agenda that commits one to a single-minded way of thinking about issues may hinder the gaining of credibility that is crucial to effective activism.²⁷

²⁷ This may not be true in all scenarios: it is possible that a bioethicist’s beliefs may be based on a fully explored and analysed philosophical position, and it should not negatively impact credibility to hold and defend such views. For instance, a bioethicist is unlikely to lose credibility for being a vocal proponent of racial equality. It may even seem wrong to think that there is any need to entertain the possibility to go back and reconsider one’s starting points or to be open to changing one’s mind on an issue such as this.

Time constraints

It is not always easy to delineate ‘work’ and ‘not work’ for bioethicists. There may be a notional working week for many, but one can easily find oneself stretching this in order to achieve what one needs, or wants, to achieve. Moreover, one can just as easily find oneself reading books about philosophy, lying awake at night puzzling over philosophical questions or refining arguments in one’s head, just as one might do during one’s working week. Some bioethicists may consider themselves fortunate to work in areas that allow them to think, write and talk about things about which they are passionate. The cliché that if you find a job that you enjoy you will never do a day’s work again in your life should not, however, also mean that you can never have time off.

The first claim that I make here is not that academics already work too long, or that academics should rigidly stick to their notional working week (although these claims may receive some support), but rather that one’s working time obligations must have *a* limit. One may voluntarily work additional hours, or spend one’s own time refining one’s arguments, but this cannot be an obligation. In short, work cannot reasonably take up all of one’s day or one’s week.

The second claim that I wish to make is that if there is a duty to undertake activism, and this arises from the work that one undertakes as a bioethicist, then that activism should be considered an extension of one’s work. Undertaking the additional actions required to see one’s arguments bring about change should be regarded as seeing the task of bioethics on that

issue through to its endpoint, and should reasonably be considered to constitute work.²⁸ And if activism constitutes work, it should be done within that finite quantity of work time.

Given these claims, and that activism itself takes time, activism comes at an opportunity cost to other things that one might do within one's work time. Most bioethicists face time pressures. Time pressures are not unique to junior academics, and it may even be the case that with good line-management and mentoring, junior academics are protected from many of the excessive demands that more senior colleagues are faced with. Junior bioethicists may spend their work time doing various activities, some of which will be required and some of which will be optional, but it is reasonable for them to prioritise those that will help them to achieve a permanent post and establish themselves within academia. It is, of course, debateable whether current metrics of academic ability/performance are the right ones, but in terms of establishing oneself as a credible candidate for permanent employment, things such as publications, grant income and teaching experience are particularly important. Although there may be some exceptions (see section on Impact later), it is generally the case that activist activities will not produce the kinds of measurable results that are useful for obtaining oneself a job.

Additionally, when I was undertaking my PhD, I was given one piece of advice regarding obtaining permanent employment that has stuck with me: 'make yourself indispensable'. This meant being a 'team player' and contributing to the demands of the department in which I worked. This involved contributing to teaching, marking and generally being seen to say 'yes' to requests from colleagues. At the start of one's academic career, it is important to build networks of colleagues and collaborators with whom one can work in future, and being

²⁸ Employers will also probably be keen to consider this as work when developing Impact Case Studies for the Research Excellence Framework. See: Higher Education Funding Council for England. 2016. *REF Impact*. Available at: <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/rsrch/REFImpact/> [Accessed 18 Jan 2019]

perceived as someone who contributes to departmental efforts seems an important part of this. Because activism blurs the boundaries between the personal and the professional, there is a risk that a junior academic prioritising activist activities over contributions to departmental efforts would be perceived as pursuing a personal agenda over departmental needs.

The self-regarding reason to prioritise those activities that increase one's prospect of permanent academic employment may not convince everybody. There are, however, other-regarding reasons to prioritise these activities. If one's ability to be an effective activist arises at least in part from one's role as a bioethicist, then it seems sensible to take action to maximise the time that one spends as a bioethicist. Although one may compromise one's activist activities in the short term, by prioritising activities likely to result in longer-term employment, one is able to engage with activism for longer (and more effectively) throughout one's longer career.

The right order

The potential costs of activism outlined above may be significant in the short term to both junior and senior bioethicists, but they are likely to have a significant ongoing detrimental impact upon the careers of junior bioethicists to an extent that is much less likely for senior bioethicists. For example, it seems unlikely that a senior academic is going to lose credibility for more actively pursuing change towards something that is consistent with the arguments they have made throughout their career. And it seems unlikely that pursuing this would result in them losing their academic career. On the other hand, spending one's career arguing for something that one started off as an activist for may hinder one's gaining of credibility, and prevent one from establishing a secure academic career. The tension between academia and effective activism can be stated as follows: effective activism relies on the credibility

obtained by being an established academic and doing the things that academics do, but being an activist can prevent one from becoming an established academic and developing credibility. It therefore seems sensible that the effectiveness of activism can be maximised if one goes about things in the right order.

If my arguments thus far are convincing, then attempting to undertake activism as a bioethicist prior to having established that credibility may have a long-lasting impact on both one's own academic career, but also on one's potential effectiveness as an activist. For these reasons, it would seem reasonable for junior bioethicists to delay activism until they have reached a point in their career where they have established sufficient credibility to be effective activists.

Is Activism Always Optional for Junior Academics?

I have thus far argued that the early stages of one's academic career may not make a good time for activism. I will now explore some further ramifications and exceptions to this argument.

Acknowledging Privilege

An important consideration and one not discussed explicitly thus far is the idea of privilege within academia. Within my argument there are tacit assumptions about normal career progressions, diminishing precarity and an assumption that academia will generally reward people roughly equally for their contributions and achievements. It is known, however, that these assumptions will not hold true for everybody.²⁹ There are people for whom existing within academia already requires concerted levels of activism. The academic world may not,

²⁹ D. Knights, W. Richards. Sex discrimination in UK academia. *Gender, Work & Organization* 2003; 10: 213-238.

for example, always be particularly welcoming to people with autism, and various changes may be required in order to help autistic academics to flourish. The existence and continued efforts (beyond those that other academics may have to make for themselves) of autistic academics helps to create and normalise suitable environments and practices for other autistic academics, and their presence may also serve to encourage other autistic people to pursue academic careers in future. Other unjustified inequalities and challenges resulting from gender, race, health and disability are plainly unacceptable and need to be resolved.

The arguments that I have put forward may place an unfair burden on those who *have* to be activists in order to be bioethicists. Moreover, by excusing junior bioethicists from engaging in activism, my arguments may further disadvantage those who are already having to engage in activism to be junior bioethicists, by giving some people a clear conscience to go away and build their CVs and establish their career without considering other less privileged junior bioethicists.

It may be helpful here to distinguish between activism inside academia and activism outside academia. It seems entirely reasonable to think that academics have an obligation to promote an inclusive and diverse academy, and to take action to counter the privilege that one may encounter from day to day, and that this is an important role as an academic. Whether this has to amount to activism as understood in this paper is open to debate, but we should all be doing *something*. For example, male academics should resist appearing in panels consisting only of men. For junior male academics, this may come at the cost of turning down something potentially creditable on their CV, which is certainly a cost, but this must be considered in light of the fact that junior female academics may have been unfairly overlooked. This sort of action does not seem at odds with the role of bioethicists within academia. Parker suggests that bioethicists “take substantive moral positions and also seek to

create tolerant venues in a pluralistic society in which others may do the same”³⁰, and our obligation to promote a diverse academy should be regarded as an extension of this, rather than broader activism.

Impact

The UK-based Impact Agenda³¹ adds an additional dimension to activism, in that in some instances, achieving the ends of one’s activism may also demonstrate Impact. My arguments for delaying activism have generally assumed that undertaking activism will hinder one’s career, whereas being able to demonstrate meaningful Impact is distinctly advantageous. This does not undermine the general argument, but instead provides a potential exception. If one can use activism to generate Impact, then this would seem like a good use of a junior bioethicist’s efforts. Of course, it is not necessarily the case that activism will be the most effective or appropriate way of generating Impact, or that the goals of one’s activism and Impact aims will neatly align. Due to the necessity for Impact to be evidenced and demonstrably a result of research, Impact aims are often concrete and readily achievable, whereas some aims of activism may be slightly ‘bigger picture’. Nonetheless, Impact is another important consideration for junior bioethicists to consider when thinking about what it is reasonable to prioritise.

The Commitment – The activism must be done at some point

The upshot of what I have argued for is that if one is a junior academic and, for prudent reasons, decides to postpone activism until later in one’s career when one can more effectively be an activist, it is precisely that: a postponement. If the earlier arguments are

³⁰ Parker, *op. cit.* note 1. P153

³¹ Higher Education Funding Council for England. 2016. *REF Impact*. Available at: <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/rsrch/REFImpact/> [Accessed 18 Jan 2019]

convincing, and one accepts that activism is best placed later in a bioethicist's career, then influential bioethicists in secure posts (with the ability to affect change) may have an obligation to be activists. It may be that there is *never* a perfect time to undertake activism, as senior academics face many pressures, and committing time to activism may only add to these.³² Returning to my earlier argument in favour of an obligation for bioethicists to be activists, there was a condition that the obligation arises only if there is not an unreasonable cost to oneself. For junior academics, an unreasonable cost would be the premature end of one's academic career. Although not universally true given the current academic climate, established academics do not generally face the same precarity that junior academics face. Whereas failing to bolster one's CV with additional publications may be catastrophic for a junior academic, the impact may be less significant for a senior academic. Once someone has worked their way towards the top of the career ladder, and enjoyed a long academic career, the costs of activism seem relatively smaller, and this removes many of the reasons to not engage with activism.

Conclusion

I have argued that, in some circumstances, there is a *prima facie* duty for bioethicists to be activists, but that it is not the case that all academics are well-positioned to be activists. In particular, I have argued that junior bioethicists are unlikely to have sufficient credibility to be effective activists. This, coupled with the costs to junior academics of being activists, would provide reasons for junior bioethicists to delay activism until later in their career. Significantly, this does not excuse them from being activists. It is instead intended to maximise the good that they achieve from their activism, by ensuring first that they have a secure academic career to act as a springboard for effective activism.

³² It is also the case that some senior academics may consider themselves to have responsibilities to junior academics, in terms of securing funding, protecting time etc.

