

Can (and Should) Jon Dolle Resist Being Drawn to the Dark Side of the Force?

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Who can doubt that the findings of empirical inquiries into the natural and social worlds are being pressed into service in the ideological and political battles that rage within our society? Facts, purported facts, and explanatory theories are interpreted, reinterpreted, misinterpreted, subjected to spin, and even summarily dismissed or suppressed — not in the service of the advancement of knowledge, but in the service of the political and ideological “dark side of the force.”

Unfortunately, some well-meaning intellectuals have unintentionally strengthened Darth Vader’s hand, first, by arguing that of course inquiry has a dominant sociopolitical rather than an epistemic purpose, and second, by also maintaining that it is quixotic to believe that objectivity and value freedom even are possible. Facts are constructed by sociopolitical processes, and thus (note the *non sequitur*) it is acceptable to manipulate them to become useful for sociopolitical purposes.

I open my response this way to highlight the drama and the sociopolitical relevance of the topic before us; it is not hyperbole to say that the fate of empirical social and educational inquiry hangs in the balance.

I have ventured into this debate about value neutrality on a number of occasions in the past, always committed to keeping the border with the dark side inviolate. And although I have warned him about it, Jon Dolle has not only joined me, but imprudently rushed past and is in danger of being absorbed by the evil side of the force.

I have some quibbles with the way he analyzed my position; but Dolle explains clearly enough my overriding concern, which is with the incredibly important issue of the epistemic integrity of the research process.

My gloss on the situation is this: There are a number of positions with respect to the value neutrality of social science and educational research (that I discuss in *The Expanded Social Scientist’s Bestiary*¹); these can be arranged in a continuum, at one end of which is the hard-line (and discredited) view that there is no space at all for values to enter the process of scientific investigation, while at the other end of the spectrum is the position I just identified as giving support to the dark side of the force — the view that inquiry is, and cannot help but be, a nonepistemic value-laden activity.

The position that I hold, with many others, is near the middle of the continuum. Part of what I am committed to has been well-expressed by the philosopher of social science Harold Kincaid:

The quest for value-free social science is not a quest for science that presupposes no value judgments. Science essentially involves innumerable judgments about what is good and ought to be done. However, value assumptions are problematic only if they are moral or

political values — as distinct from epistemic values. Reliability, objectivity, fruitfulness, scope and so on are important values in science, but they are epistemic values.²

In the *Bestiary* I recognized that values and ideologies which are dominant in society inevitably (and justifiably?) affect the direction scientific inquiry takes and the resources it has at its disposal; however, my overriding concern was that when these external and nonepistemic values are allowed to influence the internal epistemic judgments that are made (are allowed to shape or constrain the nature of the conclusions that are reached), then scientific research has been completely subverted. As I put it, “the point is that if extrascientific values are allowed to influence the internal dynamic, the resulting science will in all probability be *poor* science, for the rules and procedures of the science will have been over-ridden by these external values.”³ As an example I discussed the Lysenko affair in Soviet Russia, in which Marxist/Stalinist ideology was allowed an epistemic role within the science of genetics — with disastrous consequences for Soviet agricultural policy based on what had become a pseudoscience.

Early in his essay Dolle recognizes the danger of science being subverted, but he rejects my solution to the problem as being too restrictive. I hold that the first line of defense is to swear allegiance to the regulative principle that there should be zero toleration of any interference in epistemic matters by external or nonepistemic values. In the *Bestiary* and other books I also have endorsed the Popperian principle of open criticism within the scientific community as pointing to a major way in which intrusion of external values can be detected.

In contrast, Dolle wants to preserve the epistemic purpose of research, but he wants it to be socially and educationally significant or relevant research, and to this end he wants to allow values to enter the epistemic playground, and indeed he offers several examples in an effort to show not only that this can happen but that it must happen. I only have space to make three points about his argument.

First, he draws support from a book by Philip Kitcher, but has not been careful enough. Dolle writes that “the goal of science is what Philip Kitcher calls significant truth — truths that are...important to human endeavors”; this goal “requires” that theories, assumptions and so forth be “evaluated on grounds that are not purely epistemic,” for “purely epistemic criteria cannot distinguish between the truly profound and the utterly mundane.”

We get to the heart of the matter by examining the words “significant truth.” In essence he treats this expression as naming two coequal desiderata, namely that scientific findings should be “significant” and should be “true.” Since the traditional emphasis has been on truth, Dolle emphasizes significance. What he fails to notice is that the expression is not “significance and truth,” but is “significant truth” — the key term is “truth” and “significant” is the modifier. Dolle’s use of the expression “not purely epistemic” supports my analysis here, for presumably he means “not solely epistemic.” (In a Venn diagram, a large circle would represent truth, and significant truth would be a smaller circle within it, representing a subset.) Clearly we are not seeking, nor would we be well served by having, “findings” that are socially significant but untrue. (The USSR was not well-served by Lysenko, whose

results oozed with significance but were untrue!) So the logically basic task in inquiry is to ensure that our epistemic procedures are not debased, for truth has precedence over significance. But by making significance a coequal goal with truth, and by allowing nonepistemic values to play an epistemic role in the name of significance, Dolle shoots himself in the foot and undermines attainment of the part of the goal that is basic, a goal that his essay opened by endorsing.

Second, while Dolle is to be applauded for including real examples, they are not compelling because they can be recast in ways that defuse any challenge to the principle of disbaring external values from playing an internal, epistemic role. I only have space to show this with respect to his example concerning the need for researchers to select “significant” measures of student learning in a curriculum evaluation. Here he ignores the broader context in which such projects emerge; new curricula are designed within this larger environment, and their purpose is to achieve goals neglected in, and to address shortcomings in, traditional curricula. It is in this external educational context that judgments about significance are made, but it is fidelity to the new curriculum being evaluated that shapes the range of measures that are appropriate for the researcher to use. An example is the post-Sputnik PSSC physics curriculum — based on students being active investigators — fidelity to which required new (and abandonment of many traditional) assessment instruments. It was not the nonepistemic values of the researchers, but the values built into the object being studied, that determined the appropriate measures.

Third, despite his opening affirmation, the central issue of how to guard against the illicit influence of external values is dealt with in one lonely paragraph at the end of his essay! His tentative solution is a revival of the Popperian mechanism of open criticism, which earlier I acknowledged I endorse. But he needs more than this, for on what basis can a critic discriminate acceptable from illicit influence of values? There may even be an endless loop here — illicit influence of nonepistemic values is determined by our other non-epistemic values!

The difference between us, then, is that he regards the threat as so minimal that he allows value infections to enter the research process willy-nilly, and then tries to eradicate the subsets of infection that are not benign, without bringing to bear any antiseptics; whereas I use strong prophylactic measures from the outset — for any infection is intolerable!

So, to return to the questions in my title: Dolle should resist being drawn to the dark side; but — given the resources he marshals here — he cannot offer much resistance.

1. D.C. Phillips, *The Expanded Social Scientist's Bestiary* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).

2. Kincaid, cited in Phillips, *Expanded Social Scientist's Bestiary*, 246.

3. *Ibid.*, 243 (emphasis in original).