

# Implicit Bias, Ideological Bias, and Epistemic Risks in Philosophy

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## Abstract

It has been argued that implicit biases are operative in philosophy and lead to significant epistemic costs in the field. Philosophers working on this issue have focussed mainly on implicit gender and race biases. They have overlooked *ideological bias*, which targets political orientations. Psychologists have found ideological bias in their field and have argued that it has negative epistemic effects on scientific research. I relate this debate to the field of philosophy and argue that if the same bias also exists in philosophy then it will lead to hitherto unrecognised epistemic hazards in the field. Furthermore, the bias is epistemically different from the more familiar biases in respects that are important for epistemology, ethics, and metaphilosophy.

## 1. Introduction

We all need to be challenged out of our mistakes, stupidities, and complacencies – especially when it is our own intellectual blinkers that prevent us from seeing them as such. This is the preeminent role of philosophy. (Priest, 2006, p. 207)

We are not perfectly rational beings. In our practical and theoretical reasoning, we are often influenced by psychological and social factors that we ourselves tend to think should not affect our cognition. It is widely accepted that one such a psychological factor is *implicit bias*. Implicit biases are largely unconscious and automatic evaluations that involve stereotype-based associations<sup>1</sup> between social groups and positive or negative properties (Holroyd, 2012; Brownstein & Saul, 2016).

Philosophers have written much on implicit biases in a range of different areas of philosophy, including moral philosophy (Washington & Kelly, 2016), metaphysics (Mandelbaum, 2016), and epistemology (Gendler, 2011; Saul, 2013; Puddifoot, 2017). One important issue in the epistemological research on implicit biases concerns the question as to what epistemic impact implicit biases might have on the field of philosophy. That is, what is their effect on belief-formation and knowledge acquisition in philosophy?

Saul (2013) argues that implicit biases lead to significant epistemic costs for philosophy. She contends that empirical research on implicit biases suggests that we are often automatically and unconsciously influenced by factors such as a subject's gender or race that are irrelevant for assessing the subject's academic abilities but nonetheless lead us to more negative evaluations of the subject. Since philosophers are not immune to implicit biases, Saul continues, there are

almost certain to be some excellent [philosophy] students receiving lower marks and less encouragement than they should; some excellent philosophers not getting the jobs they should get; and where anonymous refereeing and editing is not practiced, there is some excellent work not being published. Philosophy as a field is the worse for this: it is not as good as it could, or should, be. (Saul, 2013, p. 246)

Antony (2016) concurs, adding that empirical 'research on implicit bias tells us' that 'our current gatekeeping policies for entrance into our knowledge institutions are, very likely, advancing the interests of members of socially dominant groups at the expense of more able members of socially subordinate groups' (Antony, 2016, p. 172). 'Because of implicit biases,' Antony continues, we thus almost certainly 'know less' in the field of philosophy 'than we would otherwise' do (Antony, 2016, p. 157). Since implicit biases are likely to lead us to exclude, discourage, or fail to promote individuals who could otherwise contribute to a more reliable belief formation and comprehensive knowledge acquisition in the field, implicit biases have epistemic costs for philosophy.

One key assumption underlying arguments such as Saul's, and Antony's is that implicit biases are real and have causal effects on cognition and behaviour. Especially the causal efficacy claim, however, is controversial, for meta-analyses of empirical studies on implicit biases have failed to find strong correlations between implicit bias and behavioral responses (Oswald, Mitchell, Blanton, Jaccard & Tetlock, 2013; Forscher, Lai, Axt, Ebersole, Herman, Devine & Nosek,

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<sup>1</sup> There is debate about whether implicit biases are associations or beliefs (Brownstein, 2015; Mandelbaum, 2016). The argument of this paper remains unaffected if one adopts the view that they are beliefs.

<sup>2</sup> I use the term 'ideology' in a nonevaluative way, as referring to a set of political 'beliefs about the proper order of society and how it can be achieved' (Erikson & Tedin, 2003, p. 64). This contrasts with what Shelby (2003)

2017). Nonetheless, philosophers who work on implicit bias and are aware of these meta-analyses tend to accept that implicit biases are real and have at least some of the problematic effects on behavior that Saul and Antony have in mind (Schwenkler, 2017). For the purpose of this paper, I shall follow them in this respect.

In the debate on the epistemic costs of implicit biases, philosophers have so far focussed mostly on implicit gender and race biases (Gendler, 2011; Saul, 2013; Antony, 2016). There are other kinds of bias, however. For instance, just as gender or race, a subject's *ideology*, that is, her political orientation,<sup>2</sup> is a feature of her identity also. And it too can, just as her gender or race, be the target of evaluations involving largely automatic or controlled associations between that ideology and positive or negative properties (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). Such an evaluation, which might be implicit or explicit and might pertain to contents (e.g., arguments, conclusions, or theories) or individuals, is what I shall call an *ideological bias* (see also Jussim, Crawford, Anglin & Stevens, 2015).

Ideological bias may target many different political orientations. I shall here, just as psychologists working on ideological bias typically do it (Duarte, Crawford, Stern, Haidt, Jussim & Tetlock, 2015), focus only on the politically left, *liberal* orientation, on the one hand, and the politically right, *conservative* orientation, on the other. I shall use the term 'ideology' to refer to these two political orientations only.

The topic of ideological bias has gone unnoticed by philosophers working on implicit bias.<sup>3</sup> This is surprising because empirical research suggests that implicit and explicit ideological bias exists (Iyengar & Westwood, 2017; Duarte, Crawford, Stern, Haidt, Jussim & Tetlock, 2015). Moreover, Jonathan Haidt (2011) and many other psychologists have drawn attention to the impact of ideology-related factors on scientific research. They have argued that, in the field of psychology, (1) liberals are overrepresented and conservatives underrepresented and (2) there is an ideological bias against conservatives, which has pernicious epistemic effects on psychological research (Inbar & Lammers, 2012; Duarte, Crawford, Stern, Haidt, Jussim & Tetlock, 2015; Jussim, Crawford, Anglin & Stevens, 2015; Honeycutt & Freberg, 2017). The issue seems *prima facie* highly relevant to research on the epistemic impact of bias in the field of philosophy. For instance, can (1) and (2) also be found in philosophy? And if so, what are their likely epistemic effects in the field?

I shall mainly focus on the second question. More specifically, I want to explore whether ideological bias against conservatives, assuming that it also exists in philosophy, might lead to the same kind of negative epistemic effects for the field of philosophy as, for instance, gender and race biases.

The answer is not obvious. For even though the term 'bias' has a built-in negative connotation, some biases might be epistemically or ethically beneficial (Antony, 2016; Schwitzgebel & Ellis,

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<sup>2</sup> I use the term 'ideology' in a nonevaluative way, as referring to a set of political 'beliefs about the proper order of society and how it can be achieved' (Erikson & Tedin, 2003, p. 64). This contrasts with what Shelby (2003) calls an 'evaluative use' of 'ideology', which 'always suggests some form of criticism. [...] To claim that a particular belief system is ideological, in the evaluative sense, is to impute to the system of belief some negative characteristic(s) that provides a reason to reject it (or at least some significant part of it) in its present form' (Shelby, 2003, p. 157).

<sup>3</sup> For instance, Brownstein's (2015) entry on implicit bias in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* does not mention ideological bias. Similarly, in Brownstein and Saul's (2016) two-volume edition *Implicit bias and Philosophy*, there is no mentioning of the bias either. So far only Cholbi (2014), Case (2015), and Sesardic (2016) discuss the bias, albeit in different contexts.

2017). For example, the implicit or explicit negative evaluation and exclusion of some political viewpoints (e.g., extreme right-wing positions) and their advocates is arguably epistemically and ethically beneficial for philosophy (Hicks, 2011, p. 336; Barber, 2013, p. 636; Antony, 2016, p. 169f). The issue requires further investigation.

In the following, I want to conduct such an investigation. I shall argue for two claims.

First, if the field of philosophy is just as the field of psychology characterised by an overrepresentation of liberals and an underrepresentation of conservatives, and if there is an ideological bias against conservatives in the field, then this bias is likely to lead to some of the same yet hitherto unrecognised epistemic costs and hazards as the implicit biases so far discussed in philosophy. This is because, in conjunction with the underrepresentation of conservatives and psychological phenomena such as *confirmation bias* and *group polarisation*, the bias will threaten reliable belief formation and comprehensive knowledge acquisition, particularly in areas of philosophy where topics are debated with respect to which a different ideological viewpoint leads to a different conclusion.

Second, ideological bias against conservatives is epistemically different from the more familiar biases in three respects. It is likely to have a stronger impact on cognition and behaviour than, for instance, implicit race bias. Furthermore, unlike implicit gender and race biases, it has two targets and is less easily perceived as a problematic tendency in the field of philosophy despite having epistemic costs. These differences are relevant for epistemology, ethics, and metaphilosophy.

Three clarifications are in order.

First, while I shall not fully commit to the reality of an underrepresentation of and bias against conservatives in philosophy, I do below mention some empirical evidence that suggests that they are real. However, the data are still limited and relatively weak. It should be noted that I do not introduce them here to call for change. I do not have a political agenda, conservative or otherwise. And just for the record, I'm politically left of centre. My point here is to create awareness of the relevant data and prompt reflection on the likely epistemic costs and risks of an underrepresentation of and bias against conservatives in philosophy. Because any scholar who remains unaware of the data and doesn't reflect on these matters will be unable to adequately assess and respond to the possible claim by conservative activists that the underrepresentation and bias at issue undermine the "objectivity in the academy" (Antony, 2016, p. 170). To address this kind of objection adequately, one first needs to know what exactly the data and epistemic costs and risks at issue are. The goal of this paper is to make some of them explicit.

Second, notice that it might be that even if there is an ideological bias against conservatives in philosophy that creates epistemic costs and risks in the field, this bias is epistemically and/or ethically well justified. It might also be that the epistemic and/or ethical benefits of an underrepresentation and bias against conservatives in philosophy vastly outstrip the epistemic costs and risks I shall introduce. I'm open to these possibilities.

Finally, in arguing that ideological bias is epistemically different from the implicit biases typically discussed in philosophy, I do not mean to claim that it is more epistemically or ethically *pernicious* than them. I have no doubt that implicit gender and race biases have detrimental effects on people's lives, often perhaps more so than ideological bias.

In section 2, I clarify what I mean by ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ and specify the scope of my argument. In section 3, I review some empirical data on the distribution of ideological viewpoints and the existence of an ideological bias in philosophy. Section 4 motivates a comparison between ideological bias and the implicit biases usually discussed in the field. Section 5 argues that ideological bias against conservatives would lead to some of the same epistemic perils for philosophy as these other biases do. Section 6 develops the comparison further by introducing a set of epistemic differences between this bias and implicit gender and race biases. Section 7 summarises and concludes the discussion.

## 2. Key terms and scope of the argument

In the political context, the meanings of the terms ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ differ internationally (Kanazawa, 2010, p. 38; Vincent, 2010, p. 23, 56). Since most of the empirical data that I mention below have been gathered in studies involving American samples, I shall use the American distinction between liberals and conservatives (see Cholbi, 2014, p. 177f). For ease of exposition, I focus only on two core features of them.

I take *liberals* to endorse a larger role for government intervention in the economy to achieve greater economic equality and to hold ‘progressive’ social views. That is, liberals value freedom of choice about sexual behaviour and abortion, advocate affirmative action, are open to new experiences, and welcome political change to pursue social justice.

In contrast, I take *conservatives* to prefer market mechanisms to government intervention in the economy, accept economic inequalities, and to hold ‘traditional’ social views. That is, conservatives oppose homosexuality, abortion, affirmative action, and gun control, and resist rather than welcome new experiences and wholesale social change.

These two sets of features do not capture exhaustive characterizations of American liberals and conservatives (for a fuller picture, see Cholbi, 2014). Also, the two sets can be further divided into features that refer to *economic* aspects, on the one hand, and features that refer to *social* aspects, on the other. There might then be cross-ideological combinations, for one might be liberal on social issues (abortion, affirmative action, etc.) but conservative on economic issues (e.g., favor economic freedom). Libertarians tend to hold such a position. Conversely, one might be conservative on social issues but liberal on economic issues (e.g., endorse a larger role for government intervention into the economy). Nonetheless, the two features outlined above typically cluster together in people’s notions of US liberals and conservatives and figure, in this combination, in survey studies probing ideology (ibid; Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009, p. 311-313).

Since I rely on the notions of US liberals and conservatives, in particular, and below mention mostly only US-specific data about the field of philosophy, it might seem that my argument will only be relevant for philosophers in the US. This would be too quick a conclusion, however. For it is well known that there is a broad overlap between the features just outlined and central aspects of ‘the Left’ and ‘the Right’ on the international political spectrum. On this spectrum, leftists, just as liberals, generally support government intervention in the economy and emphasise the importance of equality, social freedom, and progress, whereas rightists, just as conservatives, generally favour a free market, reject equality, and tend to value tradition,

reaction and nationalism (Heywood, 2015, p. 119).<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, while there are various political differences between the US and other Western nations, there is no reason to assume that the field of philosophy in the US is with respect to its liberal/left vs. conservative/right demographics and ideological bias an outlier internationally. In the absence of counterevidence, an extrapolation from the US to most other countries seems thus a plausible inductive move to attain a preliminary idea of ideology-specific aspects of the field in general. And importantly, my argument does not rely on any data, because it is overall conditional in nature. The data below is only meant to motivate the discussion. For this purpose, the mentioned inductive move seems unobjectionable.

What, then, do we know about ideology-specific details of the social environment in philosophy in the US?

### 3. Data on ideology in philosophy

I shall first introduce survey findings pertaining to the ideological distribution in philosophy in the US. After that, I turn to data on ideological bias.

#### 3.1 Ideological demographics in philosophy

While there are fewer studies on the distribution of political viewpoints in the field of philosophy than one would wish for and existing surveys tend to elicit low response rates, the evidence available supports consistently the same overall picture. For instance, Rothman and Lichter (2009) conducted a survey to examine the ideological composition of American university faculty in general, and found that among philosophy professors, 79% self-identified as liberals and 4% as conservatives. Voter-registration studies provide further evidence of this kind of imbalance. For example, Klein and Stern (2009, p. 16) mention three different US voter-registration studies that reveal a 5:1, 9:1, and 24:1 Democrat vs. Republican ratio among philosophers. Schwitzgebel (2008) too, who looked at the public voting records of professors in a number of American states, writes that among 375 records of philosophers, 87.2% philosophers were Democrats and 7.7% Republican.<sup>5</sup>

The categories *Democrat* and *Republican* should not be conflated with *liberal* and *conservative* (Zipp & Fenwick, 2006). But the *Pew Research Center* (2015) conducted a large-scale survey, finding that ‘92% of Republicans are [...] consistently conservative’; while ‘94% of Democrats are [...] consistently liberal’ (Pew Research Center, 2015, p. 10). Taken together, these findings suggest that conservatives are vastly underrepresented in philosophy in the US.

It is worth noting that recent studies indicate that the same holds for the humanities and social sciences in the US in general (Klein & Stern, 2009; Gross, 2013; Cholbi, 2014). Moreover, this ideological imbalance seems to become increasingly more pronounced (see Duarte, Crawford, Stern, Haidt, Jussim & Tetlock, 2015, p. 2015).

What might explain the underrepresentation of conservatives in the social sciences and humanities? Some theorists have suggested that it is due to a lack of intelligence among

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<sup>4</sup> However, the terms ‘liberal’ and ‘politically left’, or ‘conservative’ and ‘politically right’ are not interchangeable, for there are left-wing feminists critiquing liberalism (Stanley, 2016), and right-wing libertarians critiquing conservatism (Cholbi, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> <http://schwitsplinters.blogspot.be/2008/06/political-affiliations-of-american.html>.

conservatives (Kanazawa, 2010; Gilbert, 2011). Others have claimed that conservatives tend to be anti-science (Mooney, 2012).

However, when it comes to intelligence differences, meta-analyses of the relevant studies ‘do not yield a consistent liberal advantage, even a small one’ (Duarte, Crawford, Stern, Haidt, Jussim & Tetlock, 2015, p. 9). Also, if conservatives were less intellectually capable than liberals or anti-science, then one would expect them to be underrepresented across most scientific disciplines, including engineering and economics. But they aren’t. Conservatives cluster in fields like electrical engineering and economics (Gross, 2013, p. 62). Anti-scientism and lower intelligence among conservatives is thus unlikely to fully explain the underrepresentation of conservatives in the social sciences and humanities.

While different alternative accounts have been proposed (Gross, 2013; Cholbi, 2014), liberal and conservative theorists alike accept that a bias against conservatives plays at least some role (Duarte, Crawford, Stern, Haidt, Jussim & Tetlock, 2015; Shield & Dunn, 2016). For instance, studies suggest that left-leaning psychologists find a paper more publishable if its results cohere with their political view (Abramowitz, Gomes & Abramowitz, 1975) and are more likely to reject a research proposal that threatens their ideological orientation (Ceci, Peters & Plotkin, 1985).

Similarly, studies found that despite having identical academic qualifications to conservative (Christian) applicants, non-conservative applicants for admission to graduate studies in psychology were evaluated significantly better (Gartner, 1986).<sup>6</sup> Also, Inbar and Lammers (2012), who polled 800 psychologists from around the world, found that one in six respondents said they would be

inclined to discriminate against conservatives in inviting them for symposia or reviewing their work. One in four would discriminate in reviewing their grant applications. More than one in three would discriminate against them when making hiring decisions. (Inbar & Lammers, 2012, p. 5)<sup>7</sup>

Might there be a similar bias in the field of philosophy? Before considering some relevant data, I would like to reiterate an earlier point. Even though the term ‘bias’ has negative connotations, not all biases are automatically also epistemically or ethically problematic. Some might be beneficial and justified (Antony, 2016; Schwitzgebel & Ellis, 2017). When I here use the locution ‘ideological bias against conservatives’, I use ‘bias’ neutrally without implying any judgment on whether the tendency at issue is unjustified.

### **3.2 Data on ideological bias in philosophy**

To assess whether there is an ideological bias against conservatives in philosophy, one might consult different sources of information. I begin with perhaps the weakest source of evidence, namely conservative philosophers’ reports on their own experience in the field.

Shields and Dunn (2016) conducted a survey study in which they interviewed 153 conservative professors in 6 different disciplines in the social sciences and humanities, including philosophy, at 84 US universities. Many participants reported that they often face situations in which their

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<sup>6</sup> Fosse, Freese & Gross (2014), who also conducted an admission study, didn’t find a bias against conservatives. However, their study has various shortcomings, see Shields and Dunn (2016, p. 76f) for details.

<sup>7</sup> For weaknesses with the study and a partial replication, see Honeycutt and Freberg (2017).

liberal colleagues openly ridicule their values. Professors from different disciplines, including philosophy, said that in these situations: “I just bite my tongue,” “I abstained from views on things,” “I learned I should keep my mouth shut,” “I’d just let it go,” “[I stay] stony faced,” “just be quiet,” “self-censorship,” and “I’ll keep relatively quiet” (Shields & Dunn, 2016, p. 94).

Relatedly, Scruton (2014), a conservative philosopher, writes that ‘[o]rdinary conservatives are constantly told that their ideas and sentiments are reactionary, prejudiced, sexist or racist. [...] In intellectual circles conservatives therefore move quietly and discreetly [...]’ (Scruton, 2014, p. 12).

Similarly, Neven Sesardic (2016), a conservative philosopher of science, observes

On *leiterreports.typepad.com*, the most-visited philosophy blog on the internet – which most philosophers check regularly to get professional news about their discipline (new hirings, changes in the expert rankings of top philosophy departments, professional gossip, etc.) – conservatives have been routinely referred to as ‘repugs’, ‘morally depraved’, ‘morally deranged’, ‘crackpot’, ‘lunatics’, ‘idiot’, ‘twits’, ‘nuts’, ‘slimy’, ‘stupid’, ‘crazies’, ‘villains’ [...]. (Sesardic, 2016, p. 200)

It is worth noting here too that in their survey study, Shields and Dunn (2016) also found that conservative philosophers sometimes reported fear to express their political views. For instance, when they asked a conservative ‘philosopher at an elite university why he was closeted prior to tenure’, his ‘succinct response spoke for many closeted conservatives: “Fear.” “[I realized that] a tenure decision would be made, and just having experienced the general attitude of academics” toward conservatives, he decided not to be open about his political orientation (Shields & Dunn, 2016, p. 104). Scruton (2014) too notes that ‘conservatives’ are ‘under pressure to hide [who they] are, for fear of being excluded’ (Scruton, 2014, p. 12).

Admittedly, the comments mentioned so far are anecdotal and offered by conservatives who may have had an interest in emphasising their status as victims. But there are other sources that suggest that there might be an ideological bias against conservatives in philosophy. For instance, Schwitzgebel (2008), who is not a conservative, offers arguably some indication of an anti-conservative tendency in the field when shortly after presenting voting records data revealing an underrepresentation of conservatives in the field he writes: ‘this accounts for my sense that if there’s one thing that’s a safe dinner conversation topic at philosophy conferences, it’s bashing Republican presidents.’<sup>8</sup>

An hostility against conservatives and their viewpoints might also indirectly become manifest when philosophers who are not conservatives become afraid of defending conservative viewpoints, for instance, for the sake of argument in class. There is some reason to believe that this is sometimes the case. For instance, Weinberg (2016), who is not a conservative, used his website *Daily Nous* (which tends not to be frequented by conservatives) to survey people working in philosophy on ‘[w]hich ideas are students protected from?’ and ‘[w]hich are faculty fearful to defend?’<sup>9</sup> He found that ‘several of the more popular answers on the list’ of ‘ideas faculty are too scared to defend’ were ‘critiques of feminism, critiques of homosexuality, critiques of race- and gender-based affirmative action, importance of racial differences in IQ

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<sup>8</sup> <http://schwitzsplinters.blogspot.be/2008/06/political-affiliations-of-american.html>

<sup>9</sup> <http://dailynous.com/2016/08/30/ideas-students-protected-from-faculty-fearful-to-defend/>

and behaviour for social programs, critiques of transgender “ideology”<sup>10</sup>. These ideas, distilled from 132 responses to the above questions, are often considered conservative.<sup>11</sup>

I admit that I would be reluctant to discuss some of them too. But protecting students from them and not discussing them doesn't help students see their flaws and might thus ironically make them more susceptible to these ideas. Assuming that most philosophers agree that philosophy is meant to teach critical thinking and expose irrational or untenable position as such, if students are protected from and faculty are too afraid to discuss conservative positions, then this suggests that an unreflective tendency to negatively evaluate these positions interferes with judgment- and decision-making in the same kind of way in which a bias typically does it.

Of course, the reliability of a blog survey is doubtful. However, there are professionally conducted studies that yield quantitative data suggesting more directly that there might be an ideological bias against conservatives in philosophy. For example, Honeycutt and Freberg (2017) polled 618 faculty members from various academic disciplines, including philosophy, across four Californian universities, and asked them about the impact of a ‘politically conservative/liberal perspective on the review of a paper, the review of a grant, the likelihood of inviting a known conservative/liberal to participate in a symposium, and whether political ideology would be considered when selecting a job candidate between two otherwise equally qualified individuals’ (Honeycutt & Freberg, 2017, p. 116). Honeycutt and Freberg found the overt bias against conservatives that Inbar and Lammers (2012) detected among social psychologists.

Unfortunately, Honeycutt and Freberg do not offer a data analysis specifically pertaining to philosophers. But Yancey (2011) conducted a study that does. He surveyed 160 US philosophers on whether belonging to the group of Democrats or the group of Republicans damages or enhances acceptance of job applicants. He used a 7-point scale, positively correlated with level of acceptance for each group (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *very much*), and found (albeit with a low response rate of 27,9%) a mean score of 4.248 for Democrats and a mean score of 3.699 for Republicans (Yancey, 2011, p. 117, 188). Since scoring below the 4.0 midpoint on the scale indicated that job applicants were more likely to be rejected than accepted by the respondents, and since Democrats and Republicans tend to be liberals and conservatives, respectively (Pew Research Center, 2015), these data suggest that there might be an ideological bias against conservatives in philosophy in the US (Yancey, 2011, p. 135).

Having said that, the findings on an underrepresentation of and bias against conservatives in philosophy are limited and weak (e.g., anecdotal, low response rates etc.). Moreover, given the recent replication failures in the sciences, we have reason to be cautious about empirical data *inter alia* on bias (Baker, 2016).

Nonetheless, it seems to me that the available findings do provide a good motivation to take the possibility of an underrepresentation of and bias against conservatives seriously, and consider what epistemic effects both might have in philosophy, if we assume they are real. Focusing on the ideological bias at issue, what epistemic effects might it have in the field?

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<sup>10</sup> <http://dailynous.com/2016/09/06/ideas-faculty-scared-defend-follow/>

<sup>11</sup> In a follow-up blog post, Weinberg notes that some philosophers have defended ideas falling within the topics on the list and a complete list might thus be shorter than the one his survey led to, see <http://dailynous.com/2016/09/06/ideas-faculty-scared-defend-follow/>.

Research on the epistemic effects of bias on philosophy has so far concentrated mainly on *implicit* biases, more specifically, on implicit gender and race biases. To investigate the possible epistemic effects of ideological bias, it would be helpful if we could build on this existing work on implicit bias.

To do that, the implicit biases that have been discussed need to be comparable to ideological bias. Since that is so, I shall now argue that ideological bias can plausibly be compared to implicit gender or race biases. I shall do so indirectly by addressing three objections to such a comparison.

#### 4. Ideological bias compared to implicit gender and race biases

*Objection (1)* The data mentioned suggest at best that there is an *explicit* ideological bias in philosophy. No reason has been provided for believing that this bias might also be effective in *implicit* cognition. A comparison between the ideological bias at issue and implicit gender/race biases thus lacks plausibility.

*Response* There is evidence that the kind of ideological evaluations discussed can also become operative automatically and qualify as implicit bias. For instance, Iyengar and Westwood (2015) tested people's automatic cross-ideological (Democrat vs. Republican) associations by employing the same kind of methodology often used to identify implicit biases, the Implicit Association Test (IAT).<sup>12</sup> They found that when Democrats were presented with party-related stimuli (e.g., a donkey logo, elephant logo, Greenpeace logo, NRA logo, etc.), they exhibited strong automatic associations between negative words and Republican contents. Republicans did the same with respect to Democratic contents.

To be sure, the IAT and what it shows is controversial (Schwenkler, 2017). But if we assume, as philosophers still commonly do, that the IAT is a 'test of implicit biases' (Brownstein & Saul, 2016, p. 2), then Iyengar and Westwood's study does suggest that implicit ideological biases exist. For the Democrat/Republican distinction is an ideological one<sup>13</sup> and correlates with the liberal/conservative distinction (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Might philosophers harbour implicit ideological bias against conservatives? If the demographics data above are correct, then most philosophers are likely to be left-leaning, and since left-leaning subjects are, *qua* their political orientation, naturally opposed to conservatives (Brandt, Reyna, Chambers, Crawford & Wetherell, 2014; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015, p. 705), it would be surprising if they didn't also hold an implicit ideological bias against conservatives. The fact that philosophers are not immune to implicit biases in general adds to this (Di Bella, Miles, and Saul, 2016, p. 284).

Many philosophers might sincerely avow that they themselves hold no such a bias. But we have learned from work on implicit gender and race biases that even subjects with explicit egalitarian attitudes might still unknowingly harbour these biases (Brownstein & Saul, 2016). If we accept that philosophers harbour implicit gender and race biases then it is not implausible to assume that there are also many left-leaning philosophers who express conscious egalitarian attitudes toward all stigmatised minorities but nonetheless in IATs and other implicit measures exhibit a bias against conservatives that is, just as implicit gender or race bias, hard to detect

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<sup>12</sup> See Brownstein and Saul (2016, p. 4) for details on the IAT.

<sup>13</sup> Ideology and partisanship (i.e., being a supporter/member of the Democratic/Republican party) should not be conflated, however, see Mason (2015, p. 130).

introspectively and difficult to control reflectively.<sup>14</sup> While I won't commit to the existence of such an ideological bias in philosophy, the mentioned IAT study suggests that if it exists in the field, it can also be effective in implicit cognition.

*Objection (2)* A comparison between ideological bias and implicit biases is still unfitting because evaluations that target the ideology of subjects or contents are responsive to reasons and revised in the light of counterevidence (e.g., one's view that a particular conservative individual is unintelligent is perhaps swiftly updated when one receives evidence of her intelligence). Yet, implicit biases are not reasons-responsive and revised in this way.

*Response* Empirical research suggests that ideological evaluations about individuals and contents may persist in the light of strong counterevidence too. Bullock (2007) conducted a study in which a hypothetical Republican Senate candidate was initially incorrectly said to hold unpopular views on education and environment. Some test subjects were afterwards informed that the candidate does not in fact hold those views. While Republican subjects were subsequently only moderately affected by the false information, 'Democratic subjects exhibited a perseverance effect more than twice as strong' (Bullock, 2007, p. 73). A correction would have required Democrats to undo an association between a negative property (holding unpopular views) and the Republican candidate. Since Democrats had the tendency to not undo that association but Republicans did undo it, there is reason to believe that the Democrats' association was ideological in nature and, in these subjects, resistant to counterevidence.

While Bullock's (2007) research pertains only to ideological evaluations of *subjects*, Nyhan and Reifler (2010) report studies that found the same effect with respect to ideological evaluations of *contents*: subjects first read articles that included information about three divisive political claims before they were told that the information was in fact false. When the correction threatened their ideological attitudes with respect to the claims (pro or con) and called for an update, liberal and conservative subjects alike retained their belief in the false but ideology-congruent information. Otherwise, the correction initiated an update. Relatedly, Taber and Lodge (2006) who investigated how subjects evaluate arguments about affirmative action and gun control found that subjects already supportive of affirmative action (typically liberals), denigrated counterarguments (while evaluating supporting arguments as stronger) and resisted the revision of their ideological evaluation of the issue. There is, then, ground to assume that ideological bias might be as recalcitrant to reasons and revision as, e.g., implicit gender or race biases.

*Objection (3)* Ideological bias cannot plausibly be compared with these other biases because the latter target properties of a subject that the subject typically cannot control or be held responsible for (e.g., properties such as being a woman or African American). In contrast, ideological bias tracks properties that the subject *can* control and is responsible for (e.g., whether she is a liberal or conservative).

*Response* It is hard to deny this point, but ideological bias and, for instance, implicit gender and race biases do not need to be the same in this and many other respects for us to have a basis for a comparative exploration of the epistemic effects of them. For, as Holroyd and Sweetman (2016) note, provided that the processes at issue are 'automatic, difficult to discern from introspection, difficult to bring under reflective control, and as a result not governed by the

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<sup>14</sup> I do not assume that in general subjects are afflicted by implicit bias *irrespective* of their explicit attitudes. This would arguably be false (see Holroyd & Sweetman, 2016, p. 88). The claim here is just that explicit liberal egalitarians are likely to display *some* (possibly weak) implicit bias against conservatives.

same norms of reasoning as are reflective states (such as occurrent beliefs and desires)' it is useful to group them under the term 'implicit bias' for the purpose of indicating their commonality and contrasting them with the kinds of 'reflective processes to which philosophers have typically attended' (Holroyd & Sweetman, 2016, p. 82).

Since ideological bias can, just as implicit gender and race biases, operate automatically (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015), it is likely that on the occasions when it does, liberals (explicit egalitarians) will find it difficult to discern the bias introspectively and control it reflectively. If that is right, then we have a plausible basis for grouping ideological bias and implicit gender and race biases together and for investigating the epistemic effects of the former kind of bias by relating it to work on the epistemic effects of the latter kind of biases. This is what I shall do in the next section.

### 5. The epistemic effects of ideological bias

When investigating the epistemic (or moral) effects of ideological bias in philosophy, one might focus on the epistemic (or moral) costs created for the *individuals* who are the targets of the bias (e.g., conservative professors or students) or one might focus on the *group-level* costs (e.g., the costs that the bias creates for the philosophical community as a whole). I here focus only on the second issue.<sup>15</sup>

To investigate the matter, it is useful to revisit Saul's (2013) argument for the view that implicit biases have negative epistemic consequences for philosophy (see section 1.). Can it be extended to ideological bias against conservatives?

It might seem that such an extension will not work because when grading papers, or evaluating CVs or job applications, a subject's political conviction is less likely to be detected than, say, her gender or race, which can frequently be inferred from a subject's name. There is indeed a lack of parity. A subject's political views are not as easily and frequently known as her gender or race.

However, this point should not detract from the fact that evaluators do often know about a subject's ideology, for instance, when she has expressed her political views publically, when one has heard of an applicant's conservative/liberal conviction from colleagues, when a paper submission favours a conservative/liberal conclusion, and so on (Rothman, Lichter & Nevitte, 2005, p. 72). Suppose, then, that there are many cases in which evaluators know a subject's political identity.

Saul's (2013) argument applied to ideological bias against conservatives would run as follows. Since conservatives are not overall less intelligent than liberals (Duarte, Crawford, Stern, Haidt, Jussim & Tetlock, 2015, p. 9), because of ideological bias involved in grading student essays, assessing CVs, or refereeing for a journal, it is likely that there are

some excellent students receiving lower marks and less encouragement than they should; some excellent philosophers not getting the jobs they should get; and, where anonymous refereeing and editing is not practiced, there is some excellent work not being published. Philosophy as a field is the worse for this: it is not as good as it could, or should, be. (Saul, 2013, p. 246)

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<sup>15</sup> Thanks to Dan Kelly here.

Thus, if we assume that ideological bias against conservatives exist in philosophy then it seems this bias will lead to some of the same epistemic problems for the field as the biases typically discussed.

Many liberally minded philosophers will be sceptical. After all, might it not be that holding a conservative viewpoint in asking research questions, developing arguments, writing papers etc. is less epistemically fruitful, and that therefore, even if there is (i) an underrepresentation of and (ii) a bias against conservatives in philosophy, (i) and (ii) will lead to no significant epistemic costs for the field?

The point calls for further support for the claim that (i) and (ii) are in fact epistemically detrimental. In the next section, I argue that one might provide such support by maintaining that if (i) and (ii) are real, then they will aggravate psychological phenomena such as *confirmation bias* and *group polarisation* and therewith threaten the reliability of belief formation and comprehensive knowledge acquisition in many areas of philosophy.

### 5.1 Revisiting the data on ideological distribution in philosophy

Let us for the rest of the section suppose that there is a liberal majority and an underrepresentation of conservatives in philosophy. If that is so, this particular ideological distribution is likely to lead to the following epistemic problem.

In a field in which the majority shares the same liberal values and assumptions, individuals are likely to treat these assumptions as given and as true without argument, for most people already accept them and no longer consider them in need of an argument. One problematic consequence of this is that the shared assumptions can become the ‘entrenched wisdom’ in the field ‘not because they are correct but because they have consistently undergone less critical scrutiny’ (Duarte, Crawford, Stern, Haidt, Jussim & Tetlock, 2015, p. 8). There is then an increased risk that people arrive at a dogmatic consensus on possibly unjustified shared assumptions.

This risk is reduced if those who hold these assumptions keep the latter in view and ensure that they are well supported. But, as Longino (1990) notes, in a social environment with viewpoint homogeneity, widely shared assumptions ‘do not become visible until individuals who do not share them can provide alternative explanations of the phenomena without them’ (Longino, 1990, p. 80). In the absence of such individuals, who are, in the case at hand, conservatives, in a predominantly liberal field, the reliability of beliefs formed on the basis of shared liberal values and assumptions is threatened.

It might be argued that conservatives are not needed to tackle the epistemic risk at issue. For philosophers are well versed to engage in ‘devil’s advocate’, i.e., in adopting and responding to the opponent’s position. Authentic conservative dissenters are thus not necessary in the field to ensure that shared liberal assumptions remain in view.

However, this point is challenged by empirical research on the ‘devil’s advocate’ strategy. For instance, Nemeth, Brown and Rogers (2001) conducted studies on the strategy and found a

negative, unintended consequence of devil’s advocate [DA]. The DA stimulated significantly more thoughts in support of the initial position. Thus, subjects appeared to

generate new ideas aimed at cognitive bolstering of their initial viewpoint but they did not generate thoughts, regarding other positions. (Nemeth, Brown & Rogers, 2001, p. 708)

Overall, the ‘authentic minority was superior to all [the] forms of “devil’s advocate” [tested] underscoring the value and importance of authenticity and the difficulty in cloning such authenticity by role-playing techniques’ (Nemeth, Brown & Rogers, 2001, p. 707).

The typical explanation of this phenomenon is that people fall prey to *confirmation bias*, which is the tendency to seek evidence that will confirm one’s existing beliefs and to ignore or downplay disconfirming evidence (Nickerson, 1998). Studies show that the bias is very hard to avoid in everyday reasoning (Mercier & Sperber, 2011, p. 63f) and there is evidence that philosophers are susceptible to it too (Draper & Nichols, 2013; De Cruz & De Smedt, 2016, p. 131).

In fact, confirmation bias is likely to be stronger in philosophers, for ‘[a]lthough academic intelligence and experience in verbal argumentation might enhance reasoners’ ability to spot weak arguments, any such advantage might be counterbalanced or more than counterbalanced by an increased ability to discover arguments toward a favored conclusion’ (Schwitzgebel & Ellis, 2017, p. 179). Relatedly, Perkins et al. (1991) found that while more intelligent subjects are better at coming up with arguments for their own side of an argument than less intelligent subjects, crucially, they are *not better* than them at coming up with arguments for the *opposing* side. Unsurprisingly, then, studies suggest that increased argumentative sophistication, which is arguably common in philosophers, correlates with an increased susceptibility to confirmation bias (Taber & Lodge, 2006).

To further motivate that this applies to philosophers too, notice that if philosophers paid equal attention to the evidence and arguments for and against their own view, this should have a moderating effect and lead them away from implausibly extreme conclusions and radical solutions. Yet, ironically, philosophers often seem to be led precisely *to* them. As Fodor (1986) observes:

It is a curiosity of the philosophical temperament, this passion for radical solutions. Do you feel a little twinge in your epistemology? Absolute scepticism is the thing to try. Has the logic of confirmation got you down? Probably physics is a fiction. Worried about individuating objects? Don’t let anything in but sets. Nobody has yet suggested that the way out of the Liar paradox is to give up talking, but I expect it’s only a matter of time. Apparently the rule is: if aspirin doesn’t work, try cutting off your head. (Fodor, 1986, p. 1)

Since there is reason to believe that philosophers are not just vulnerable but especially susceptible to confirmation bias (Draper & Nichols, 2013; Schwitzgebel & Ellis, 2017), what are the likely effects of this bias in philosophy if we keep the ideology-related data in mind?

Notice first that in many areas of philosophy, a difference in ideological viewpoint tends to lead to different conclusions. This is often the case, for instance, in political philosophy (on topics such as equality, immigration etc. (Cohen, 2006, p. 416f; Hidalgo & Freiman, 2016)), in ethics (on topics such as abortion, environmentalism etc. (McLachlan, 1977; Bob, 2012)), or in philosophy of science (e.g., on topics such as values in the sciences (Cofnas, 2015; Kourany, 2016)).

If the field of philosophy is characterised by a vast liberal majority, then the chances are high that philosophers who are engaged in debates in these areas will frequently find themselves arguing mostly with ideologically like-minded people. In such a situation, confirmation bias is likely to lead all parties in the debate to seek support for, or turn a blind eye to, the already shared beliefs and to ignore or downplay disconfirming evidence to them.

Furthermore, if we assume that philosophy is a largely liberally homogenous field then the majority's confirmation bias is likely to become *magnified* at the intersubjective level, leading to *group polarisation*. This is the phenomenon that members of a deliberating like-minded group usually end up at a more extreme position in the same general direction as their inclinations before deliberation began (Myers & Lamm, 1976; Solomon, 2006).

Group polarisation has been found in numerous studies (Sunstein, 2009) and is perhaps unsurprising. If you get a group of people who think that abortion is a serious problem, the group will of course produce many arguments about why abortion is worth worrying over and fewer about why it is not, with the result that after speaking to each other, group members will be more polarised on the issue.

As unsurprising as this process might be, it can be highly epistemically problematic, because it 'can have an escalating effect, as extreme viewpoints tend to be less tractable and more confidently held' which makes them less likely targets for criticism (Brogaard, 2017, p. 70). Additionally, like-minded groups often fail to elicit contributions that could direct them away from the extreme. For a desire to be perceived favorably, '[p]eer pressure, as well as pressure from those in authority (if present in the group)' lead 'dissenting individuals to change their minds and, perhaps as important, not to share their knowledge of contrary evidence' (Solomon, 2006, p. 31). As a result, individuals in the group are likely to come to hold possibly false views with an inflated degree of confidence that could not be sustained upon an impartial assessment of the evidence or arguments.

Philosophers do not seem to be resistant to the phenomenon. Sunstein (2009) offers an illustration, writing:

A few years ago, I was discussing group polarisation with a philosopher who works on the topic of animal rights and animal welfare. He is strongly committed to reducing the suffering of animals, and he told me the following story: "On Friday of a three-day conference, we are perfectly sensible, by my lights. But by Sunday, we stop thinking straight! We become much too extreme. By Sunday, people start saying that no experiment on animals ever produced useful knowledge for human beings. By Sunday, people start saying that it is never acceptable to eat meat, even if animals lived a very long and very happy life, and died of natural causes. Some of us have, in a way, lost our minds. (Sunstein, 2009, p. 26)

If we keep in mind the data on ideology in the field of philosophy, group polarisation becomes especially relevant for the field, because there is evidence that group polarisation is very likely to emerge and has the 'greatest effect' in 'groups of similar-minded individuals' in which the majority lacks exposure to opposing perspectives (Brogaard, 2017, p. 71; Myers & Lamm, 1976, p. 605). If the field of philosophy is largely liberally homogenous with a lack of vocal conservative critics, then the chances are high that group polarisation occurs frequently and with a vengeance in discussions on value-laden topics.

Moreover, and importantly, while in the sciences, researchers can in principle often use observation and experiment to correct their biased reasoning, this way of counteracting erroneous thinking and overconfidence is typically unavailable in philosophy. In philosophy, in value-laden discussions, in particular, usually no appeal to external, empirical facts of the world is possible to check claims (Schwitzgebel & Ellis, 2017). Philosophers are more reliant on social criticism to ensure the reliability of their views than scientists. If this is right, and if there is a liberal majority in philosophy then it is not implausible to suggest that most philosophers will often be reliant on conservative opponents for effective (confirmation-bias countering) criticism of their own claims. But now ideological bias comes back into the picture.

## 5.2 Revisiting the bias data

If there is an ideological bias against conservatives in philosophy then that bias will significantly increase philosophers' epistemic risk of coming to hold systematically less scrutinised views with an unwarranted degree of confidence. This is because it will incline the majority in the field to think of conservative objections, arguments, or proposals from the outset and prior to analysis as if they are misguided. It will also increase the likelihood of mischaracterisations of conservative contributions and facilitate a dismissive attitude toward them.

In discussions of gender and race, this process is sometimes called the 'silencing' of the target (Fricker, 2007, Chapter 6). When the silencing of conservatives takes effect, the liberal viewpoint becomes insulated from criticism from its main opponent that offers objections to its most fundamental and most principled assumptions (Muller, 1995, p. xvi, 3). That is, bias against conservatives shields the liberal majority of people from possible corrections from their immediate political opponents by motivating them to ignore, silence, or misconstrue these opponents (Case, 2015).

The epistemic problem that ideology-related factors pose in the field of philosophy can be summarised thus. If there is a liberal majority and underrepresentation of conservatives in philosophy then in belief formation in the field many assumptions that align with the liberal orientation will be shared and systematically undergo less scrutiny. Most people will be less able to counter this process because of a shared confirmation bias with respect to these assumptions. In fact, within groups, group polarisation is likely to lead most individuals to an unwarranted degree of confidence in assumptions and claims that are in line with the liberal orientation. Furthermore, philosophers typically cannot use empirical methods to keep the move towards overconfidence in check. And, while conservatives could possibly offer correctives, if there is also an ideological bias against them in the field then that bias is likely to insulate most philosophers from conservative contributions from the outset.

It might be objected that the reasoning just introduced could equally be used to argue that the underrepresentation of and aversion or bias against, say, creationists in biology pose an epistemic risks for biologists. But surely, the objection continues, this is not the case. Hence, the reasoning proposed must have gone wrong somewhere.

In response, let me stress that I do not assume that viewpoint diversity is always epistemically beneficial. The creationist-case illustrates that this assumption is false.

Notice, however, that there seems to be a significant difference between, for instance, creationists and conservatives. This is because the proposals by creationists are clearly unpromising and the objections to the received view in biology that they might offer are hardly

corrective, for the received view in the field has been well established. When it comes to conservatives, however, and their possible objections to views that are in line with the liberal orientation, these points arguably do not hold. Radical right-wing views (e.g., racist, homophobic, sexist views) are perhaps misguided too, but it is less obvious that this applies to conservative viewpoints in general, including those situated toward the centre of the political spectrum.

Moreover, it is not obvious that the philosophical beliefs shaped by a liberal orientation are as firmly established as, for instance, the received views in biology. Relatedly, it is not clear that conservative objections to these philosophical beliefs are as devoid of possibly corrective effects as creationist objections in biology.

To further illustrate this, I shall now mention cases in which conservative criticism arguably has had or can have a positive impact on the reliability of belief formation and knowledge acquisition in philosophy.

### **5.3 When conservatives might matter**

I shall consider three examples. They are taken from debates in philosophy of biology, philosophy of implicit bias, and political philosophy.<sup>16</sup> In none of these debates do I favour a conservative viewpoint. Nor do I mean to suggest that there are good reasons for accepting it. My suggestion is merely that the presence of and attention to a conservative critic in the debates might positively affect belief formation and knowledge acquisition.

#### **5.3.1 Conservatives in philosophy of biology**

Notice first that a preference for and pursuit of social equality and social justice are central to the liberal orientation (Arneson, 2015). Since that is so, liberals and, more generally, left-leaning researchers are likely to be inclined to deny the importance or underestimate the influence of biological factors on inter-individual differences, and emphasize social determinants of behaviour and capacities. For if the goal is to increase equality, environmental interventions are arguably still the only realistic policy option, even after the recent advent of genetic engineering.

In line with this, in the debate on the heritability of IQ differences, left-leaning scientists and philosophers tend to be sceptical of genetic explanations of IQ differences between groups, for instance, whites and blacks, and prefer environmental explanations (Tabery, 2014, p. 48; Block, 1995). If political orientation affects belief formation on the matter, then one would expect left-leaning philosophers engaged in the debate to be more willing to endorse arguments against the heritability of IQ group differences than conservatives. Consider, then, the following.

Lewontin (1976), a well-known left-leaning biologist, argued that the genetic explanation of the black-white IQ difference involves a fallacious inference. He maintained that theorists proposing such an explanation first note correctly that IQ is highly heritable among whites and among blacks, and then directly and fallaciously infer from this that the difference in IQ between whites and blacks is also heritable.

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<sup>16</sup> I'm grateful to Andreas De Block for his contributions to this section.

Lewontin illustrates that this transition from within group heritability (WGH) to between group heritability (BGH) is a fallacy by using the example of a handful of genetically diverse seeds of a plant (Lewontin, 1976, p. 89). Suppose some of the seeds are planted in soil rich of nutrients, and others are planted in soil poor of nutrients. The result in the ontogeny of the plants will be 100% heritability of phenotypic differences *within* each of the two groups. The differences *between* the groups, however, will not be heritable. They will be effects of environmental conditions. Lewontin argued that since genetic explanations of IQ differences rely on reasoning from WGH to BHW, which is fallacious, hereditarianism, that is, the view that intelligence and human traits more generally are crucially genetically determined, is misguided.

What matters here is that Lewontin's argument had a significant influence on the philosophy of biology (Singh, Krimbas, Paul & Beatty, 2001, p. 3). Most philosophers of biology working on heritability repeated his critique of genetic explanation of IQ differences without questioning whether it in fact captured the reasoning of advocates of hereditarianism (e.g., Richardson, 1984, p. 401, 406; Block, 1995, p. 110; Sarkar, 1998, p. 93).

It was arguably not until Sesardic (2000), a conservative philosopher, subjected Lewontin's argument against genetic explanations of inter-group IQ differences to scrutiny that core problems with the argument came clearly into view in the field. In a paper published in *Philosophy of Science*, Sesardic (2000) argued that advocates of hereditarianism recognized the fallacious transition themselves and did not, unlike Lewontin claimed and most philosophers following him assumed, make it. Rather than transitioning directly from WGH to BGW, the inference they made was from (1) high WGH of IQ (among both whites and blacks) *and* (2) empirical data (mainly about the relation of certain environmental variables and IQ) to (3) non-zero BGH (Sesardic, 2000, p. 587). Sesardic maintained that Lewontin and the philosophers that endorsed his critique of hereditarianism missed the hereditarians' actual thesis, which was that high WGH, together with some collateral empirical information, inductively establishes a non-zero BGH.

Independently of what one makes of this alternative hereditarian thesis, the relevant point here is that some philosophers who are not conservatives grant that Sesardic's critique of environmentalism in the philosophical debate on the heritability of human behavioural traits is 'strong' and noteworthy (Griffiths & Stotz, 2013, p. 200). This is relevant here because it is not implausible to assume that, as a conservative, Sesardic was more disposed than liberal philosophers to ask a particular kind of critical questions in the environmentalism/hereditarianism debate, as asking them was less comfortable for liberals. Moreover, these questions made it easier to see the problems with Lewontin's critique of genetic explanations of human behavioural traits and therewith helped correct aspects of the debate. Hence, even if one rejects the positive proposals conservative philosophers of biology might make, there is reason to hold that conservatives can *qua* their ideological difference sometimes be conducive to the reliability of belief formation in philosophy by offering critical, corrective contributions which less easily come to the mind of left-leaning philosophers.

### 5.3.2 Conservatives in the philosophy of implicit bias

In the philosophy of implicit bias, some assumptions are more amenable to a liberal political orientation than others, for a liberal viewpoint involves an appreciation of and commitment to equality, which comes with a tendency to favour affirmative action (Taber & Lodge, 2006; Madva, 2016, p. 200). If implicit biases are real and unconsciously affect judgement- and

decision-making, disadvantaging, for instance, women and African Americans, then their existence and efficacy will sanction affirmative action to counterbalance the biases and promote equality (Antony, 2016). The assumption that implicit biases and their negative cognitive/behavioral effects are real is thus a premise in the liberal argument for social intervention to achieve social justice, for instance, for women and Africa Americans.

In philosophical research, implicit biases are correspondingly frequently cited to explain '[p]ersistent inequalities between social groups' and justify normative claims (Brownstein & Saul, 2016, p. 1). Since that is so, one would expect liberally minded philosophers to use empirical studies to support the mentioned assumption, and to be more likely to readily accept and rely on studies suggesting that the assumption is correct, rather than first critically assess these studies.

There is reason to believe that this has happened. For instance, Antony (2016), who is a left-leaning philosopher, holds that from empirical research, we 'have learned about the operation of *implicit bias* in evaluative contexts'; its 'influence has been discovered in the grading of student work (Bradley, 1993), in the review of job candidate (Steinpreis, Anders & Ritzke, 1999; Moss-Racusin, Dovidio, Brescoll, Graham & Handelsman, 2012),' and 'in the evaluation of submissions to journals (Peters, & Ceci, 1982)' (Antony, 2016, p. 157).

However, in fact, *none* of the mentioned studies shows the operation of *implicit bias*, which Antony herself understands as an unconscious tendency (Antony, 2016, p. 159). For instance, Bradley (1993) reports findings on gender bias in grading that do not pertain to an unconscious bias. Similarly, in their CV study, Steinpreis, Anders, and Ritzke (1999) found a gender bias against woman in hiring but make no mentioning of unconscious processing; the bias might have been explicit. Also, while Moss-Racusin, Dovidio, Brescoll, Graham, and Handelsman (2012) do use the term 'subtle gender bias', their study tested subjects with the 'Modern Sexism Scale', which is an 'explicit measure of prejudice' (Bauer et al., 2000, p. 80) and doesn't provide direct evidence of implicit bias. Finally, Peters and Ceci (1982) tested whether papers written by authors from prestigious institutions would also be accepted if an author from a less prestigious institution submitted the same paper. They found evidence against this, but they never investigated whether this prestige bias was implicit. Antony (2016, p. 157) thus takes studies to support the existence of implicit bias that do not provide such support.

Many philosophers who have done important work on implicit bias, including Antony (2016), Saul (2013), and Haslanger (2008) also sometimes make claims about implicit biases that are only weakly corroborated by the empirical studies they cite. For instance, they cite Steinpreis et al.'s (1999) study as showing that a male as opposed to female name on an applicant's CV makes the assessor rate the application more positively (Haslanger, 2008, p. 213; Saul, 2013, p. 245; Antony, 2016, p. 157).

However, upon scrutinising the study, Hermanson (2017) found that the sample sizes of respondents for female CV and male CV were small, and the "discrepancy in responses is just at the fringes of the margin of error" (Hermanson, 2017, p. 6). He points out too that Steinpreis et al. detected no gendered effects for tenure decisions. Moreover, their results were not replicated by other studies. For instance, Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004) conducted a CV study which did find that applicants with 'black'-sounding names received less return calls but didn't find evidence that CVs with female (as opposed to male) names were disadvantaged (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004, p. 998). After examining other studies, Hermanson concludes that philosophers writing about implicit bias sometimes endorse low evidentiary standards and

omit reservations about empirical research. He suggests that this might be because of their shared liberal ‘commitment to progressive reforms such as affirmative action initiatives’ (Hermanson, 2017, p. 12).

No matter whether one accepts Hermanson’s diagnosis, it is not implausible to assume that since conservatives tend to be critical of equality and affirmative action (Redding, 2001, p. 211; Shield & Dunn, 2016, p. 196), they are more inclined to skeptically approach the mentioned studies than left-leaning philosophers. Relatedly, given their different political commitments, vocal conservative opponents in the philosophical debate on implicit bias are likely to be disposed to offer critical contributions that may help correct the possibly unwarranted overconfidence philosophers may place on empirical studies on biases.

To be clear, I do not deny that implicit biases against women, African Americans and other members of stigmatised social groups are real and have pernicious behavioral effects. Nor do I endorse a conservative view on implicit bias research or affirmative action. The point here is merely that conservative critics in the theorising on implicit bias might provide an epistemically useful control on the reliability of belief formation on implicit biases.

### **5.3.3 Conservatives in political philosophy**

The final example that I want to introduce comes from political philosophy, more specifically, from work on distributive justice where the pros and cons of social welfare systems are being debated.

Rajczi (2014), a liberal political philosopher, argues that philosophers who work on distributive justice and defend social welfare programs tend to neglect the conservative view on the costs of social policy and focus mostly only on libertarian objections to these programs, that is, on objections according to which social safety net programs in general are to be opposed because they interfere too much with individual liberty (as they need to be funded via taxation). Rajczi notes that whereas libertarians oppose social safety net programs, conservatives think social welfare systems are in fact needed, but in developing and revising them, we should take care that the programs do not become imprudent, inefficient, or fiscally unsound. According to conservative critics, social welfare programs should be abandoned or substantially revised when they allow or encourage able-bodied individuals to subsist on government benefits when they could be contributing to society.

Rajczi argues that given their liberal commitments to equality, many political philosophers think that a social safety program such as a national health system can of course be made to function in an efficient and fiscally sound way. If one makes this assumption, he notes, then the ‘conservative position may not seem worth addressing at all’ (Rajczi, 2014, p. 24).

However, that such a system can be made to function in this way needs to be shown first. And, Rajczi contends, the conservative view, which is motivated by a ‘combination of non-ideal principles, empirical assumptions, and further ideas about how the reasons against safety net programs should weigh against the reasons in favour’, has so far not been adequately addressed and ‘cannot be refuted by appealing to existing egalitarian writings’ (Rajczi, 2014, p. 1, 43).

A full exploration of the efficiency and fiscal soundness of social welfare programs will benefit from a well-developed critique of the welfare system, because such a critique is one way to address issues related to confirmation bias. A conservative viewpoint is relevant in this area,

and, as Rajczi notes, conservatives could contribute to a full exploration of the matter. Hence, in this particular area of political philosophy, conservative critics could positively affect belief formation by providing a check on the confidence with which liberally-minded philosophers might hold certain beliefs about what can and can't be made to work in an efficient and fiscally sound way.

There are many more areas in philosophy where a difference in liberal/conservative viewpoint often leads to different conclusions and in which the factors discussed in the preceding sections are hence likely to affect belief formation. This is perhaps less so with respect to topics in, for instance, logic or the philosophy of mathematics. But it clearly plays an important role in a wide range of debates in other areas of philosophy (especially areas involving value-laden topics).

Notice that there is *no* suggestion here that in any of these debates the liberal viewpoint is *wrong*, that a liberal orientation will *inevitably* negatively affect belief formation, or that conservatives are *necessary* to counteract the epistemic effects if it does do so. The overall point here is different and much more modest. It is merely that in these debates belief formation is likely to be epistemically negatively affected by ideology-related factors such as a bias against conservatives, for these factors aggravate confirmation bias and group polarization, which are likely to lead to unwarranted overconfidence in possibly false propositions that are in line with the liberal orientation, and impede the thorough exploration of an issue. Hence, just as implicit biases against women and African Americans have epistemic costs for philosophy (because they lead us to exclude, discourage, or silence individuals who could otherwise contribute to a reliable belief formation and wide-ranging inquiry in the field), so does implicit and explicit ideological bias against conservatives.

Having introduced a commonality between the two kinds of biases, I shall now consider some important epistemic differences between them.

## **6. The epistemic distinctness of ideological bias**

Ideological bias, implicit or explicit, has epistemic features that implicit gender and race biases lack and that are relevant for epistemology, ethics, and metaphilosophy. I shall mention three of them.

### **6.1 Ideological bias versus implicit race bias**

Studies suggest that ideological bias is likely to have a stronger impact on cognition and behaviour than, for instance, implicit race bias when both ideology and race are known. Iyengar and Westwood (2015) tested the strength of cross-ideological (i.e., Democrat vs. Republican) bias as opposed to cross-racial bias (European vs. African American). They conducted IATs measuring the reaction time people (N=2000) needed to associate Democrats/Republicans and Europeans/African Americans with positive and negative attributes (e.g., terms such as 'good' and 'bad'). Iyengar and Westwood found that negative cross-ideological associations were significantly faster, hence more automatic, than negative associations related to African Americans (see Iyengar & Westwood, 2015, p. 696).

This ideology/race-related difference in the strength of automatic affective associations<sup>17</sup> does not mean subjects also act in line with these associations. Meta-analyses have shown that there is a poor correlation between IAT scores and discriminatory behavior (see Schwenkler, 2017).

However, Iyengar and Westwood also conducted a study to test the behavioural robustness of the ideology vs. race difference in responding. They asked people to decide, on the basis of CVs that contained indicators of race or political identity, whether to award a scholarship to an applicant. They found that ideology had a more significant impact on the decision than race. Both Democrats and Republicans chose the candidate with whom they shared political orientation ca. 80% of the time even in cases when the applicant from the other party had stronger academic credentials. Overall, then, Iyengar and Westwood's findings suggest that ideological bias is epistemically distinct from implicit race bias in that it has a more pronounced impact on a subject's cognition and behaviour when political and racial identity are known.<sup>18</sup>

This is philosophically interesting for at least two reasons. First, if ideological biases affect assessments more strongly than implicit race biases (when ideology and race are known), then liberals and conservatives are more likely to be wrong about subjects, arguments, or conclusions they classify as belonging to the opposite ideology than about subjects, arguments, or conclusions they conceptually tie to particular racial demographics. This matters because most debates in value-involving areas in philosophy happen between people with different ideological viewpoints. And it is specifically components of their different ideological viewpoints that people tend to attack in these debates (e.g., their view on abortion, equality, social justice etc.), not aspects of their race or gender. If we have a particularly strong tendency to be automatically biased against our ideological opponents then we are at a particularly high risk of unknowingly drawing unjustified conclusions.

Second, Iyengar and Westwood (2015, p. 705) suggest that race bias is less pronounced than ideological bias because it is usually kept in check by social norms of civility and tolerance whereas there are no such norms governing the expression of negative sentiments against political opponents. For instance, the media regularly presents people with evidence of overt and unsanctioned hostility among political opponents, including instances of unrestrained exchanges of insults (think of the last US presidential election in which an unlikely presidential candidate used expressions such as 'crooked Hillary' or 'lying Ted' to defame his political opponents without much negative repercussions). The frequent presentation with and lack of condemnation of this kind of behaviour are likely to strengthen ideological bias. This is ethically interesting as it calls for reflection on whether we ought to introduce social norms constraining bias against political opponents.

I now turn to the second aspect in which ideological bias is epistemically distinct from the biases typically discussed in philosophy. It pertains to the objects of these two kinds of biases.

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<sup>17</sup> Notice that implicit *affective* associations do not entail implicit *semantic/stereotype* associations. For instance, even if test subjects' implicit affective associations between African Americans and negative concepts are weak, their semantic/stereotype association between African Americans and concepts such as, say, 'unintelligent' might be stronger, possibly stronger than their associations between, e.g., conservatives and 'unintelligent' or related concepts (Amodio & Devine, 2006; see also Holroyd & Sweetman, 2016, p. 90f). However, in academia, conservatives (unlike African Americans) are frequently openly classified as less intelligent or stupid without much public outcry (Duarte, Crawford, Stern, Haidt, Jussim & Tetlock, 2015, p. 10), which provides some reason to assume that implicit ideological bias is also stronger than implicit race bias when it comes to associations between conservatives and 'unintelligent' or related concepts.

<sup>18</sup> There is no claim here that the second study probed *implicit* ideological bias. CV studies show little about implicit as opposed to explicit bias. Also, for the limits of cross-ideological bias, see Lelkes and Westwood (2017).

## 6.2 Ideological bias targets persons and contents

Implicit gender and race biases target primarily persons *qua* members of social groups. When anonymous reviewing is practiced, they are less likely to affect the assessment of research proposals, arguments, conclusions, or theories, because it is often difficult to tell by the content of a particular research proposal, argument, conclusion, or theory whether its source is, for instance, female or African American.

This is not to say that implicit gender or race biases cannot become effective when one is considering anonymised contents. Women and African Americans often work on more socially engaged topics. When an assessor links contents with gender or race, her/his implicit gender or race bias might negatively affect decisions on contents.

However, the bias then targets contents *indirectly* via the assessor's connecting them with, for instance, a female or African American source first. I shall here only focus on cases where a bias targets contents *directly*, i.e., without the assessor having to link them with an individual (e.g., woman or African American).

Explicit and implicit ideological bias does so. It targets contents directly *qua* instantiations of the conservative/liberal ideology. Since research proposals, arguments, conclusions, or theories can be easily classified as conservative/liberal even when anonymous reviewing is practiced, they can become the direct target of ideological bias (Abramowitz, Gomes & Abramowitz, 1975; Ceci, Peters & Plotkin, 1985).

In addition, the bias also targets persons *qua* members of the social group of conservatives/liberals (Honeycutt & Freberg, 2017; Yancey, 2011). The point that ideological bias, unlike implicit gender and race biases, often directly affects the assessment of *both* contents and persons captures the second kind of epistemic distinctness of ideological bias.

The third and last one that I shall consider pertains to the way the bias is perceived in the field of philosophy.

## 6.3 Ideological bias is viewed as less problematic

In a field with a vast liberal majority, countering bias and discrimination against women and African Americans is already a specific, well-justified goal of liberals, and a failure to pursue the goal will earn one criticism from most others in the field. When it comes to bias and discrimination against conservatives, however, this is less likely. The point is illustrated by the data introduced above (e.g., Schwitzgebel, 2008; Yancey, 2011; Honeycutt & Freberg, 2017). They suggest that an aversion against conservatives is considered less objectionable in philosophy.

Relatedly, while bias and discrimination against women and African Americans are (rightly) being flagged in most discussions of implicit bias and in diversity statements of philosophy departments, this is not the case when it comes to ideological bias. For instance, while the *American Philosophical Association* (APA) has diversity committees for *Asian and Asian-American Philosophers and Philosophies*, for *Hispanics*, *Indigenous Philosophers*, *LGTQ Philosophers*, *Status of Black Philosophers*, and *Status of Women*, there is no committee for ideological diversity. The *APA Factsheet on Minorities in Philosophy* also does not list ideological/political status.

To be fair, the evidence of an underrepresentation of conservatives and bias and discrimination against them in philosophy is not very strong, and I do not commit to their reality. But there is at least *some* such evidence (Yancey, 2011; Honeycutt & Freberg, 2017). And in other fields of study, the problem of ideological diversity has been highlighted for many years (Haidt, 2011; Inbar & Lammers, 2012; Yancey, 2011; Duarte, Crawford, Stern, Haidt, Jussim & Tetlock 2015).

Notice too that the APA explicitly condemns discrimination against members of different political groups. For instance, the APA *Statement on Non-discrimination* written *inter alia* by Martha Nussbaum states that the

American Philosophical Association rejects as unethical all forms of discrimination based on race, color, religion, political convictions, national origin, sex, disability, sexual orientation, gender identification or age, whether in graduate admissions, appointments, retention, promotion and tenure, manuscript evaluation, salary determination, or other professional activities in which APA members characteristically participate [emphasis added].<sup>19</sup>

If this is right then, given even the only very limited indications of bias and discrimination against conservatives in the field, it is not clear why this bias and discrimination are not mentioned on the APA website. Since neither is mentioned, it is not unreasonable to suspect that in philosophy most people view ideological bias against conservatives as less problematic than gender and race biases.

What might explain this? The suggestion that ideological bias does not have any of the same kind of negative *epistemic* effects as, for instance, implicit gender and race biases is questionable, given the discussion above.

It might be that there are good *ethical* reasons for the differential treatment. But if we assume that the APA and most philosophers consider discrimination on the basis of political conviction as unethical then this suggestion is not convincing either.

It might also be that the epistemic and ethical costs of ideological bias against conservatives are insignificant compared to those of implicit gender and race biases. This would be a good explanation of the differential treatment. But it is not obviously true, and it would be nice to have an argument to support the claim at issue,<sup>20</sup> for this would help us address the possible accusation by conservatives that they are victims of an ethical and/or epistemic injustice in the field of philosophy.

I want to finish by mentioning two other possible (I do not commit to either) reasons why ideological bias and discrimination against conservatives might be viewed as less problematic in the field.

First, when liberals detect gender and race biases in themselves, they will tend to experience a dissonance with their egalitarian commitments. In contrast, when it comes to ideological bias

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<sup>19</sup> <http://www.apaonline.org/?page=nondiscrimination>

<sup>20</sup> One such argument might use the assumption that we automatically believe the propositions we entertain and that we have thus an epistemic obligation to not expose ourselves to propositions deemed morally problematic. Levy and Mandelbaum (2014) propose such an argument. However, elsewhere (Peters, 2017) I contend that the assumption that we automatically believe the propositions we entertain is empirically not well supported.

against conservatives, the occurrence of such a dissonance is less likely, because liberal values are frequently the direct opposite of conservative values. The chances are thus high that liberals hold anti-conservative tendencies that interfere with their egalitarian commitments, reducing the tension between the latter and these tendencies. The reduced dissonance will make ideological bias against conservatives more difficult to perceive as a negative tendency at the intrasubjective level, which in turn lowers the probability that liberals will feel impelled to approach their egalitarian standard when it comes to conservatives.

Second, ideological bias against conservatives might be more difficult to perceive as a negative tendency in philosophy than implicit gender or race biases because it elicits less protest from its target. For in a mostly liberal field in which anti-conservative sentiments are typically not criticised but tolerated, conservatives will make themselves vulnerable to further ostracism if they object to the way in which they are treated while the majority implicitly or explicitly condones this kind of treatment. Conservatives will thus be motivated to refrain from speaking out against the bias they face and have an incentive to remain silent about their political orientation. The fact that many conservative philosophers report fear of revealing their political identity and prefer to stay ‘in the closet’ (Shields & Dunn, 2016, p. 104) is a case in point.

Moreover, while those affected by implicit race or gender bias call (rightly) for affirmative action, conservatives tend not to do so because they disfavor affirmative action in general; opposition to it is part of their ideology (Redding, 2001, p. 211). The reduced interest among conservatives in affirmative action to improve their situation is likely to further contribute to people’s impression that there is little if any problematic bias against conservatives in the field.

The preceding considerations are epistemically, ethically, and metaphilosophically important. They suggest that ideological bias in conjunction with demographic and psychosocial factors might prevent us in philosophy from achieving our “twin epistemological goals to believe truths and to avoid error” (Feldman, 2005, p. 378) without our noticing it and partly because we are acting in ways inconsistent with overtly endorsed ethical principles. The discussion suggests that we may in our philosophical reasoning not only be blind to our own biases because they are unconscious and introspection is unreliable; this point is already well known (Ballantyne, 2015). Rather, external, social aspects too might hinder us from recognising one particular bias, namely ideological bias against conservatives, as a problem.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper is not meant to accuse anyone of any epistemic or ethical failing. The goal has simply been to explore what the possible epistemic costs, risks, and distinctive features of ideological bias against conservatives in philosophy might be, if we assume that the bias is real.

The points made are not intended to diminish the epistemic and ethical harmfulness of implicit gender or race biases. Nor should the focus here on conservatives as an ideological minority in philosophy be construed as a denial that there are also *left-wing* ideological minority groups in the field that deserve equal attention. Perhaps there is, as Stanley (2016) suggests, a dearth of (and a bias against) radical left-wing thinkers in the social sciences and humanities, including philosophy. I shall not gainsay that.

The overall argument here has just been that if conservatives are vastly underrepresented in philosophy and there is an ideological bias against them in the field then this bias will lead to some of the same epistemic costs in the field as implicit gender and race biases do. For it is

likely to incline us to exclude, silence, or misconstrue subjects who could otherwise contribute to a reliable belief formation and comprehensive knowledge acquisition in the field.

While ideological bias against conservatives is epistemically similar to implicit gender and race biases in this respect, it is also epistemically different from them in that when it becomes effective, the bias is likely to have a stronger impact on cognition and behaviour than, for instance, implicit race bias. In addition, it directly tracks both persons and contents, and, due to psychological and social factors, is likely to be less easily perceived as a problem in philosophy despite leading to clear epistemic costs and risks.

While these differences between ideological bias against conservatives, on the one hand, and implicit race and gender biases, on the other, are unlikely to make the former overall more epistemically or ethically pernicious than the latter, I provided several reasons for thinking that they are philosophically interesting and important. It is thus my hope that this paper will help launch a conversation within the philosophical community about the hitherto neglected topic of ideological bias.

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