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# **KİTAP İNCELEMESİ**

## **RETHINKING PHILIP KITCHER'S SCIENCE POLICY IN TIMES OF A GLOBAL PANDEMIC**

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**Merve KAPTAN\***

### **Introduction**

The relationship between policies of science and democratic debates is and probably always will be a current topic as long as science keeps shaping our lives. The renowned British philosopher Philip Kitcher's *Science, Truth, and Democracy* (Kitcher, 2001) are still relevant today, some twenty years after its first publication, as the heated debates concerning the role of science and its social consequences rage on. In the first part of the book, Kitcher gives us his account of science and truth by introducing the notion of significant truth. In the second part, he presents his arguments for well-ordered science to answer how we should organize science so that it would provide the significant truth which will serve the people and would not obstruct scientific development. In this essay, we will discuss and evaluate Kitcher's views about well-ordered science. To this end, we should clarify what Kitcher means by significant truth and his theory of well-ordered science. Then, we will attempt to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of Kitcher's argument and finally present some ideas about how his model can be overcome/improved in today's society.

### **Significant Truth and Well-Ordered Science**

In the first part of his book, via modest realism, Kitcher argues that there are no natural kinds such as chemical elements or biological species: the way

\* Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, İstanbul Galata Üniversitesi Sanat ve Sosyal Bilimler Fakültesi İletişim ve Tasarımı Bölümü. ORCID: 0000-0002-3467-5001, e-mail: merve.kaptan@galata.edu.tr

we classify objects depends on our interests. In other words, since the perception of things and facts involves judgment, we do not have direct access to reality, so we construct our perception of reality about types. Therefore, social and political ideologies may come into play in the classification of kinds or in directing scientific inquiries. Yet Kitcher, unlike most of the new constructivist and relativist approaches of the mid-1970s, wants to retain the ideal of objectivity to some extent. But for Kitcher, this objectivity does not mean that scientists approach their subject without any prejudices as positivists claim; it means that a given theory may be analyzed and then its biases may be removed, as exemplified by the classical case of Darwinian evolution and sexism. Yet we cannot say that the changes in our theories are for the better, we can only say that science gives us truth only to the extent that this truth is the significant one, depending on the social and political contexts. From this, it follows that Kitcher rejects the ideal of truth-seeking since he argues that there is no absolute truth but significant truths in the sense that significance is a human-dependent value (depended on moral, social, and political values). This is the point that puts Kitcher somewhere between the "Scientific Faithful" who argue that science is value-free and knowledge and truth are intrinsically good and the "Debunkers" who claim that the value-freeness of science is a myth and data counting as evidence is not neutral but always tempted by our ideologies. So, from the standpoint of Kitcher's philosophy of science and communication, the notion of truth and the idea that science can deliver the truth, which has the scientific significance, are acceptable as he mentions: "I began by... justifying the idea that science sometimes delivers the truth, even about quite recondite entities and properties" (2003, p.199).

As a consequence of this, in the successive chapter, Kitcher argues that there are limits to free scientific inquiry since investigating certain issues, depending on the values and ideologies of societies -depending on the significance level for that society- can be limited. His main argument for the constraints on scientific inquiry is that because freedom of inquiry may undermine more fundamental freedom, it should be organized in a way that scientists pay attention to social and political consequences without blocking scientific development. As an example, we can assume that studies in the field of human behavioral genetics may turn out to be socially disadvantageous for women if evidence shows that their biological traits are inferior.

Once this point has been made, in the second part, he explains that his ideal of well-ordered science is required because we should organize scientific inquiry in a way that would serve our interests as members of a society,

since we would like to decide what is significantly important for us<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, it should be organized in such a way that the decision of society does not ban the scientific development by being too conservative which is in Kitcher's (2003) words "not appreciating the power of inquiry to liberate us from our prejudices". In other words, well-ordered science should provide a balance between free inquiry and social justice or social values. For instance, inquiries in the field of ethology or primatology would be against some social values of conservatism yet it may liberate us from a possible prejudice of ours: the uniqueness of man in nature. Therefore, in the second part of his book, starting with the tenth chapter, Kitcher aims to answer these two questions: How should we organize scientific inquiry so that it would fulfill the functions that we mentioned above? Which conditions are necessary to claim that the science of society is well-ordered?

The answer to the first question lies in his argument of deliberative or enlightened democracy. This is how Kitcher defines enlightened democracy: "Enlightened democracy would try to tutor the raw preferences of representatives of different perspectives within the society, would admit expression of the needs and perceived interests of all groups, and would thus conduct informed deliberations." (2003, s.200) In a more detailed version, this means that we begin with the individual preferences of ideal deliberators, each representing a distinct group of citizens. These ideal deliberators present their significant graphs and revise them considering the new information in graphs of other deliberators and collectively choose moral constraints of the inquiry. With this process of value exchange, personal values are transformed by tutoring so that the deliberators understand both the scientific issue and the interests of other deliberators. Another important point is that the preferences of parties outside that society should not be disregarded. If the outcome of each deliberator is the same, then there is consensus. If there is no consensus, a collective vote would settle the issue and the result of the inquiry is translated into application.

The second question is answered by figuring out to which degree the science of a given society matches this ideal that we explained as an answer to the first question: ideal deliberators setting the agenda, deciding on moral constraints, and applying the results of the inquiry. The more the scientific model of society approximates this ideal model, the more it is considered to be well-ordered by Kitcher.

1 For instance, when deciding on how much money should be given to researchers working on heart diseases or Covid 19.

## **Strengths and Weaknesses of Kitcher's Ideal**

Kitcher's position in the first part of the book where he identifies the conceptual and moral bounds of science is quite strong. As Longino says; "Kitcher is correct to point out that the world that we inhabit is a result of past human alterations carried out under the aegis of classificatory schemes responsive to the interests of those who used them." (2002, p.562) If we look at scientific inquiries in time, we realize that it is impossible to differentiate practical concerns and pure epistemic concerns. This enables Kitcher to say there is room for political, social, or moral considerations in evaluating scientific projects therefore his position justifies the second part of the book, in other words, it sets strong grounds for the necessity of an order for scientific inquiry.

Another strong point of Kitcher's argument is intrinsic coherency. What we mean by this term is that the problem disclosed about significant truths can be solved in theory by remaining faithful to the suggested method of enlightened democracy. In other words, as an ideal theory, Kitcher's account of well-ordered science is capable of preventing science to become an instrument for the worst goals that an elitist group may have or of saving it from the myopic concerns of a scientific community. We do not see any reason to deny that in theory, ideal deliberators who represent a distinct interest group and who take into consideration the interests of other societies, would be able to decide on the most significant "significant truths". As Bunge (2005, p.680) mentions, science should be under the control of democratic deliberations since it has the power to change the world. He gives the example of Nazi's and Stalinist's attacks on the scientific inquiries and resumes that "science should be subject to democratic control because it may harm."

Yet, Simon and Goodstein point out some internal flaws of this argumentation. Simon posits three arguments that he thinks are problematic:

First, Kitcher's morality is a consequentialist one: It seems that for Kitcher an act is moral (and the choice of which scientific inquiry to follow is right) if and only if it is beneficial for most people. But the definition of morality is problematic too. So, Simon (2006, p.203) concludes that "many who hold moral theories not compatible with Kitcher's account will immediately judge it as failing in its goal of bringing science under the guidance of morality".

But we think that Kitcher's account makes room for a society to determine its moral values. If the ideal deliberators would agree on a moral constraint that is not a consequentialist one, they are free to set their scientific inquiry according to it. What Kitcher insists on is that there is no escape from moral or political values when directing our inquiries.

Secondly, Simon also disagrees with the fact that there is no escape from morality in Kitcher's account of science. He says, "science seems to be possible without first settling, even implicitly and ad hoc, on any position in moral philosophy" (2006, p.203). He criticizes Kitcher because morality construes the essence of his scientific inquiry. Simon argues that the domain of science is free of moral concerns. But Kitcher's position between the Faithfuls and the Debunkers and with his argument of significant truth has turned out to be wrong, both historically and theoretically.

Thirdly, Simon (2003, p. 204) also writes that "if moral consensus is indeed impossible...it would turn out for Kitcher, science does not and cannot exist." Yet, in chapter 10, Kitcher has already answered this problem: he said that even after reciprocal tutoring and deliberating there appears to be a case of nonconsensus, and the final decision can be determined by vote. So, for Kitcher unanimous vote is not always the necessary condition in enlightened democracy yet this would not turn the democracy into the tyranny of the ignorant since it is postulated that deliberators are tutored and able to recognize the needs of each other.

Another criticism of the internal constitution of Kitcher's argument comes from Goodstein (2001). He claims that democracy is an irrelevant concept in choosing significant problems:

"An important problem...is one for which the solution turns out not only to solve the problem at hand but also to shed unexpected new light on the solutions to other problems as well. The ability to choose such problems is what we call scientific good taste. Some people have it and others don't. Democracy has nothing to do with it."

In this argument, by "people" Goodstein, as an internal elitist, means successful scientists. And we know that Kitcher (2003, p.116) is against the idea of internal elitism and he is for the enlightened democracy where "we should limit our discussions to societies that honor certain democratic ideals". Yet, if we look at the history of democracy, we are faced with comical examples like: "the democratic elected State of Illinois legislature (about a century ago) passed legislation to the effect that  $\pi$  is a rational number". (Brown,

2001, p.169) Or, in the United State polls show that “49 percent of the public believe in possession by the devil, 47 percent in the account of creation given in Genesis, and about a third that people are periodically abducted by aliens”. (Taverne, 2005, p. 251) In theory, defending enlightened democracy seems to be easy yet in practice, when we try to match his model to the actual world, his approach remains unsuccessful: As Aronson (2003) says, “Unfortunately, he remains almost entirely in the realm of the ideal, avoiding altogether the difficult questions about how democratization has proceeded in the past and how it should proceed in the future”. Kitcher (2003, p. 135) only argues that when initial preferences would turn into tutored preferences and people listen to explanations given by others, they may absorb some recognition and adds that “unless, or until, sociological research shows that the project of approximating tutored collective preferences is hopeless, we have no basis for concluding that some form of elitism must be superior”. But the current polls about people's beliefs and examples from the history of democracy show us that what may be decided as “significant” when setting the scientific agenda in democracies may even fall outside the frame of science. Kitcher should have spelled out more about how enlightened democracy would work in the practical world if we do not want it to turn back into a vulgar democracy and it seems that before Kitcher theorizes about the well-ordered science, he needs to argue for a way for the civilization to be uplifted.

Indeed, the question of uplifting civilization gives way to the problem of a well-ordered society: the past shows us that enlightened democracy is not possible without a civilized or well-ordered society. So, to which extent Kitcher's ideal model can account for the problem of a well-ordered society, and are his suggestions applicable in practice? From these questions, it follows that Kitcher's model does not argue about two important points.

### ***First point: How to Match Theory and Reality?***

Kitcher (2003, p. 176) only writes that his “normative ideal for inquiry might be viewed as a constructive contribution to a broader political critique”. But we think that it should be vice versa, first one should set the political constraints in actuality and then base his ideal of scientific inquiry according to these constraints. Otherwise, problems without a definitive solution will always appear. An instance of these kinds of problems is given in Bird's (2003, p.748) review of *Science, Truth, and Democracy*:

If people are willing to exaggerate the import of any evidence to support their prejudices, a well-ordered science might only avoid that consequence

by banning the relevant research. But as Kitcher points out, that would be a cure at least as bad as a problem, since the prejudiced would be convinced that the ban exists to hide a politically uncomfortable truth. The problem is not simply with the well-ordering of science but with the well-ordering of society.

Is a society well-ordered if its members need to veil politically uncomfortable truths? We do not think so. Galileo's censure by the ruling authorities can be interpreted as an example of this concern. One may argue that even though in Galileo's time the society would be ruled by democracy, people under the influence of the Church and their religious values, would have voted for banning Galileo's theory. This is what Jasanoff (2004) means when she says that "though Kitcher's significance graphs do make room for human agency, Kitcher's account suffers from inattention to the role of power". What she means may be similar to Foucault's argument that modern society's control systems are knowledge and power through which institutions watch over and organize their citizens. Kitcher is aware that there is no escape from ideologies even in making some scientific decisions yet he should have taken into serious consideration the role of the institutions in the democratic process since a well-ordered science would not work properly in a bad-ordered society since its ground (which is unconsciously ruled by institutional power) would not be well-formed. Though he is aware of this fact, Kitcher's (2003, p. 126) argument is only putting forth the lack of time and world:

"Had we but world enough and time, we could follow a direct approach to designing an ideally well-ordered science. We would review all possible institutions, and all possible contexts over which they might operate, formulate an optimization problem, and solve it. This is an impossible dream. We have no realistic prospects of canvassing social institutions and reviewing their entire range of effects across all the situations in which they might be employed... But we can still scrutinize our practice from the perspective supplied by the standard."

This account of Kitcher reminds us of the standpoint of the radical Science for the People group who does not wait for a democratic society or a well-ordered society to practice a well-ordered science but they claim that "science activism is going to contribute to a better, more democratic society later" (Brown, 2001) as long as they inform people about scientific facts and thus, improve their living standards. Yet, this approach sounds good only in theory as much as Kitcher's.



### ***What Account of Current Problems (That Would Affect Scientific Knowledge) of The Actual Societies Can Be Given?***

In his account, Kitcher seems to forget some problems caused by neoliberalism and the changing ethos of science in this period of Big Science:

First, consider the stage that capitalism reached today. Knowledge is now considered to be one of the things that became a commodity thus scientific knowledge in the neoliberal world is turned into a business and gave birth to the problem that Irzik (2007) calls "commercialization of science as a whole"<sup>2</sup>. Kitcher does not take into consideration the commercialization of scientific knowledge and Longino (2002, p.567) criticizes this lack of *Science, Democracy, and Truth*: "Now that more and more research, even in universities, is funded by the private sector, it is not clear... on what grounds privatized research could be brought under the umbrella of well-orderedness". Kitcher's account is inadequate in reformulating an institutional framework that would cover the privatization of scientific sectors or the globalization of economics. This problem also seems a subset of the problem of a well-ordered society: Is a society well-ordered if the shares of the private sector in social and economic areas are greater than the ones of the government? If it is not so, Kitcher (2002, p. 570) should not settle for just saying that well-ordered science is an ideal therefore "privatization of research looks like a trend that we should want to resist strenuously". He has to argue about the necessity of governmental funding in well-ordered science or explain to us how a well-ordered society should resist privatization. Yet, if he would respond to this problem by arguing that ideal deliberators who represent different segments of the society would address it then what is important in his model is only procedural. If ideal deliberators vote for the privatization of academic science or the patenting of natural forms, then according to Kitcher's model we have the right to say that science is well-ordered. Therefore, we have the right to say that Kitcher's model does not account for the content of the decision-making process.

Moreover, the social function of science affects its epistemic function: Scientific inquiries as they are already conducted by a huge number of scientists, in large laboratories with big foundations of multinational companies together with teams of workers and before the eyes of media, have turned into the Big Science. In other words, the commodification of science is affecting the very structure of science. Taverne (2005, p.241) utters some results of the changing social function of science like this:

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2 Starting with 1980s, Neoliberal turn and commercialization of academic science coincide temporarily.

“I referred to the widely held belief that capitalism corrupts science and that research results produced by scientists who work for multinational companies should be disregarded, because the pursuit of profit cannot be reconciled with the public interest, and such results are bound to be self-serving. As I have mentioned, there are many drawbacks to the growing dependence on corporate finance for scientific research and many examples of malpractices. Some scientists have been corrupted. Those who continue to contend on behalf of their corporate masters in tobacco companies that there is no link between smoking and cancer are an obvious example.”

As we can deduce from the description of “corrupted scientists”, the ethos of science has changed, too.<sup>3</sup> When the goals, practices, and social organization of science change, how Mertonian norms would maintain their values? What Kitcher’s model can do to save the scientific ethos? For instance, let’s look at the disinterestedness norm. In Kitcher’s account, there is no guarantee for choosing public interest over commercial interest as long as ideologies affect the result of the significant graph. Power relations may influence ideal deliberators as they influence “scientists pursuing knowledge in certain fields where there are commercial interests” (Krimsky, 2003, p.78). Kitcher is too optimistic in believing that democracy will take care of these issues. He should have answered, “what sort of policies is needed to decommercialize science without at the same time hindering its development” (Irzık, 2007, p.151) and how we can restore the ethos of science.

### **How to Improve Kitcher’s Model?**

The answer to the above question lies in the two points that have been criticized: Firstly, instead of creating a top-down approach and evaluating the well-orderedness of science in society by referring to its level of approximation to the ideal, we can look for the problems concerning democracy and hence concerning the well-orderedness of society and try to approach them with possible solutions. And secondly, we should take into consideration the decommercialization and the ethos of science that need to be restored. Consequently, we can create a model which is informed by current problems of the society according to which the well-ordered science will be institutionalized. Thereby, it would be possible to match the reality and our model by following the points that are matchable and by trying to improve the ones which are not coherent with the model. In short, theory and practice should be given together in this model.

3 The concept of ethos of science can be summed up by addressing to Mertonian norms as universalism, disinterestedness communalism, and organized skepticism. For further information see Krimsky (2003) p.75-7.

Concerning the problems of democracy and the well-orderedness of society, we offered some examples from Goodstein's and Aronson's critics of Kitcher about the problems in the history of democracy. We propose that since trying to increase public knowledge by tutored preferences during the process of the vote seems to be too naïve, we can try for an uplifting of civilization by teaching more science studies courses in schools and making the public read more about issues concerning science, informing them about social relations and power relations in science through a well-ordered media. For this uplifting, one should offer policy suggestions based on the analysis of today's reality in politics and culture. The above example of ours may be considered one of them. There is another suggestion of Collins and Pinch mentioned in Brown's (2001, p.178) article:

“Collins and Pinch want the public to understand how science works as an institution. We the public cannot make better guesses than the experts, but we can make informed decisions about which experts to believe...They are in no position to rethink the underlying theories, but they can note that, for example, one expert witness is employed by a company with an interest in the outcome; perhaps the other is paid, an itinerant expert witness who makes a living testifying in various lawsuits. This kind of information, they say, would be relevant in deciding whom to believe.”

This is another way to put public input about scientific issues in democracies. In short, one of the ways to improve Kitcher's account is to turn it into a bottom-down approach and try to make some empirical analyses and suggestions concerning social policies.

If we turn to the other problem, restoring decommercialization and the ethos of science, we can say that because neoliberal democracies are based on a free-market economy as the best means of allocating resources, they bring us to profit relationships in social policies, hence it seems very hard to restore the above values in this sort of democracies. Krimsky's (2003, p.7) analysis of this current situation can enlighten us about this problem:

“Public policies and legal decisions have created new incentives for universities, their faculty, and publicly supported nonprofit research institutes to commercialize scientific and medical research and develop partnerships with for-profit companies. The new academic industry and non-profit-for-profit liaisons have led to changes in the ethical norms of scientific and medical researchers. The consequences are that the secrecy has replaced openness, privatization of knowledge has replaced communitarian values;

and commodification of knowledge has replaced the idea that university-generated knowledge is a free good, a part of the social commons.”

Since Kitcher does not inform us about the economic policies of his ideal model and disregards such current conditions of democracies and academic science, we may conclude that his suggestion of increasing public input in the decision-making process would not be sufficient to save the scientific knowledge from turning into a commodity and to recover the ethos of science: If the significant ideology is for profit-making and against the values concerning the ethos of science, then Kitcher’s model would not account for these problems. As we mentioned before, it would be possible to save his model at the procedural and theoretical levels, but his model would not account for the content of the scientific agenda.

David Harvey’s (2006, p. 150) analysis of the current state of neoliberal democracies’ power as an ideological assault upon media and educational institutions may be helpful to see this point: “Independent think-tanks financed by wealthy individuals and corporate donors proliferated (the Heritage Foundation taking the lead) to prepare a discursive onslaught to persuade the public of the common sense of neoliberal propositions”. Therefore, the commodification of science and accepting values that are against the ethos of science may be appreciated by ideal deliberators since their ideology, today, is shaped unconsciously by neoliberal propositions. If this would be reflected on the significant graph that sets the scientific agenda, the result would destroy the ethos of science and would not prevent scientific knowledge to turn into a commodity.

Still, one can argue that Kitcher’s account can be improved if one accepts the premise of uplifting civilization. The ideal deliberators by the agency of policies regulating media and educational institutions can be educated in such a way that they would not be assaulted by neoliberal ideologies when choosing their most significant scientific graph. Or as Krinsky (2003) suggests we may put some constraints on the democratic decisions by some regulating policies: “Certain institutions must be protected by tradition, law, or regulation from taking on conflicting roles....Physicians should not be earning income every time a person swallows a pill or participates in a clinical trial. Members of Congress and judges should not be sitting on the boards of corporations. University scientists should not be corporate CEOs or handmaidens to America’s for-profit companies.”

In conclusion, we propose that Kitcher’s model could be improved by a bottom-to-top approach which would cover some regulations for the uplift-

ting of civilizations and some policies to save the democracies and academic science to be directed by neoliberal ideologies and by purely economic ideals.

## **Conclusion**

We have tried to evaluate Kitcher's argument separately: first by referring to its internal coherency as a theory that we found quite valid and sound and secondly by referring to its practical applicability as a method that we found fruitless. We have argued that Kitcher is silent about the changing function of science together with social and economic changes after the 1980s when money and profit became the new aim of science. Since this new picture is affecting research agendas in his model, Kitcher needs to give an account of it. We propose that by using our analysis of the current state of things, we can develop social policies and regulations. Thus, the result would not just be a description of an ideal model but a realistic suggestion of applicable policies.

## Öz

### Global Pandemi Döneminde Philip Kitcher'in Bilim Politikalarını Yeniden Düşünmek

İngiliz felsefeci Philip Kitcher'in *Science, Truth and Democracy* (Bilim, Gerçek ve Demokrasi) kitabının üzerinden yirmi yıl geçmiş dahi olsa bugün, bilim hayatımıza yön vermeye devam ettiği sürece, güncelliğini koruduğu görülmektedir. Bilimin toplum içerisindeki rolü ve etrafında şekillenen sosyal politikalarla ilgili tartışmalar özellikle global pandemi dönemiyle hayatlarımızın merkezi durumundadır. Bu çalışma Kitcher'in "ideal düzenlenmiş bilim" kavramını, yazarın ilgili argümanının tutarlılığı ve yönetsel olarak uygulanabilirliği açısından tartışmayı amaçlamaktadır. Sosyal politikalara ve yönetmeliklere, sadece mevcut durumlar üzerinden yapılan bir analiz zemininde karar verilmesi gerektiğini öne süren bu okuma, aynı zamanda Kitcher'in ideal modelinin aksine bilim insanları, siyasetçiler ve toplum arasındaki diyalogu temel alan gerçekçi ve uygulanabilir bir yöntem önermektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Bilim Gündemi, Karar Verme Politikaları, Bilimin Ticarileşmesi, Bilimsel İletişim, Bilim Felsefesi

## Abstract

### Rethinking Philip Kitcher's Science Policy In Times of a Global Pandemic

The relationship between policies of science and democratic debates is and probably always will be a current topic as long as science keeps shaping our lives. The renowned British philosopher Philip Kitcher's *Science, Truth and Democracy* is still relevant today, some twenty years after its first publication, as the heated debates concerning the role of science and its social consequences rage on. This paper evaluates Kitcher's main argument about an idealistic well-ordered science as policy by referring to its internal coherency and its practical applicability as a method. After having discussed his arguments on significant truth and his theory of well-ordered science, we will propose that it is only by using our analysis of the current state of things, we can develop social policies and regulations. Thus, the result would not just be a description of an ideal model, but a realistic suggestion of applicable policies based on communication between scientists, policymakers, and the public.

**Keywords:** Scientific Agenda, Decision-Making Policies, Commercialization of Science, Scientific Communication, Philosophy of Science

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