Security in Now the Sturdy Child of Terror: Research after September 11

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Two and a half years after 9/11, the tension between national security and both civil and human rights continues to be a freighted issue for all sectors of U.S. society. Scholarly communities are far from exempt. In fact, they are one of the places this tension is being displayed most dramatically.

A set of questions about research rarely examined seriously in the recent past, have now become central: How to decide which research topics will be taken up, and with which voice scholarly communities will speak in public? Who ought to make these decisions? How ought they be made? And with what goals?

Though at first blush, these may have been taken as simple strategic questions, it has become clear as public discussion has evolved, that these are not best understood in that way. Rather, what are at issue for scholarly communities, as for U.S. society as a whole, are questions about our deepest moral commitments.

To ask how scholarly communities should set their questions, or what assumptions they ought make, or what descriptions they should use, is already to be confronted with puzzles about how to resolve or at least acknowledge, the many competing needs, desires, moral injunctions, not only within U.S. society, but in the complex global society in which the U.S. plays so pivotal a role.

The question for scholarly communities is, at its most stark, how to continue their work, in a moral way, in the face of crisis?

Philip Kitcher, in his recent Science, Truth and Democracy, takes on this question. Acknowledging the central role that accepted knowledge claims play in the welfare of the society that accepts those claims, he argues for democratic societal control of scientific research. He then develops, within the well established tradition of aggregating preferences through rational deliberation, a model of ideal decision-making for both the conduct of scientific research and the dissemination of its results.

In his model, ideal deliberators make decisions about the conduct and dissemination of a scholarly community's research, each deliberator representing some sub-set of the interests of the larger society in which the scholarly community is embedded. These deliberators then engage in an iterative process of mutual education of one another, and rational reflection and deliberation. At the end of this process, morally responsible decisions about the scholarly community's research emerge.

This is Kitcher's vision of 'well-ordered science'. Whatever institutions a particular society in fact uses, Kitcher argues, the practices that grow out of those institutions ought to result in decisions that approximate the decisions his ideal deliberators would reach. The ideal deliberators' decisions set the moral goal that real societies ought to approximate.

In what follows, I argue that his model fails.

My argument is this:
Though models can do various kinds of work, what is needed here, and what Kitcher claims to be providing, is an account that shows what decisions about the conduct and dissemination of research ought to be like in order to be moral decisions.

A model based simply on the concept of interest, especially as Kitcher's model employs that concept, cannot provide such an account. It fails in at least two ways. First, the understanding of the concept of interest it employs is too narrow to pick up those aspects of moral decision-making that can legitimately be picked up by the concept. Second, there are aspects crucial to moral decision-making that cannot be picked up by that concept alone, no matter how well it is used. Kitcher's account fails to acknowledge these.

My paper proceeds through the following steps to make that argument:

Section One summarizes Kitcher's model of well-ordered science. I show how the model uses rational deliberation and the concept of interest to set goals for the decision-making of any scholarly community.

Section Two chronicles the failures of the model. I argue that it fails on two counts. First, although there are crucial aspects of moral decision-making that can be captured by the concept of interest, to assume that simple articulation of preferences wholly and unproblematically represents that concept, as Kitcher does, side-steps what are in fact crucial moral issues. Second, and perhaps more important, there are some aspects of our moral lives that can not be captured by the concept of interest, no matter how well the complexity of that concept is presented. I use an example from the work of Cora Diamond to display this category. In an account designed to point to moral action, I conclude, to fail in these two ways, is necessarily to fail in providing the model of moral decision-making that Kitcher claims to have provided.

Section Three displays the failure of the model in providing a template for decisions about research in the scholarly communities that make up the sub-field of international relations. I show how an account such as his, based only on an ontology of individuals and groups to which interest attaches singly and unproblematically, cannot capture some of the major conflicts that provide impediments for moral action both in this community and the society which, according to Kitcher, must decide about its research. Prominent among these is the conflict between particularist civic duties and universal scholarly moral obligations. The model cannot then fill the function of an action-guiding account in displaying ways to go on in attempting at least to understand and perhaps resolve such conflicts.

Section Four concludes with a reprise and an indication of the work to be done in coming to see which conceptual resources might be more useful in both allowing crucial conflicts to surface, and in addressing them as they do.

Section 1: The Vision of Moral Decision-making in Kitcher's 'well-ordered science'

After spending the first six chapters providing a pellucid account of how interests and values are necessarily implicated in the production of knowledge, Kitcher argues that since that interest-implicated knowledge
then enters the society in which the scholarly community is embedded, and can have profound effects, the decision about which research to conduct and under which description it ought enter public discourse, must not be just a technical or professional decision, but must instead be morally responsive to the lives of the individuals it may effect. In his words, "to assess the proper functioning of scientific inquiry we must consider if collective research is organized in a way to promote our collective values." (Kitcher, 2001, p. 111)

How to do that? First of all, take the decisions out of the hands of the research community itself and place it in the hands of the society that funds and is affected by that research. Kitcher argues convincingly for this move. For our purposes here, let us give him that large step. For what I am interested in looking at here is what follows. And that is his claim that a moral decision will emerge from rational deliberation among people of good will, given a starting point of articulated preferences ostensibly representing the society's many groups.

The account he offers is this: He constructs a fable about ideal deliberators evolving tutored preferences. He then concludes that he is not suggesting that scholarly communities or their societies mimic the procedures of the fable. Instead, the hope, and the challenge, is to construct societal institutions that generate the results that the supposedly ideal deliberators of the fable achieve.

So, he is not addressing the sociological question of how to construct institutions that will in fact help achieve morally responsive scholarly decisions about the doing and dissemination of research. Rather, however inquiry proceeds in a given society, whatever institutions guide that society's practices, "...we want it to match the outcomes those complex procedures would achieve." (Kitcher, 2001, p.123)

Those complex procedures, then, in brief:

We begin with a set of individuals, the deliberators, each representing a different societal group's preferences about the desirability of different lines of research. But these deliberators may well have only a partial understanding of the implications and significance of the different lines of inquiry the scholarly community might undertake. Most likely, they will not have understood the implications of each of the community's possible research agendas on groups other than the one whose interests they represent. So, each deliberator must transmit to the others, information about its own group's interests and how they will be affected by the conduct and/or public dissemination of alternative lines of research the scientific community is proposing.

On the basis of this new information, each can then revise her initial preferences. What before looked like it might best meet one of the goals a deliberator had for the constituency she represents, might now be surpassed by another research project. Or goals themselves might change.

At this point, we have a set of new and tutored preferences.

There is now another round of discussion in which each explains her reasons for her (perhaps now changed) preferences and listens to the others' presentations. Kitcher assumes each is moved by respect for the preferences of others and aims to arrive at a consensus list in which no one is under-represented. He further assumes that as a function of this exchange, preferences are again modified, again to absorb recognition of the needs of others.
Eventually, after some number of iterations of this procedure, we get a communally constituted list that represents the deliberators' priorities concerning the outcomes relevant to the society as a whole, outcomes to which the scholarly community's inquiry might prove relevant. This will function as a guide to the conduct and dissemination of the community's research.

If no consensus is reached, the issue is put to a vote.

That's the fable. The society, through its deliberators, decides both what the scholarly community's research agenda will be, and how it will be publicly disseminated. And it does so as a function of rational deliberation among interest-representing deliberators of good will. There will be, in any society in which science is perfectly well ordered, "...institutions governing the practice of inquiry within the society that invariably lead to investigations that coincide... with the judgements of ideal deliberators, representatives of the distribution of viewpoints in the society."

Of course, such perfectly well-ordered science is too much to hope for, for any actual society. But societies can hold such well-ordered science as an ideal and can try for 'a feasible approximation' (Kitcher, 2001, pps. 122-123)

Now we must ask about this fable offered as an ideal, one which is action-guiding account: what should we worry about in constructing practices or institutions whose results will mirror the results of the fable's rational, respectful representatives, progressively acquiring more tutored preferences as they proceed in their deliberations? What does the fable not allow us to see? In what ways does it not foster the just deliberation and moral development an action-guiding account must have as its goal?

Section 2: How interest fails

The concept of interest functions well in accounts offering description and explanation. But, as Kitcher uses it, it fails in displaying, much less giving guidance for, our moral lives.

In what follows, I want to display two problems with Kitcher's use of interest:

First, the way he employs the concept of interest is too narrow to pick up those aspects of moral decision-making that could legitimately be picked up by the concept.

Second, there are aspects crucial to moral decision-making that cannot be picked up by that concept alone, no matter how well it is used. Kitcher's account fails to acknowledge these.

1. Interests and Preferences:

Let me begin with the first problem. Simply put, preferences are not interests. Even Kitcher's 'tutored' preferences.

In describing some of the variation among different groups in a society, we might quite legitimately talk about their different preferences, the different ways they articulate what they take to be their interests.
But in an account that claims not to be doing sociology, not to just be picking up self-descriptions, but rather to be finding a description of that variation perspicuous enough to display the society's moral life, taking preference as adequate representation of interest, is a howler.

There are many paths that lead to this conclusion. Let me take one suggested by Naomi Scheman in her article "Non-Negotiable Demands".vi

What Kitcher seems to want to do with his account is give each group, and perhaps each individual, the strong position of having unique access to its own interests. Members of any group, and they alone, directly and infallibly know their own interests. Hence the notion of tutored preferences. It is only if the deliberator representing another group shares her privileged knowledge of that group's interest, that another deliberator, representing another group, can come to know, and with good will, can change, her own preferences to fairly accommodate the first group's needs.

This seems on the surface, an admirable way of solving many problems, especially those that individuals and groups with less power face, as others with socially sanctioned expertise are taken, though often wrongly, to know how best to describe their experience and provide what is in their interest. The solution seems obvious: let each group speak for itself. Let each group represent the interest that it and it alone knows best. The preference it articulates will represent the interest that it and it alone has privileged access to.

Why shouldn't we argue, as Kitcher does, for practices that assume such privileged access?

Because, if our quest is for moral solutions to questions such as which research should be undertaken, then what we are looking for is a solution that at least displays, but certainly does not mask, the real conflicts that exist among different groups. An account that offers moral guidance can do no less. And that complicated set of conflicts is often masked by the stories told in any given society, masked in such a way that individuals themselves cannot grasp what is in their interest. The notion of privileged access to one's own interests, where there are no ways to make those interests transparent even to oneself, begins to be less coherent.

What is needed, Scheman argues, are two things. First, we need 'the discursive resources of our cultural surroundings', stories, that is, that organize each of our experiences in such a way that we come to be coherent beings to ourselves as well as others. And second, we need "...more focused uptake from those with whom we interact - we need acknowledgement and, beyond that, critical engagement with our ongoing projects of self-creation. Simply being left alone, as the ultimate authorities on ourselves, will too often leave us without the resources to figure out what it is that we are supposed to know."vii

In short, an account that promises to provide guidance to a society about how to make moral decisions about the work of its research communities, cannot merely offer an un-rippled surface account where privileged access to one's own needs is taken as given. It must instead acknowledge the complexity of the relation between articulated preferences and interests, of the problems with the notion of privileged access. What is needed is the courage both to acknowledge how complex the project is, and to avoid providing what in the end is simply "... a distraction from the changes in our form of life that would address the real needs that (the notion of) privileged access appeals to."viii
2. Beyond Interest:

But even were it possible to solve this first problem and construct an acceptable mapping of preference on to interest, there remains a second challenge for Kitcher's model.

The problem is this: there is an aspect of any society's life, a category of injunctions that are crucial to its moral decisions, but are not capture-able by an account that talks simply about interests attaching singly to individuals or groups.

This category may well be instantiated differently in different societies. So a general account such as Kitcher's would not be expected to provide specific descriptions. But, as an account that purports to explore and then provide guidance concerning moral decisions, what it must do is make explicit that this category of injunctions exists, and give some indication that searching for, reflecting on, and debating about, candidates for that category is a crucial part of any society's decisions if those are to be morally responsible.

We simply lose something crucial when we ignore this category or try and force its contents wholly into the discourse of interest. We ask the term, interest, to do more work than it can.

As Kitcher's account does not acknowledge, much less incorporate this category, the result is an account that fails to reach its goal of providing guidance for moral decision making.

Let me argue for this point through example.

And let me start by laying out one particularly clear example of this category crucial to moral decision-making that both does and ought continue to comprise any society's moral life, but is not capture-able wholly in the discourse of interests attaching singly to individuals or groups.

The example comes from Cora Diamond's "Eating Meat and Eating People". The paper is a response to a set of arguments standardly used to defend the rights of animals. Though Diamond makes it clear that she is deeply committed to understanding non-human animals and treating them well (she identifies herself as a vegetarian), she thinks that standard arguments about animal rights fail. And their failure is counterproductive to the goal of just treatment of non-human animals.

The failure she sees is this. 'Speciesism' arguments such as Peter Singer's and Tom Regan's depend on the assumption that animals have interests and rights, and that many of our practices in relation to animals fly in the face of those rights.

"The fundamental principle (assumed by speciesists)...is: we must give equal consideration to the interests of any being which is capable of having interests; and the capacity to have interests is essentially dependent only on the capacity for suffering and enjoyment. This we evidently share with animals." (Diamond, 1991, p.320)

It is on the basis of this sort of claim that Singer argues we must give up killing animals for food.
Though she agrees with the injunction, Diamond finds this supporting argument, because it is cast in terms only of interests and rights, importantly confused. It makes it hard to see "...what is important either in our relationship with other human beings or in our relationship with animals." (Diamond, 1991, p. 321)

Think about the fact that we do not eat our dead. Or our amputated limbs. Except in extreme cases, and then with great reluctance. Could we capture this deeply central moral prohibition in a discussion of interests alone? Or is there something about our central but unstated assumption that a person is not something to eat that transcends our understanding of interests?

Diamond argues that there is. Her arguments defy easy summary, but a first approximation is this. There is a great deal that constitutes the complex web of our moral lives and creates the moral world we share with one another, but which cannot be captured by appeal only to the needs, interests and capacities of the objects of our actions. We give people names, for instance. And when the character Gradgrind refuses to abide by that practice, and instead calls a child 'Girl number twenty', he is not merely doing something 'morally wrong'. His action goes deeper than that. He is transgressing the boundaries of our shared moral world. 

"(He) lives in a world, or would like to, in which it makes no difference whether she has a name, a number being more efficient, and in which a human being is not something to be named, not numbered." (Diamond, 1991, p. 323)

Let me offer a rather long quote that goes well to the heart of what Diamond wants us to see:

"...it is not (merely) morally wrong to eat our pets; people who ate their pets would not have pets in the same sense of that term....A pet is not something to eat; it is given a name; it is let into our houses and may be spoken to in ways we do not normally speak to cows or squirrels. That is to say, it is given some part of the character of a person....Treating pets in these ways is not at all a matter of recognizing some interest which pets have in being so treated. There is not a class of beings, pets, whose nature, whose capacities, are such that we owe it to them to treat them in these ways. Similarly, it is not out of respect for the interests of beings of the class to which we belong that we give names to each other, or that we treat human sexuality or birth or death as we do, marking them - in their various ways - as significant or serious. And again, it is not respect for our interests which is involved in our not eating each other. These are all things which go to determine what sort of concept 'human being' is. Similarly with having duties to human beings. This is not a consequence of what human beings are, it is not justified by what human beings are: it is itself one of the things which go to build our notion of human beings...

The ways in which we mark what human life is belong to the source of human life, and no appeal to the prevention of suffering which is blind to this can in the end be anything but self destructive" (Diamond, 1991, p. 324)

The injunction in this culture against eating the dead is a clear example of an spect of social life which is crucial to moral decisions but not capture-able by an account that talks simply about interests attaching singly to individuals or groups.

To acknowledge the existence of that category is to realize that there are at least some decisions which, in order to reflect a society's values, must make essential reference to more than individual interests.
There is no reason, then, to assume that putting all capture-able interests into a hopper, and then relying on even the best of reason and good will to do the sorting, will result in decisions that will promote that society's values. There may be crucial reasons to privilege some interests over others. There may well be competing values. There may be values, such as not eating the dead, that are crucial but not capture-able in terms of interests. Enjoining a society to make sure its decisions "...match the outcomes those complex procedures [the fable's deliberations] would achieve" may insure that it flies in the face of, rather than promotes, its most central values, or that it masks, rather than acknowledges critical conflicts.

In the following section, I want to display these troubles with an example more clearly relevant, a case of moral decision-making in the international relations scholarly community.

Section Three: the International Relations Scholarly Community:

We have traveled far away from decisions about the conduct and dissemination of research. I want to return to those decisions now and look at how Kitcher's account might be instructive, or fail to be, in the actual decisions about research after 9/11. In what follows, I look at decisions about international relations research that various U. S. scholarly communities conduct. Which of these groups' research programs ought be encouraged, funded, published? Which publicly disseminated? How to decide?

A critical assumption we are making, along with Kitcher, remember, is that, simply put, ideas matter. That is, while it is hubris to think that academic research wholly creates public or government opinion, still, it seems obvious that public dissemination of even the most esoteric research does enter into the complex process that creates both public opinion and policy. Which candidate knowledge claims this set of scholarly communities produces and publishes and as a community, endorses, matters.

Kitcher's suggestion, remember, was that since any research community necessarily produces interest-implicated knowledge and since that knowledge then enters the society in which the scholarly community is embedded, and can have profound effects, the decision about which research to conduct and under which description it ought enter public discourse, must be placed in the hands of the society that funds and is affected by that research.

And the resulting decision the society takes will be a moral one provided it approximates the decision that would be arrived at by the deliberators of Kitcher's fable.

I have argued that there are problems with Kitcher's assumption that the result of rational deliberation should set the goal any society's decisions should approximate.

In what follows, I want to show how those problems are displayed in trying to decide about research in the international relations scholarly communities.

Consider the complex set of research programs conducted by the set of political scientists, sociologists, historians and anthropologists whose work explores the economic and political relations that constitute the background structures for and relations among, actors in the global system.
The questions that get foregrounded and the answers that are publicly disseminated, must differentially effect different groups, both within and outside the U.S.. And if we are thorough in our thinking about short and long term benefits and costs, the mapping is extremely complex.

In the atmosphere immediately after 9/11, the pressure to produce and disseminate the sort of knowledge that seems most obviously to fill the 'national interest' unreflectively considered, was heightened.

There was, that is, tremendous pressure, both emotional and political, to have professional responses, like our personal responses, both contribute to the nation's solidarity and attend to its anxieties. As was all too apparent in the months just after 9/11, the almost universal public response was to see the perpetrators of the twin towers explosions, and 'their people', not only as enemies, but as 'evil'. Research that reinforced that vision was overwhelmingly tempting. Attempts to raise explanatory questions were seen by much of the country as attempts to justify the act rather than simply understand it, and were condemned. The temptation, then, to suppress or at least not make public, that sort of research, was strong.

Suppose, then, a group of U.S. citizens meets, in that atmosphere, or the slightly ameliorated one that exists at present, to decide which programs ought be funded, which results published, which discussions publicly disseminated.

The first and most obvious challenge is this. The set of individuals effected by the research reaches beyond the society in which the research is funded. That is, the research this community takes up, funds and disseminates, can serve goals that range from unquestioned justification of current U.S. foreign policy to projects whose data and conclusions provide the basis for clear arguments against current policy. Research that assumes the self-regard and the centrality of U. S. national interest, can function to justify policy and further solidify an atmosphere in which security policies, both domestic and international, strongly and negatively impact groups outside U. S. borders. Those same groups might be far differently impacted by research that reinforced a commitment to understand and then ameliorate economic oppression and cultural insensitivity.

How to decide? Especially given that effected groups, and thus, groups to be represented, transcend the borders of the society funding and disseminating the scholarly community's work?

Kitcher has a solution: have the interests of groups beyond the funding society's borders represented by members of the funding society. The problems in the specific way Kitcher sets up this solution are legion, but I leave them for another time. For now, what is crucial to the line of discussion I want to pursue is that even if these extra-societal interests are honestly considered, still, intractable problems will arise.

That is, imagine a group of Kitcherian ideal deliberators, a complete set, all interests somehow represented, my first set of objections notwithstanding. What would that deliberation look like? What guidance does Kitcher's account give? What perspicuous description does it offer? How is it that all these interests will be somehow aggregated and a moral decision reached?

As I have been suggesting, interest alone will not do it. And in fact, if all our ostensibly action-guiding account can do is talk about interests and rational deliberation, it seems to me it turns useless just at points where we need guidance most. Simple rational deliberation, without at least acknowledgement of the web
of moral injunctions that constitute the background against which it takes place, does not solve the challenge of moral complexity. It masks it.

In this case, for instance, there are two relevant but competing injunctions that currently are part of what constitute as moral agents. One is the particularist set of obligations we all, scholars included, incur as citizens. This includes a duty, heightened at times of threat and crisis, for the citizen-scholar to produce knowledge useful for, or at least not detrimental to, policies that ostensibly protect her fellow citizens. But there is also the universal responsibility scholars incur, a responsibility to attempt to set their questions, make assumptions and use methods that are as divorced from ideological constraint as possible. In the case of international relations scholars, this often means exploring the role of their political and economically hegemonic state in ways that may well show the moral flaws in that policy. Not to do so is to risk becoming ideologues, not scholars.

Could Kitcherian deliberators capture these deeply central moral injunctions and the conflicts between them in a discussion of interests alone? Isn't there something that goes beyond respect for our interests which is involved in these two often competing injunctions?

Isn't there something about these central but often unstated assumption that transcends our understanding of interests, but that must be explicitly stated if decisions based on this account are to be counted as moral?

It seems to me that it may well be the patchwork of moral injunctions and assumptions, just those that cannot be captured in terms of interest alone, that must be mobilized and used if a decision is to truly reflect and be a part of the moral life of the society.

Because Kitcher's account has armed its deliberators with so meager a set of tools, it ends up putting to a vote what should be put to deep reflection, and thus masks the complex nature and depth of the real conflict. His account simply does not have the resources to handle the cases it should.

Section 4: Reprise:

What to do? Kitcher is open about describing his work as both a first step to be improved upon by others, and as an only 'good enough' account. These claims might be understood as requests to continue development of similar accounts. Perhaps our understanding of interests needs to be refined. Or maybe there need to be more or more complex steps in the rational deliberation of representatives of those interests.

I obviously want to suggest that the project go in quite a different direction. Even if we accept Kitcher's claims that science produces significant truth, not just truth simplicitur; and even if, impressed by his careful analyses of competing arguments, we come to accept science as a public good, decisions about which belong to the society in which scientific communities work and are funded; still, the prescriptive last step is not tentative. It is a misstep. Providing moral guidance, even if in the modest way Kitcher does, by simply setting criteria for decisions particular societies may reach in many different ways, must at least point to, and certainly not mask, the complex set of values that constitute the moral life of any society.
The exact quote, from a speech given by Winston Churchill in response to the advent of nuclear weapons: "It may be that we shall, by a process of sublime irony, have reached a stage in this story where safety will be the sturdy child of terror, and survival the twin brother of annihilation."

I want to thank Garry Pech for his attentive listening as I worked through the arguments in this paper, and for the model of careful scholarship and deep reflection that his work has provided for all of us, his students and colleagues.


See for instance the articles in the Supplement to the AAAS Science and Technology Policy yearbook 2003. Of special interest is Eugene Skolnikoff's "Research Universities and National Security: Can Traditional Values survive?" Skolnikoff discusses in some detail, the International Traffic in Arms Regulation (ITAR) and the limits it places on research. Of interest also is HR 3077, the International Studies in Higher Education Act. Passed by the U.S. House of Representatives in October 2003, this bill, if passed, would provide for the establishment of a board to oversee how Title VI funds are being dispensed. This board would not be comprised of members of research communities. Nor would it be chosen by researchers. Rather, the education secretary would appoint three of the members, two of whom would be recommended by federal agencies with 'national security responsibilities'. The majority and minority leaders of the US Senate would recommend two members; and the House majority and minority leaders would recommend the remaining two. To see how the tension is played out among scholarly communities doing work in international relations and comparative politics, see Martin Kramer's Ivory Towers On Sand and the reviews that followed, e.g. by Lawrence Davidson; Thomas Idinopulos; Gregory Gause III; Nathan Alexander; Daniel Pipes; Mary Lord; Richard Bernstein; Robert Kaplan.  


Ibid.