Sample Essay on Kitcher

In his 2011 book *Science in a Democratic Society*, Philip Kitcher argues that the role of Science in a democratic society like ours is to provide epistemic expertise on a number of issues that factor in to public knowledge. Public knowledge is *shared information* – information that people need to make decisions about how to live their lives. Kitcher argues that for tens of thousands of years humanity has been engaged in *The Ethical Project* – we have invented ethics as a social technology to help improve our lives as we learn to live together. This requires knowledge of how the world works and hence, we need a system of public knowledge organized to shape and promote our values and ideals; hence we need Science. Since Science is for the public good, Science should study not just any truths or the "whole truth" but *significant truths*. Kitcher defines a well-ordered science to be one in which "its specification of problems to be pursued would be endorsed by an ideal conversation, embodying all human points of view, under conditions of mutual engagement" (page 106). As a society, we should be aiming to change Science to make it closer to the well-ordered ideal.

One obvious way to determine the research agenda of Science would be to simply let the experts decide. However, since Science should study *significant* truths, this is in fact a question about values and Kitcher argues that there are no ethical experts. Democratic ideals require the input of everyone on matters of value. However, we should be careful. The other extreme of simply letting everyone has an equal say (say through voting) would be what Kitcher calls *vulgar democracy*. In fact, people do not always know what is best for them – their untutored preferences would lead to systematically bad results. Since everyone needs a voice and untutored preferences are dangerous, the only solution is a healthy system of public knowledge.

While Kitcher is correct that there are some ways of improving our system of public knowledge, attempting to approach well-ordered science by integrating non-expert citizens into the process of setting the research agenda is likely to backfire. As Kitcher points out, modern science evolved out of an *unconstrained* system of individuals and groups (such as the Royal Society) who just wanted to study the world. Scientists do their best work because they study what they are interested in – not when they are working to fulfill an agenda set by someone else. True, there is an important worry that some of the biggest questions in contemporary science require enormous budgets and if the public funds something, democratic principles require collective input and transparency. But the need for public funding provides a distorting effect on the projects to be pursued – it doesn't change which truths are actually significant. As for trust in scientific expertise, Kitcher seems to believe that understanding how science works (for example, by studying the history and philosophy of science) will make the public trust science more. But this too could backfire. In fact the history of science is filled with false starts and cases of vast overconfidence in bad ideas. Sometimes, a naive trust that the experts have it right would in fact serve us much better.