

Article

Figleaves Right and Left: A Case-Study of Viewpoint Diversity Applied to the Philosophy of Language

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Abstract: This paper investigates a linguistic device that was only recently proposed, the figleaf, whose function is to prevent a bigoted statement from being interpreted as bigoted. Previous research on figleaves focused on examples of speech by conservative politicians, commentators, and their supporters. My main contributions here are coverage of figleaves across a wider range of the political spectrum and an enhanced taxonomy of figleaves, which can sharpen our theoretical understanding of the psychological and social mechanisms that facilitate bigoted speech. In light of important recent developments in the social and psychological sciences, this paper also illustrates some benefits of incorporating viewpoint diversity into philosophical research on controversial social and political topics.

Keywords: language; speech acts; intolerance; bigotry; politics; ideology; bias; viewpoint diversity

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Introduction

Based on evidence from recent elections and political discourse, Jennifer Saul defines a linguistic device, a *figleaf*, which previous research has overlooked.¹ A figleaf is a statement whose function is to prevent another statement from being interpreted as bigoted, or at least to make the other statement less likely to be interpreted as bigoted. For present purposes, I understand *bigotry* to be an unwarranted prejudice or bias against individuals based on group membership.

¹ Saul, J. M. 2017. Racial figleaves, the shifting boundaries of the permissible, and the rise of Donald Trump. *Philosophical Topics* 45(2): 97–116.

An effective figleaf provides *plausible deniability* that another statement is bigoted. For example, referring to occasions when “Mexico sends its people” to the United States, candidate Donald Trump famously remarked, “They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.” Saul interprets this as a racist generalization about Mexican immigrants, followed by a figleaf that sows just enough doubt to prevent many people from concluding that the generalization is racist.² Instead, it is viewed as a harsh judgment about some Mexicans in virtue of their bad behavior and moral character, not their national origin. To take another example, a conservative political commentator said to a Muslim politician, “I know Muslims. I like Muslims . . . [W]hat I feel like saying is, ‘Sir, prove to me that you are not working with our enemies.’ And I know you’re not . . . but that’s the way I feel.” Because the commentator merely mentioned, rather than used, the demand for proof, because he said he knows that the implied accusation is false, and because he professes to know and like Muslims, people can avoid viewing the commentator’s remarks as expressing religious bigotry.

Saul explains three other important features of figleaves. First, figleaves are defined functionally in terms of their effect on an audience. They are identified without “attempting to discern the state of mind of the speaker.”³ Speakers need not be trying to obfuscate or manipulate their audience. Second, figleaves have seriously damaging consequences, regardless of what speakers intend. In particular, figleaves can cause harmful changes to shared norms about acceptable speech. For example, thanks to an effective figleaf, a “blatantly racist statement” can come to be viewed as nonracist and acceptable.⁴ Thus figleaves cause “changes to our beliefs about what a nonracist might say,”⁵ such as making negative generalizations about immigrants. Third, figleaves can provide plausible deniability for bigoted statements of many sorts.⁶ Saul gives examples pertaining to race, ethnicity, national origin, and religion, which could be extended to other forms of bigotry, including sexism.

Two other features of figleaves worth mentioning are that the person offering the figleaf needn’t be the person who made the original statement, and that a figleaf needn’t be offered in the same conversational context as the original statement. So, for instance, long after Donald Trump makes a statement and in a completely different context, Michael Pence could offer a figleaf addressing it.

Figleaves occur in a broader social and historical context that provides critical insight into their occurrence and effectiveness. Saul explicitly develops her account with respect to racial figleaves in the United States, or figleaves whose function is to inhibit an American audience from concluding that a particular statement is racist.

Drawing on research from the social and psychological sciences, Saul identifies two relevant factors. On the one hand, over the past fifty years, a general consensus has emerged in American culture around a norm of racial equality, which prohibits racism. There will always be exceptions to any social norm, and “some Americans, those who identify as white supremacists,” openly accept and practice racism. Nevertheless, mainstream American culture rejects racism. On the other hand, “the majority of white

² An anonymous referee asked that I clarify that in this paper I am broadly following the conception of racism used in Saul’s original exposition of the *figleaf* concept, which is primarily an individual attitude.

³ Saul, Racial figleaves, 111.

⁴ Ibid., 101.

⁵ Ibid., 98.

⁶ Ibid.

Americans” still maintain “remarkably high levels” of “racial resentment.”⁷ This racial resentment is allegedly measured by one’s response to statements such as, “Irish, Italian, Jewish and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors.” Following a widely accepted interpretation in the social sciences, Saul views agreement with that statement as racist.⁸

This combination of attitudes—explicitly endorsing a prohibition on racism while retaining “implicit racist biases” or resentments—provides fertile ground for figleaves to do their work. Because of their commitment to the norm of racial equality, many Americans are motivated to find ways of interpreting themselves, and others they support, as not racist. The psychological forces pushing them toward this interpretation can be “almost irresistible.”⁹ So if blacks should get by “without any special favors,” it is not because they are black, but rather, perhaps, because it is virtuous to do so. By exploiting this psychological mechanism, figleaves end up “facilitating the spread of racist speech.”¹⁰ In support of her interpretation of Trump’s racial figleaves, Saul quotes examples of Trump supporters citing his figleaves as evidence that his statements were not racist.

Generalizing Saul’s line of reasoning, we could offer similar explanations for the reception of figleaves that provide cover for sexist statements. As with racism, a consensus in America has also been built around the norm *don’t be sexist*.¹¹

Intolerance Left and Right

The emerging political consensus against racism and sexism, alongside other significant cultural and legal changes such as same-sex marriage, indicates a more general shift in favor of tolerance and against discrimination in American culture. At the same time, and in stark contrast, Americans have become more ideologically polarized and intolerant,¹² with some studies indicating that partisan discrimination exceeds racial discrimination. For example, in one study using the dictator game paradigm, participants were significantly more generous in their allocations to players who shared their political affiliation, but they were not more generous to other members of their race.¹³ Researchers attributed this partly to the fact that although prevailing social norms prohibit discrimination based on race, they do not discourage discriminating against political opponents.¹⁴

This dynamic of ideological polarization in the broader culture is mirrored in the academy. For example, a recent survey found that roughly one-third of academics in the California State University system said that they would discriminate against a job candidate based on their political ideology: conservatives would discriminate against liberal candidates, and liberals would discriminate against conservative candidates.¹⁵

⁷ Ibid., 99

⁸ Ibid., 100.

⁹ Ibid., 111.

¹⁰ Ibid. 112.

¹¹ See, for example, the historical survey data found here: <https://gssdataexplorer.norc.umd.edu/trends/Gender%20&%20Marriage?measure=febam>.

¹² Iyengar, Shanto, Gaurav Sood, and Yphtach Lelkes. 2012. Affect, Not Ideology. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 76(3): 405–31.

¹³ Iyengar, Shanto, and Sean J. Westwood. 2014. Fear and loathing across party lines: New evidence on group polarization. *American Journal of Political Science* 59(3): 690–707. Here Study 4.

¹⁴ Iyengar and Westwood, Fear and loathing across party lines, 704.

¹⁵ Honeycutt, Nathan, and Laura Freberg. 2016. The liberal and conservative experience across academic disciplines. *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 8(2): 115–123; see also Inbar, Yoel, and Joris

Researchers have recently begun examining the intellectual and social implications of ideological polarization and intolerance in the academy, especially in light of the fact that academics overwhelmingly identify as liberal.¹⁶ There is a risk that research is uncritically guided by liberal assumptions and values.¹⁷ For example, social scientists long ago concluded that conservatives are more closed-minded and intolerant than liberals, resulting in research aimed at understanding this “prejudice gap.” However, recent research suggests that this gap might be an artifact of survey instruments that were more likely to detect prejudice among conservatives than liberals.¹⁸ When studies were conducted that stood a comparable chance of detecting prejudice among liberals—by also examining attitudes about groups stereotypically associated with conservatism, such as the military or business leaders—researchers concluded that “intolerance knows no ideological bounds” and that “social scientists have almost entirely overlooked the phenomenon of liberal intolerance.”¹⁹

To take another example, consider the research on racial resentment, cited by Saul, which interprets agreement with the following statement as racist: “Irish, Italian, Jewish and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors.” Agreeing with such statements is said to mark a “new racism” on the part of white Americans that “focuses on blacks as a group rather than on individual blacks.”²⁰ In particular, it involves “a category-based affective response” whereby whites “respon[d] systematically more negatively to attitude objects associated with blacks than to other comparable attitude objects.”²¹ If this were the case, then asking whites an identical question but substituting a different group for “blacks” should result in significantly lower agreement. Surprisingly, this straightforward prediction wasn’t tested until recently.

When it was tested, researchers observed that mean agreement with the statement was *higher* when this substitution occurred—in other words, the exact opposite of what is predicted by the “new racism” theory.²² Among the other groups tested were “Hispanics,” “some whites,” “Nepalese,” “Jordanians,” and “Bhutanese.” The effect was driven by an interaction between participants’ political ideology and the target group being evaluated.

Lammers. 2012. Political diversity in social and personality psychology. *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 7(5): 496–503.

¹⁶ Honeycutt and Freberg, The liberal and conservative experience across academic disciplines.

¹⁷ Duarte, José L., Jarret T. Crawford, Charlotta Stern, Jonathan Haidt, Lee Jussim, and Philip E. Tetlock. 2015. Political diversity will improve social psychological science. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 38: e130. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X14000430>.

¹⁸ Brandt, Mark J., Christine Reyna, John R. Chambers, Jarret T. Crawford, and Geoffrey Wetherell. 2014. The Ideological-Conflict Hypothesis. *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 23(1): 27–34.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 28, 32.

²⁰ Sears, David O, Colette Van Laar, Mary Carrillo, and Rick Kosterman. 1997. Is it really racism? The origins of white Americans’ opposition to race-targeted policies. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 61: 16–53. Here, p. 22.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 19. The phrase “attitude object” refers to the focal object of a person’s attitude. For example, if a person is fond of a painting, then the painting is the attitude object. And if a person is biased against black people, then that person might have a strong aversion against rap music, in which case rap music would be the attitude object.

²² Carney, Riley K., and Ryan D. Enos. 2017. Conservatism and fairness in contemporary politics: Unpacking the psychological underpinnings of modern racism. April, 1–42. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Conservatism-and-Fairness-in-Contemporary-Politics%3A-Carney-Enos/e87ba57c72a53151b11b4fbf14fc04d5a6c2bdf2>; see also Tetlock, Philip E. 1994. Political psychology or politicized psychology: Is the road to scientific hell paved with good moral intentions. *Political Psychology* 15(3): 509–29.

Conservatives responded similarly regardless of the group in question, whereas liberals responded differently based on the group's race. In particular, liberals were less likely to agree with the statement specifically about blacks. The data further suggest that this ideological difference is partly caused by an underlying difference whereby conservatives are more likely to believe that people tend to get what they deserve in life (i.e., conservatives are more likely to accept a "just world" hypothesis).

Frequently in recent decades, social scientists have interpreted findings in ways flattering to their own political ideology and unflattering to opposing ideologies.²³ Of course, it could turn out that some of these asymmetries are in fact real, but clearly the pattern also reflects self-serving biases that ought to be avoided—and, failing that, corrected—in the course of serious inquiry. Aside from undermining the credibility of scientific research on important social topics, this could also have broader implications for sound public policy. For example, conservatives have consistently lost trust in science in recent decades, which erodes political support for efforts to address emerging problems requiring a societal response. The erosion of trust is greater among conservatives with more education.²⁴ And it is specific to "impact science" that is "in the service of understanding human impacts on the environment and human health," and which "regularly provides evidence used to justify governmental regulation."²⁵ By contrast, conservatives are more trusting than liberals are of "production science," which aims to develop techniques and materials to make better products and improve efficiency. Accordingly, one hypothesis is that "science denialism" among conservatives is, at least partly, a rational response to "impact scientists" who act as political advocates for liberal policy initiatives.²⁶

Similar to the social sciences, the humanities, including philosophy, have an ideologically unbalanced professoriate.²⁷ Rarely does one encounter self-identified conservative philosophers. Although not all philosophical research is threatened by this, it can raise doubts about research that is focused on, or influenced by, controversial social and political issues. Some philosophers have objected to politicizing research in the discipline²⁸ and have argued that research on controversial topics such as stereotype threat and implicit bias has been distorted by ideological commitments.²⁹ Some have explicitly raised the question of whether academic philosophers discriminate against conservatives,³⁰ and a surprising number of disciplinary members express

²³ For reviews, see Duarte et al. Political diversity will improve social psychological science; Gharbi, Musa. 2018. Race and the race for the White House: On social research in the age of Trump. *The American Sociologist* 49(4): 496–519. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12108-018-9373-5>.

²⁴ Gauchat, Gordon. 2012. Politicization of science in the public sphere: A study of public trust in the United States, 1974 to 2010. *American Sociological Review* 77(2): 167–87.

²⁵ McCright, Aaron M, Katherine Dentzman, Meghan Charters, and Thomas Dietz. 2013. The influence of political ideology on trust in science. *Environmental Research Letters* 8(4): 044029.

²⁶ Cofnas, Nathan, Noah Carl, and Michael A. Woodley of Menie. 2018. Does activism in social science explain conservatives' distrust of scientists? *The American Sociologist* 49(1): 135–48. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12108-017-9362-0>.

²⁷ Peters, U., Honeycutt, N., De Block, A., & Jussim, L. 2020. Ideological diversity, hostility, and discrimination in philosophy. *Philosophical Psychology* 33(4): 511–48.

²⁸ E.g., Haack, Susan. 1993. Epistemological reflections of an old feminist. *Reason Papers* 18: 31–43.

²⁹ Hermanson, Sean. 2017. Implicit bias, stereotype threat, and political correctness in philosophy. *Philosophies* 2(2): 12.

³⁰ Case, Spencer. 2015. Political bias in philosophy and why it matters. https://www.nas.org/articles/political_bias_in_philosophy_and_why_it_matters.

willingness to discriminate against colleagues with whom they disagree politically.³¹ The American Philosophical Association’s “diversity” page lists committees and resources for underrepresented groups based on race, ethnicity, sex, sexuality, and disability, all topics at the forefront of liberal political consciousness, but there is no mention of political or ideological diversity.³² Some philosophers have argued that academics are justified in discriminating against conservatives because their learning style does not fit the aims of modern educational systems.³³ And many have expressed concerns that ideological intolerance and intimidation are a common feature even of debates that occur entirely on “the left,” with certain positions and arguments being labeled “hateful,” “harmful,” and worthy of censure.³⁴

Figleaves Left and Right

Against this backdrop, I propose approaching the topic of figleaves with an awareness of potential ideological biases in mind. Further reinforcing this suggestion, I note that Saul’s examples of figleaves pertain to forms of bigotry that contemporary liberals care deeply about, including white supremacy and bigotry against blacks, hispanics, and Muslims; Saul’s examples feature statements made by conservative politicians, commentators, and their supporters; Saul emphasizes the importance of specific, urgent, political objectives, in particular resisting Donald Trump’s agenda. Although it is probably psychologically impossible for humans to conduct value-free inquiry, we should nevertheless strive to minimize the influence of ideological and political values in our research, especially in how we gather and interpret evidence and draw conclusions. To the extent that such values influence some research, this needn’t imply that the field is biased, provided that we are collectively willing to scrutinize those values and explore how the evidence and interpretation would appear conditional upon a range of contrary values. The credibility, and therefore usefulness, of philosophical research depends on our willingness to do this.

Toward that end, I propose applying Saul’s theory of figleaves to discourse on the left of the political spectrum. Recall that a figleaf is a statement whose function is to prevent another statement from being interpreted as bigoted. Figleaves are defined functionally and the speaker’s intentions are strictly irrelevant.

To be clear, I do not intend this discussion to be an attack on philosophers who theorize about political topics or topics of personal importance to them. Nor do I intend it as a criticism of liberal ideology, a defense of conservative ideology, or the promotion of any particular political ideology. Instead, my immediate aim is to advance understanding of the underlying substantive issues, concerning language use, by deliberately detaching from a set of ideological values and assumptions characteristic of contemporary philosophical research. To the extent that I succeed in this aim, it will also illustrate some benefits of incorporating viewpoint diversity into philosophical research, similar to the benefits recently enjoyed by social and psychological science.

³¹ Peters et al. Ideological diversity, hostility, and discrimination in philosophy.

³² <https://www.apaonline.org/page/divmenu> (last accessed 27 August 2018).

³³ Cholbi, Michael. 2014. Anti-conservative bias in education is real—but not unjust. *Social Philosophy and Policy* 31(01): 176–203.

³⁴ See, for example, this *New York Times* op-ed, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/18/opinion/the-uproar-over-transracialism.html>, or this online discussion at a leading philosophy blog, <http://dailynous.com/2018/08/27/derogatory-language-philosophy-journal-hostility-discussion>.

“#KillAllMen”

Supporting women’s rights obviously need not be, and often is not, accompanied by bigotry against men. Opposing sexism against women does not imply that one favors sexism against men. Nevertheless, some people do adopt, and publicly profess, this combination of attitudes.³⁵ A striking expression of sexism against men is the Twitter hashtag #KillAllMen. Ezra Klein, a former editor at the liberal American political site Vox, recently commented on the hashtag:

A few years ago, it became popular on feminist Twitter to tweet about the awful effects of patriarchal culture and attach the line #KillAllMen. This became popular enough that a bunch of people I know and hang out with and even love began using it in casual conversation.

And you know what? I didn’t like it. It made me feel defensive. It still makes me feel defensive. I’m a man, and I recoil hearing people I care about say all men should be killed.

But I also knew that wasn’t what they were saying. They didn’t want me put to death. They didn’t want any men put to death. They didn’t hate me, and they didn’t hate men. “#KillAllMen” was another way of saying “it would be nice if the world sucked less for women.” It was an expression of frustration with pervasive sexism. I didn’t enjoy the way they said it, but that didn’t mean I had to pretend I couldn’t figure out what they meant. And if I had any questions, I could, you know, ask, and actually listen to the answer.³⁶

We begin with an expression that literally calls for the death of approximately half the human population based on their biological sex. In order to counteract a sexist interpretation of the expression, Klein denies that it is meant literally: it is a dysphemism for a completely inoffensive hope that women’s lives improve. In the process, Klein characterizes the state of mind of those using the hashtag: they were motivated not by “hate” but rather “frustration with pervasive sexism.” Finally, Klein clearly implies that to determine whether people’s use of the hashtag is sexist, one need only ask them whether it is. Their answer will presumably be “no,” because a widely accepted social norm against sexism motivates people to avoid viewing themselves as sexist. Klein’s remarks reflect this norm insofar as he describes feeling uncomfortable when people used the hashtag.

Applying Saul’s theory, Klein’s intervention counts as a figleaf, perhaps even multiple figleaves. Appealing to the fact that those using the expression would deny that it’s bigoted is what Saul calls a “denial figleaf,” or an attempt “to dodge accusations of [bigotry] by simply asserting that they are not true.”³⁷ Klein’s digression on motivation and intent is a distraction: we must not let the conversation drift to what some additional observations or (imagined) answers might indicate about sexism “in the heart.”³⁸ (Finally, Klein’s

³⁵ Walters, Suzanna Danuta. 2018. Why can’t we hate men? https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-cant-we-hate-men/2018/06/08/f1a3a8e0-6451-11e8-a69c-b944de66d9e7_story.html?utm_term=.199c5e51bc8b.

³⁶ <https://www.vox.com/technology/2018/8/8/17661368/sarah-jeong-twitter-new-york-times-andrew-sullivan>.

³⁷ Saul, Racial figleaves, 103.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 114.

intervention includes an example of a previously undiscussed figleaf, what we might call a *Humpty Dumpty figleaf*. This occurs when one declares a redefinition of bigoted words in the mouths of some, after the manner of Humpty Dumpty in conversation with Alice:³⁹

‘I don’t know what you mean by “glory”,’ Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. ‘Of course you don’t—till I tell you. I meant “there’s a nice knock-down argument for you!”’

‘But “glory” doesn’t mean “a nice knockdown argument”,’ Alice objected.

‘When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.’

‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you *can* make words mean different things.’

‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master—that’s all.’

Of course, Klein’s remarks will not persuade committed misogynists, because they are motivated to see through the smokescreen and retain what is, from their perspective, a rhetorically effective lodestone to hang on feminists. But just as staunch Hillary Clinton supporters were not Trump’s audience, committed misogynists are not Klein’s. And a figleaf need only function to inhibit a specific audience from inferring that a statement is in fact bigoted.⁴⁰ Presumably that audience is, at the very least, Vox’s liberal readership, which is broadly aligned with feminist politics.

The fact that Klein presumably does not literally want to kill all men does not prevent him from engaging in a figleaf for this particular expression, nor does it prevent him from accepting some lesser forms of anti-male sentiment. Someone can amplify a sexist message without fully or even partially accepting the message, and someone can be bigoted against a group without wanting to kill them all. Also, the fact that Klein is a male does not prevent him from taking bigoted attitudes toward men, because members of a group can have unwarranted biases against fellow group members and even themselves.⁴¹

Racism Is Prejudice Plus Power

When the *New York Times* hired technology reporter Sarah Jeong onto its editorial board in August 2018, intense controversy ensued because of dozens of posts about white people that she made on social media over a period of several years.⁴² Here are some of them:

Dumbass fucking white people marking up the internet with their opinions like dogs pissing on fire hydrants

white men are bullshit

³⁹ Carroll, Lewis. 1871. *Through the Looking-Glass*. [gutenberg.org](https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/12), ch.6. <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/12>.

⁴⁰ Saul, Racial figleaves, 110.

⁴¹ Credit to an anonymous referee for raising the concerns addressed in this paragraph.

⁴² For relevant reporting and quotations, see the articles in *The Washington Post*, *Vox*, *The Independent* (UK), the history of screenshots collated by Nick Monroe, and commentary by Cathy Young.

fuck **white women** lol

white ppl are fucking dumb

white people are gross

the world could get by just fine with zero white ppl and the only thing stopping POC is . . . a disinclination towards genocide?!

#CancelWhitePeople

Criticism of Jeong's statements quickly spread online. Jeong addressed the controversy by quoting some threatening and hateful abuse she received on social media and explaining,

As a woman of color on the internet, I have faced torrents of online hate [. . .]. I engaged in what I thought of at the time as counter-trolling. While it was intended as satire, I deeply regret that I mimicked the language of my harassers.

The *Times* stood by their new employee, echoing her statement,

[Jeong's] journalism and the fact that she is a young Asian woman have made her a subject of frequent online harassment. For a period of time she responded to that harassment by imitating the rhetoric of her harassers.

We begin with a series of statements that demean a group of people based on their race and entertain the prospect of racial genocide. In addressing the posts, Jeong and the *Times* refer to her race and sex, point out that she suffers harassment online, and characterize her speech acts as *imitation* or *mimicry* of that harassment. (I interpret *counter-trolling* to be a form of imitation that implies responding to an antagonistic interlocutor.) The presumed contrast here is speech expressing her own attitudes, as opposed to copying others. Later I will return to the reference to her race. But first I will focus on the characterization of her speech acts, which is yet another type of figleaf to add to the list, what we might call a *force figleaf*. This occurs when the force of a speech act with bigoted content is characterized in a way that prevents it from being interpreted as bigoted. For example, if an actor onstage reads the assigned line, "White people are dumb," he is not being racist. At worst, he is pretending to be racist. Similarly, if Jeong was just imitating hateful statements directed at her, as a way of calling attention to how unacceptable they were, then that would rightly affect our interpretation of their significance. Unfortunately, Jeong and the *Times* do not provide evidence that her posts were, in fact, mimicry. This is left as an exercise for readers.

What is the significance of mentioning Jeong's race? It is not entirely clear based on the remarks quoted above, but it is potentially related to the ideas expressed by Nolan Cabrera, a professor of education policy. Addressing the Jeong controversy in an interview with the *Washington Post*, Cabrera is quoted as saying,

Part of the reason it was so easy for the outrage to be manufactured in the first place was that it was completely decontextualized and ahistorified. Then it was easy to drum up anger and say it looks like she hates white people. That only makes sense if you are willfully ignorant of 400 to 500 years' history and contemporary social context and also the context from which the tweets were sent. [. . .] You hear [it] all the time: Substitute "white" and put in minority group "X." The term "racism" is not

the equivalen[t] of prejudice or bigotry. It's an analysis of social inequality along the color lines and an analysis of power dynamics and social oppression. None of which has ever been in the hands of people of color or communities of color: There's never been the social structure to be able to oppress white people.⁴³

Former Bernie Sanders staffer Symone Sanders was much more to the point during a CNN panel discussion of Jeong's posts:

It's not racist for this reason. Being racist is not just prejudice, it's prejudice plus power.⁴⁴

This line of reasoning is based on stipulating that *racism* means *prejudice plus power*, along with the claim that the present social structure empowers whites. From here, one might then claim that Jeong's posts were not racist because they were directed at whites, and anti-white racism is (currently) impossible. Alternatively, one might claim Jeong's posts could not have been racist because Jeong herself is not white. Either way, here we have another figleaf, what we might call a *stipulative figleaf*. This occurs when the term naming the bigotry in question, "racism" in this case, is stipulatively redefined so as to automatically exclude the target statement from being bigoted.

One needn't follow current affairs closely to get a sense that this stipulative figleaf—that racism is prejudice plus power—occurs frequently. Consider the case of James Livingston, a tenured history professor at Rutgers University who was recently investigated by Rutgers for comments posted on his private social media account.⁴⁵ In part, the comments read, "Officially, I now hate white people. I am a white people [sic] . . . but can we keep them—us—out of my neighborhood? [. . .] I hereby resign from my race. Fuck these people." Controversially, the investigating officer determined that Livingston's remarks were not Constitutionally protected speech and that they violated the university's policy against racism. In response to the charge of racism, Livingston wrote:

I'd be worried, and maybe even penitent, if I thought that "reverse racism"—that's what I stand accused of [. . .]—was in the realm of reality, where we could measure its results. But there's no such thing. Racism is the exclusive property of white, mostly European people [. . .].

This is another example of the stipulative figleaf regarding "racism." Livingston mentions potentially feeling worried and penitent at having made racist statements. This fits with the hypothesis that his figleaf is partly motivated by a desire to avoid concluding that his remarks were racist. Setting aside informal social norms, the figleaf is likely intended to avoid concluding that his remarks violated the university's formal rule against racism.

Other Potential Examples

Other potential examples of left-wing figleaves include the following:⁴⁶

⁴³ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2018/08/03/an-asian-american-womans-tweets-ignite-a-debate-is-it-okay-to-make-fun-of-white-people-online/?noredirect=on>.

⁴⁴ <https://twitter.com/CNNTonight/status/1025576830542073856>.

⁴⁵ <https://www.thefire.org/cases/rutgers-university-tenured-professor-found-guilty-of-violating-discrimination-and-harassment-policy-for-facebook-posts-about-gentrification>.

⁴⁶ I owe the suggestion to include other potential examples, as well as these specific ones, to an anonymous referee.

- **No justice, no peace:** When a group of agitated people shout anything in unison at you, it can seem like a threat. It could be easy to interpret “No justice, no peace!” as a threat to give them what they want, or they won’t allow you to live in peace. But the slogan could also be charitably interpreted to mean that justice is essential to a peaceful society. “No one is threatening the public order, just pointing out the obvious fact that turmoil inevitably accompanies injustice.” The ambiguity provides flexibility that could be used to provide plausible deniability for unpopular or vicious motives.
- **Defund the police:** Some might insist that this slogan be interpreted literally, resulting in police departments being disbanded due to resources drying up. Others could insist that it is a dysphemism for the relatively unobjectionable proposal that since the public funds police departments to begin with, the public can rightfully withhold funds to encourage police reform. “No one is really advocating for abolishing police departments, only using the power of the purse to induce needed reforms for a better and more just world.”⁴⁷

These examples probably do not fit standard preconceptions of *bigotry*, because often we tend to think of bigotry as focused on demographics categories such as race, sex, religion, and nationality. On reflection, it is clear, I think, that one can be bigoted against policemen, but absent further context, “No justice, no peace” does not seem to be connected to any identifiable group. This connects with the discussion point in the Conclusion regarding whether *concealing bigotry* should ultimately be understood as essential to the figleaf mechanism.⁴⁸

Conclusions

Saul recently proposed a theory of a previously undiscussed speech act, the figleaf, whose function is to prevent a statement from being interpreted as bigoted. In short, figleaves provide plausible deniability for bigoted speech. Notable features of figleaves are that they are defined functionally, in terms of their effect on audiences, rather than by reference to the speaker’s intentions; figleaves fulfill their function because of widely accepted social norms against bigotry, which motivate some people to seek and accept interpretations of speech that do not attribute bigotry; and figleaves can have serious harmful consequences, such as normalizing bigoted speech and thereby undermining our shared values opposing bigotry. In this paper, I have set aside the claim that figleaves have dangerous consequences, because assessing it requires empirical evidence that I do not have access to. Instead, my goal has been to conduct a broader investigation of the occurrence of figleaves, in light of three facts.

First, a growing body of evidence suggests that academic research on important social and political topics, such as bigotry and discrimination, suffers from ideological bias. More specifically, the evidence indicates a bias in favor of liberal or left-wing ideology and against other ideologies, such as conservatism and libertarianism. Second, anecdotal and scientific evidence indicates that intolerance and discrimination are common across the political spectrum. Third, previous research on figleaves focused narrowly on examples of speech by conservatives. Accordingly, I concluded that additional fertile territory for

⁴⁷ The last phrase is taken from this *Washington Post* piece: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/02/09/what-defund-police-really-means>.

⁴⁸ Credit to an anonymous referee for raising the points addressed in this paragraph.

studying figleaves had yet to be explored. The result was new case studies of figleaves in discourse specifically “on the left.”

This research has at least two benefits. The first benefit is theoretical. By studying the phenomenon across the political spectrum, we can gain greater insight into the types of figleaves that occur. Saul’s initial investigation yielded a list of several types, including denial, mention, and friendship figleaves. A denial figleaf occurs when one simply denies that another statement is bigoted; a mention figleaf occurs when a bigoted remark is merely mentioned rather than used; a friendship figleaf occurs when one indicates that one has friends in the group being singled out for bigotry. To that list, the present investigation proposed adding force, Humpty Dumpty, and stipulative figleaves. A force figleaf occurs when one claims that a bigoted statement didn’t have the appropriate locutionary force to count as a bigoted statement; a Humpty Dumpty figleaf occurs when one states that the bigoted statement meant something other than what it did, as intended by the speaker; a stipulative figleaf occurs when one stipulatively defines the relevant form of bigotry in such a way that the speaker could not possibly have made a bigoted statement.

In addition to enhancing the taxonomy, the present research can also shed light on the psychological and social mechanisms that facilitate bigoted speech. If figleaves were limited to conservatives, then this would suggest that the operative psychological and social mechanisms are to be found in the personality traits, cultural values, social structures, or ideological commitments of conservatives specifically. By contrast, if figleaves occur across the political spectrum, then this would suggest that the operative mechanisms are not specific to conservatives but instead can be traced to something more fundamental about human psychology and social behavior.

One possibility is that figleaves are a predictable result of basic in-group/out-group dynamics.⁴⁹ People are generally biased to favorably evaluate others “on their side.” Figleaves might be a linguistic device that builds on this bias. We all belong to groups at many levels. For instance, on one level, we are all moral agents, and perhaps it is on this level where general anti-discrimination norms—e.g., *don’t be racist, don’t be sexist*—get a foothold. But we also have political and ideological commitments that divide us, which can be very powerful. On this level, we can exploit our fellow ideologues’ tendency to favor us when we violate norms. For instance, if we say something racist or sexist, our fellow ideologues will be motivated to give a more charitable interpretation of our speech. We need only give them a thread to hang that interpretation on. Thus the figleaf is born, a specifically linguistic expression of in-group bias that can contribute to the double-standards of social life.

The second benefit of the present research is methodological and practical. By studying figleaves across the ideological spectrum, we gain a measure of objectivity. Of course, no human inquiry is ever perfectly objective, but more objectivity is still better than less. In the process, we can increase the trustworthiness of the research. The category of *figleaf* is not necessarily merely a theoretical tool for branding conservatives as racist or sexist. It could, of course, turn out that bigotry is more common in one corner of the political spectrum or another. My present investigation does not speak to this. Further research is required to provide answers.

⁴⁹ Hewstone, Miles, Mark Rubin, and Hazel Willis. 2002. Intergroup bias. *Annual Review of Psychology* 53: 575–604.

Future research could consider at least the following possibilities.⁵⁰ First, figleaves might just be instances of the “motte-and-bailey” fallacy,⁵¹ whereby a claim can be understood in one of two ways, as a defensible position that is not ultimately of interest to proponents, or as an indefensible position that is ultimately of interest to proponents. When the claim is challenged, it is defended as the defensible position (the motte); when it is unchallenged, it is interpreted as the indefensible position (the bailey). Second, it is worth considering whether *concealing bigotry* is essential to the phenomenon. For instance, might not the same mechanism be used to conceal corruption or fraud? Third, it is worth considering whether there are legitimate defenses an individual could use to refute the accusation that her statement was a figleaf rather than the sincere expression of a worthwhile view or a nuanced opinion on a controversial subject. Fourth, and relatedly, whereas the examples discussed here tend to make unacceptable things appear acceptable, what about the interpretative practice of making acceptable things appear unacceptable (“reverse-figleaves”)?

Finally, and related to important recent developments in the social and psychological sciences, the present research illustrates some benefits of incorporating viewpoint diversity into philosophical research on controversial social and political topics. In undertaking this project, I found that I shared the sentiments expressed by one prominent psychologist who recently wrote eloquently about the “struggle to overcome liberal bias,” replete with “a quasi-phobic tendency to avoid thinking certain thoughts because someone might find them offensive.”⁵² Upon reflection, I could not justify letting these fears get the better of me, which I took as further evidence—as if more were needed—that a serious commitment to inquiry can require making oneself uncomfortable.

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⁵⁰ I owe the suggestions to anonymous referees.

⁵¹ Shackel, N. 2005. The vacuity of postmodernist methodology. *Metaphilosophy* 36(3): 296–320.

⁵² Baumeister, Roy F. 2015. Recognizing and coping with our prejudices: Fighting liberal bias without conservative input. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 38: 15–16.