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Reflections on the Hypatia Controversy: Philosophical Methods and Social Justice

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Reflections on the Hypatia Controversy: Philosophical Methods and Social Justice

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This cluster of articles proceeds from a symposium funded by both the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and Kule Institute for Advanced Studies. The symposium took place in March 2017 at the University of Alberta on the topic of "Social Justice, Feminist Affects, and Philosophical Futures: Responding to the Hypatia Controversy." Chloë Taylor, along with Ada Jaarsma of Mount Royal University, was an organizer of this day-long symposium, and Alison Suen was one of the seven presenters at this event. Given that the significance of lived experience for philosophical and social justice scholarship was frequently highlighted over the course of the original controversy, the organizers of this symposium were careful to forefront the perspectives of women-of-colour philosophers and social theorists and trans scholars. Atlantis agreed to publish a partial proceedings from this event and, as editors, we continued to be mindful of the importance of lived experience in seeking reviewers for this publication.

Although feminist philosophers remain painfully divided over the events of April and May 2017, it is agreed that these events raised an array of important ethical, disciplinary, social, and methodological questions and marked a pivotal moment in the discipline. As Namrata Mitra argues in her article included in this issue, Rebecca Tuvel's article was in fact an exceptional philosophical essay in terms of citational practice and argumentative style, and yet it was widely decried as having reinforced structural harms to marginalized people. What does this say about the norms of the tradition in which we, as feminist philosophers, have been trained? Must we, as philosophers, rethink our methods? Tuvel was criticized because, although she is white and cisgender, she wrote on a topic that most directly impacts trans people and people of colour. This raises questions about who has

the authority to speak in a discipline that has traditionally claimed to evaluate arguments based purely on their purportedly objective logical merit. Given the gravity of these questions, one of the primary goals of this collection of essays is to explore the issue of methodology in feminist philosophy. While the three essays collected here come from different disciplines and traditions within and beyond philosophy, they each expose presumptions hidden in the methods that philosophers traditionally employ. We believe this selection of essays contributes to conversation regarding philosophical methods. We hope that this collection will inspire philosophers and social justice theorists to continue to grapple with the ethical import of their divergent methods.

* * * *

In “Benefits and Burdens of Engaging in Argumentation,” Stephanie Kapusta identifies two forms of “argumentation injustice” to which philosophers from marginalized groups are particularly vulnerable. She argues that certain traditional ways of doing philosophy—in particular, the excessive focus on logical-epistemic goals of argumentation—create two conditions for injustice. First, it places disproportionate burdens on philosophers who belong to marginalized groups; second, it exposes these philosophers to harm (both cognitive and emotional). Kapusta persuasively demonstrates that participants of an argumentational exchange relate to the argument in different ways: for some, it is an intellectual exercise; for others, it is of existential import. Indeed, the latter could even experience psychological harm when they engage in an argument that does not fully recognize their identity and oppression. As such, philosophers experience differential burdens and risks, despite the fact that a philosophical exchange of reason is supposed to be impartial. Using Tuvel’s essay as her case study, Kapusta argues that insofar as trans* philosophers are especially invested in argumentational exchanges that concern their identity, they shoulder a disproportionate burden (both cognitively and emotionally) when they engage in such exchanges. For example, according to Kapusta, there is an implicit misgendering in

Tuvel’s argument; specifically, Kapusta contends that Tuvel’s argument inferentially excludes trans women who do not pass as cisgender women, thereby reiterating the transexclusionary micro-aggression found in mainstream literature on philosophy of gender. “Non-passing” trans woman philosophers who engage in Tuvel’s argument are then burdened with the additional responsibility of having to show that they, too, are women, while also suffering the psychological harm of having their identity denied.

For Kapusta, this argumentational injustice presents a double bind. On the one hand, philosophers from socially marginalized groups offer an indispensable voice in arguments that concern their identity and oppression: not only do they have vested, existential interests in such debates, they are also more likely to diagnose fallacies and problematic assumptions hidden within these arguments. On the other hand, engaging these arguments can be taxing for philosophers from socially marginalized groups: the disproportionate burden and exposure to potential harm could further alienate those whose voices are sorely needed in these debates. To adequately address this double bind, Kapusta calls for a “major ‘overhaul’ of the professional culture of philosophy.” Yet, given the difficulty of such a monumental task, Kapusta ends her paper by acknowledging the urgency for socially marginalized philosophers to engage in debates that are disproportionately burdensome and risky, “even if full enjoyment of the enticing goods on offer is denied to [them].”

Kapusta’s essay invites us to consider important questions regarding our responsibilities as philosophers. *How* can we argue responsibly? *What* can we responsibly argue about? And perhaps more controversially, *who* is responsible for engaging an argument? Implicit in this call is the recognition that *contexts* matter. The specific ways we have been trained to argue, as well as the standard we use to evaluate an argument, are both products of our professional culture. As such, to address the injustice instantiated by certain argumentational practices, we must address the professional culture from which such practices emerged.

The issue of responsible argumentation and the urgent need to interrogate our discipline take center stage in Namrata Mitra's "Disciplinary Matters in the *Hypatia* Controversy." In her essay, Mitra articulates the importance of contextualization when theorizing social and political issues. Like Kapusta, Mitra also critiques a method of doing philosophy that has long been the standard: specifically, she argues that the method of abstraction favoured by traditional philosophy often produces illusions of objectivity and universality. Mitra contends that the problem is not just that we do "bad philosophy" when we presume our particular history, context, and identity to be universal; beyond this, such a presumption has been complicit in colonialism and other forms of oppression. Drawing from both feminist and postcolonial literature, Mitra demonstrates how the exclusion of social-historical context, the omission of marginal voices, and the proclivity to stay in the comfort zone of abstraction, have long infected the discipline of philosophy.

By drawing attention to the long history of decontextualization in philosophy, Mitra offers a helpful way for us to understand and analyze the *Hypatia* controversy. One of the main charges against Tuvel's article is that it did not sufficiently attend to the "lived experience" or existing literatures of those whose lives her article discusses. Her article has been criticized for being too abstract, relying primarily on a conceptual analogy between gender identification and racial identification. While Mitra agrees with this critique, she questions why Tuvel's article was singled out for retraction, as if the lack of contextualization in her article was an aberration in professional philosophy. Mitra suggests that, ironically, by singling out Tuvel's article, her detractors (or at least some of the 800-plus signatories of the Open Letter) seem to have committed the very sin of which they believe Tuvel's article is guilty. That is, her detractors have also failed to contextualize Tuvel's essay within the broader history and culture of philosophy. They, too, have abstracted Tuvel's article from the tradition of philosophy, where the lack of attention to social-historical contexts is the norm rather than the exception.

Indeed, once we go beyond the confines of academic philosophy and contextualize Tuvel's article within the broader social-political history in America, we can begin a conversation on methodology in a more profitable way. As mentioned above, one common charge against Tuvel's article is the argument's reliance on identity analogies. Critics of Tuvel have argued that gender-identification and racial-identification are not in fact analogous. Therefore, justifications for transgender identification do not translate into justifications for transracial identification. Using the works of Serena Mayeri and Janet Halley, Mitra examines the efficacy and perils of various forms of identity analogies in American civil rights advocacy. From the analogy between the right to religious practice and queer acceptance, to the analogy between sexual orientation-based discrimination and racial discrimination, the use of identity analogies is commonplace in the American legal and political landscape. While Mitra does not explicitly analyze the analogy between gender identification and racial identification, she shows us that there is a wealth of literature on identity analogies from which we could draw. According to Mitra, rather than retracting Tuvel's article, a more productive way to engage with Tuvel's argument is to situate it within existing debates on identity analogies.

The issue of identity analogies becomes prominent in the third essay of this collection. In "Allegories of Gender: Transgender Autology versus Transracialism," Aniruddha Dutta offers a diagnosis of the discomfort that many feel toward the transgender-transrace analogy. Dutta frames the issue in the following question: why are we more inclined to accept self-determination with gender identification than with racial identification? That is, why does gender allow for subjective identification but not race? Tracing an ongoing effort to decouple subjective identity from social position in critical and activist discourses, Dutta offers a compelling account of the ways gender has been "individualized, interiorized, and dissociated from biological and social determinism." Following Foucault, Dutta highlights the confessional nature of gender identification: like sexuality, gender as a core personal identity becomes a *truth* that one must confess. And insofar as

our gender confessions correspond to, and avow, an interiorized selfhood, they are immune to sociobiological determinations. The individual is the ultimate arbiter of their gender reality.

Significantly, racial identification does not permit the kind of self-determination that we see in gender identification. Rather, race is linked to ancestry, primarily consanguineal ancestry. As such, racial identity is something that one inherits socially or biologically, rather than a matter of self-determination. However, the contention that racial identification is a matter of consanguineal ancestry presumes a hierarchy of kinship whereby blood relations are privileged over the non-genetic, “chosen” ones. To articulate the divergent ways we construct gender and racial identifications, Dutta employs Elizabeth Povinelli’s distinction between “autology” and “genealogy.” Whereas autology permits an individual to justify their gender identity by appealing to the supposed authenticity of the inner self, genealogy delimits racial identity with a “deterministic conflation of sociobiological ancestry, subjective racial identity, and racial (dis)privilege.” For Dutta, the anxiety surrounding transracialism can be understood as an effort to maintain the boundaries that separate autology and genealogy. The rigid separation can, as Dutta argues, become an “oppressive generalization” with which gender identity is inevitably tied to “confessional technologies of power,” while racial identity is predestined by sociobiological inheritance. However, Dutta neither advocates for granting autology to *all* identity claims, nor do they deny the political relevance of autology discourse. Rather, Dutta’s analysis helps us to begin understanding why many are troubled by the transgender-transrace analogy. But more importantly perhaps, it is a reminder that gender identification has not always been autological. Indeed, the widespread acceptance of gender *self*-identification is the fruit of those who have worked hard to dissociate gender identity from biological materiality. Acknowledging the historical contingency of gender self-identification can perhaps remind us that the way we determine racial identity *also* has its own history and evolution.