

To Do Metaphysics as a Feminist: Reflections on Feminist Methodology in Light of the *Hypatia* Affair¹

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Thank you all for being here today. I thought I would give a different sort of talk today. I thought I would talk about doing metaphysics of the social world as a feminist. I would have talked about how most metaphysicians of the social world think our job is simply to describe our social world in a value free way and how most metaphysicians of the social world focus on social phenomena such as institutions and notions such as joint intention, commitment, and attention, whereas if you are a feminist like me (or engaged in other liberatory projects) then you might be more interested in the part of the social world that isn't about the intentional, or about explicit commitments.

But I'm not going to talk about that today. And the reason for that is that my views about how to do metaphysics as a feminist are undergoing a radical transformation, and chiefly because of the *Hypatia* affair.

A disclaimer is in order here. I'm on the Board of Associate Editors of *Hypatia*.² But what I say here today are my personal reflections, not that of the Board or the journal.

I'm going to allow myself to be a bit personal here. It is unusual for me. My talk is entitled "To Do Metaphysics as a Feminist". And I am a metaphysician by training and temperament. My talk could just as well have been called "Confessions of an Analytic Philosopher" because my training was analytic, although I have for a long time considered myself a post-analytic philosopher.

What attracted me to analytic philosophy was the focus on clarity: what precisely is the claim? What the argument? I had been studying mathematics but was

¹ This was a talk given under the title "To Do Metaphysics as a Feminist" at a conference on feminist philosophy and methodological commitments at Humboldt University in Berlin 13-14 July, 2017. The conference was organized by Mari Mikkola, Hilkje Hänel, and Johanna Müller. <http://feminist-philosophy-berlin.weebly.com/>. Of course, no one associated with the conference, or mentioned in the talk, is responsible for the views expressed herein.

² I resigned from the Board of Associate Editors of the journal *Hypatia*, along with my colleagues, on July 22, 2017, after the Board of Directors of the non-profit entity Hypatia, which owns the journal *Hypatia*, had suspended the governance document for the journal.

interested in different questions than those mathematicians study. I was frankly more interested in the sorts of questions many in the continental tradition focus on. But my training was, in terms of methods, very analytic. And one of the attractive and powerful aspects of the practice of analytic philosophy that I came across in my training is that no claim and no argument is too holy to touch, none too offensive. Clarity and precision is a sharp knife for cutting through the obfuscation of demagoguery, ideological manipulation, and plain confusion.

The violence of the knife imagery is intentional: I experience the practice of doing analytic metaphysics as brutal: we dissect arguments (perhaps like frogs? I don't know about your background, but I have many friends in the US whose science education seems to have consisted mostly in dissecting frogs; we don't have frogs in Iceland). Another image is slicing and dicing: we slice and dice up the conceptual space as the best sous chefs. And then the third violent image: when it comes to constructing arguments we beat words and ideas into submission.

A friend of mine, who is a poet, once described our different relationship to language: I was like the classical ballerina beating my body into submission every day for the occasional performance in which I seemed to float around effortlessly in the most unnatural of poses.

She, on the other hand, didn't think of herself as a master of words or body. She wasn't trying to tame them or beat them into submission. It was a different sort of dance. Words were connected to the gut and the unconscious and her aim was to bring to light what was hidden in the words, their histories, and their associations.

I am still attracted to the product of the brutal regimen. But there is no mercy in the production.

Another thing that attracted me to analytic philosophy in the beginning is related to this lack of mercy. It is the idea that it is the claim or argument that matters, not who makes it. This was particularly attractive to me, coming from Iceland, where there is a certain tendency to accept uncritically the word of authority figures.

Judy Thomson describes insightfully in an old interview how this commitment was woven into the way philosophy was practiced in the MIT philosophy department: You may give a good paper on Friday afternoon but when you are back in the department on Monday there is no resting on the laurels received on Friday. Your Monday morning argument doesn't get the halo effect of your tri-

umph on Friday: it stand or falls on its own. You and your track record cannot ease its path to acceptance. (Even if you are Judith Jarvis Thomson, I might add).

I was, and am, attracted to this radical egalitarian potential of analytic philosophy. It isn't practiced everywhere, of course, but I was lucky enough to be at some places where that is the norm.

I may be in the minority at this conference, but I think of analytic philosophy as having huge radical potential: no question is off the table and it is claims and arguments that are evaluated, not people. Analytic philosophy has radically anti-authoritarian aspirations.

The question just is: who gets to sit at the table?

I've been a feminist for a long time, perhaps because I was often the only girl engaged in various activities like sports or math and physics competitions. I don't know. But for a long time it wasn't exactly clear how my feminist commitments were expressed in my work, apart from the choice of the subject matter itself and it is only recently that I have started to articulate more clearly how my feminist commitments are reflected in my methodological commitments. Even as recently as January, I gave a talk where I characterized my book on social categories, *Categories We Live By*, as feminist, because it was motivated by feminist social justice concerns. How that was reflected in my methodology, as opposed to the subject matter, was unclear.

Then came the *Hypatia* affair.

I probably don't have to provide much context here, so let me very brief: a philosopher published a paper in *Hypatia*, which is the flagship feminist philosophy journal, in which she argued that arguments for the possibility of changing gender apply equally well for changing race, and that therefore people should be able to change race.

A month or so after the publication of the essay a social media storm began. People were hurt and outraged for a myriad of reasons. Some people were offended by the question or the conclusion; some were offended that a seemingly white, heterosexual, cisgender person was tackling these questions. But there were also more substantive criticisms, including that the author ignored the trans and critical race theory literature on related topics.

I'm on the Board of Associate Editors at *Hypatia*, which is the Board that advises on policy and selects editors, but isn't responsible for the day-to-day running of the journal.

My first reaction to the publication was that this paper was an example of a certain way of doing philosophy that is very prevalent (and accepted) in the discipline of philosophy today. I may think that working on these topics without engaging the trans and critical race theory literature is doing bad philosophy, but I think similar thoughts about a lot of philosophy that doesn't engage what I take to be relevant considerations (I think that way about a lot of current philosophy of language, for example).

This paper is a product of the kind of training most analytic philosophers in the US get, feminist or not (I am interested to hear what non-US based philosophers think about the training in their countries). It isn't a bad example of its kind, although I think its kind is bad for the reason that it doesn't engage what I take to be relevant literature and considerations.

But we are a pluralist feminist philosophy journal. This paper was anonymously refereed by at least two expert colleagues of ours. I might not have accepted it myself, if I had been asked to review it, but that is the journal process.

So my first reaction was this: I don't think the paper as it stands passes muster for being a good feminist philosophy paper, publishable in *Hypatia*, because it doesn't engage the relevant literature. But we are a pluralist feminist journal and some colleagues of mine may apply different standards of excellence and find this a good paper, because it is the sort of paper, apart from its subject matter, that typically gets published in mainstream philosophy journals.

Note that we are not talking about freedom of speech here. At issue is not whether an author can argue for offensive claims or be insensitive in their argument. At issue is what academic excellence in feminist philosophy scholarship consists in.

But the emails, and Facebook messages and phone calls continued. And I started to listen. What exactly is going on?

I am neither trans* nor a person of color. Some of the features I identify with are recognizable socially in the US or Germany, some not. For instance, I'm a lesbian (recognizable). I'm from a very small country (Iceland) that was a colony (the Danes were the lords for some centuries). We speak a minority language

and have various minority practices (including naming practices)-- none of that really registers.

I thought: ok I'm missing something here. Perhaps it's like when people write about the value of language without engaging work on minority languages. Or perhaps it is like when people liken homosexuality to pedophilia. Or, as Richard Swinburne did recently, argue that homosexuality is like disability (seemingly offending homosexuals, people with disabilities, and even those who care about both).

I get that those would be offensive and make me or others mad. But being mad isn't the issue. People can be mad for all kinds of reasons, including, precisely, when someone who makes you mad is right. A case in point is when Rebecca Solnit wrote a piece in *Harper's* magazine, published in 2008 about, among other things, how the Icelandic democracy wasn't functioning. I was royally offended (I thought it worked much better than the American one, for example) and invited her to tea. We became fast friends and the Icelandic economy crashed a week later (largely because of the failure of our democracy).

People can be offended for all sorts of reasons. *Hypatia* as a journal is not an offense police. Our job is to produce excellent feminist philosophy scholarship and our refereeing policies and procedures are to reflect that commitment.

But the response to the publication wasn't all offense, or even hurt. Among all the offense, the hurt, and the outrage, was something that I could recognize as having real critical bite: it was the sense of betrayal.

Amidst the turmoil Lori Gruen reminded me of a passage from an essay María Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman published together. It is in Lugones' voice that they ask(1983):³

What are the things we need to know about others, and about ourselves, in order to speak intelligently, intelligibly, sensitively, and helpfully about their lives? We can show respect, or lack of it, in writing theoretically about others no less than in talking directly with them...

When we speak, write, and publish our theories, to whom do we think we are accountable?

³ "Have We Got a Theory for You! Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism and the Demand for 'The Woman's Voice'" by María C. Lugones, Elizabeth V. Spelman. *Women's Studies International Forum* 6 (1983): 573-81.

There are two main questions in this here. The first question is how we should theorize about other people's lives and the second is the question to whom we are accountable in our theorizing. This second question is the same question as who gets to sit at the table of my radically egalitarian analytic philosopher.

There is a limited number of seats at the table because of the physical limitations of the room, size of table, and so on. And there is a limit to how many communities of people one can hold oneself accountable to because of limited intellectual, emotional, linguistic, material, and temporal resources.

So who are we feminist philosophers, including feminist metaphysicians, accountable to?

Publishing the essay in *Hypatia* without engaging the trans* and critical race theory literature about passing, identity, and related topics, sends the message that the author is not accountable to those communities. But what is worse, it sends the message that the journal is not accountable to those communities. And therein lies the betrayal.

Let me be perfectly clear: I am not blaming the author. I think it could have been an earlier version of myself. We have talked a lot about ideology these past couple of days. The author was badly served by our review process. The paper is a perfectly respectable piece of analytic philosophy in the sense that it is a product of the sort of training most PhD students in the US get. I am also not blaming our editor. Our editor carried out our policies and procedures to a T. Those were the procedures we had at the time. They were shown to be inadequate. That's why the Board of Associate Editors, which is the Board responsible for policies and changes to them, issued an apology. *Hypatia*, the feminist journal, cannot publish essays specifically about the experiences and identities of people in its own community that ignore the scholarship on those very topics by that community.

Doing so is to say to those members of our community: you don't get to sit at our table. We are not accountable to you. We treat you as mere objects of reflection, not as people, living and breathing, and not as theorists to engage with.

It is to enact epistemic marginalization. It is to enact epistemic harm.

The journal is not in the offense police. But it is in the have-you-engaged-the-relevant-literature police. And given our feminist commitments, we as a journal are in the make-sure-we-are-not-enacting-marginalization-of-our-own-community police. We failed.

The Associate Editors apologized to take responsibility for that failure and commit to doing better in the future. We did not express support for a retraction. I did not think that was an option at all: the paper went through our process.

I regret very much the harm the failure of our process caused our author, not to mention the subsequent attacks in the media on our author. She did not deserve any of this. I have no doubt that she had the best of intentions. She has my support, as does our editor.

I, for one, was trying to listen to and learn from, members of our own feminist philosophical community who felt betrayed. But I know many other members of the Board of Associate Editors did not need to be similarly educated.

Struggles over who gets to sit at the table are not new in the feminist community. Not all that long ago lesbians weren't allowed at the feminist theory table, for instance, or black women, or working class women. The ideal of the feminist in the seventies was a middle class, educated, white, heterosexual woman. She was cisgender, of course, but no one would have even recognized that as one of her features.

A variation of this struggle is, to my mind, going on in feminist philosophy today. Feminist philosophers aren't all white, middle class, het, cis, or even women. And I'll add, we aren't all native speakers of English, based in North America, Christian, or trained in a certain way of doing philosophy.

The *Hypatia* affair brought all of this to light and showed the need for many difficult conversations in the feminist philosophy community. As feminist philosophy has become more mainstream, there are now pressures on our community to do the ongoing work to examine ourselves and our practices and have them truly reflect our feminist commitments.

Let me now step back a little.

I've described a transformation that I went through as a result of the *Hypatia* affair. It is a transformation regarding what it means to be accountable to a certain community. And I've described how I think such accountability should be reflected in the methodological commitments of a feminist philosophy journal like *Hypatia*.

But what about my own transformation? And how do I square my commitments to radically egalitarian analytic philosophy with my feminist commitments?

To approach that question I want to go back to the quote from the Lugones and Spelman essay. The essay, you may remember, is called "Have we got a theory for you!" The other question in that quote is how we are to theorize about other people. I actually think it also applies when we theorize about ourselves, but let's not linger with that now. Their suggestion is that we should theorize with respect and take cue from how we talk with each other across difference, especially when much is at stake. We tread carefully, we listen. And we ask questions before we make statements. We are epistemically humble.

Can the analogy help us with how to theorize about other people? How are we to theorize in a respectful way? And, in particular, how are we to theorize when much is at stake for the people we are theorizing about?

There is a feminist public policy practice called "gender mainstreaming", which was introduced at the third world conference on women in 1985 and has been adopted in various countries in the world, including developing nations and Scandinavian countries. The idea is that for any proposed action, an investigation should be conducted into the likely effect on women vs men and a decision as to whether to carry through the action be informed by the potential difference in the effect on the two groups.

I'm not advocating incorporating an analogous mainstreaming practice for theorists. But I think we need to think about whose lives are affected by our theorizing and take great care in engaging their own theoretical perspectives on the issues. These are the people with "skin in the game". The idea of theorizing with respect by engaging people's own theoretical perspectives then also has epistemological implications.

I'm not advocating that only people with skin in the game talk about a certain issue. I'm also not claiming that people with skin in the game have privileged epistemic access to certain issues in such a way that others cannot in principle understand them. That would be a strong interpretation of standpoint theory, and I do not subscribe to it. But I think that people with skin in the game often have perspectives on, and experience with, things that others don't. This is soft standpoint theory and it is compatible with radical analytic egalitarianism.

We need to listen and we need to engage. This means that analytic philosophers like me cannot continue to do theorizing about people as we have done until now.

I say "we" here although there are a number of analytic philosophers who have long ago stopped doing philosophy in that way, and a high proportion of them is in this room.

What does this mean? This means that we have to read and engage with work in related scholarly fields more than we do. We should be very wary of the old "that's not philosophy" trick to push someone off the table in a climate where the discipline of philosophy is extremely white, male, het, cis, and so on. There is gatekeeping going on in philosophy, masked by the ideology of philosophical talent and the associated philosophical genius. There are pressures that direct people who are philosophically inclined and address philosophical questions away from philosophy and to related fields. The reach of our reading, listening, and theoretical engagement needs to take account of that.

It's not going to be easy. While a lot of feminists incorporate work in adjacent fields, including empirical work, philosophers doing metaphysics and related subject generally do not, and it may require a balancing act to meet the sometimes competing standards of mainstream metaphysics and feminist philosophy.

What can I say? Philosophy is hard. Good philosophy is harder.