

## **Philosophers and water spaniels: lessons in objectivity and ignorance**

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There has been a substantial amount of writing about the importance and value of knowledge produced by subordinate and marginalized communities, and the corresponding epistemic advantages of diversity in philosophy. Though there is disagreement about, say, the merits of standpoint theory vs. feminist empiricism vs. postmodern approaches to knowledge, the general claim that the apparently impartial, apparently objective stance of neutrality marks a particular set of privileged attitudes and experiences has become a familiar one. Consequently, one would expect that philosophers – those who love wisdom, those who desire to know – would be incredibly excited by this, and that they would be falling over themselves to learn more about feminist philosophy, critical race theory, disability theory, queer theory, and so forth.

Apparently this hasn't happened.

I don't need to rehearse the situation of diversity in philosophy for this crowd. What I'm interested in are reasons for resistance to it. This panel is pitched as a comparative exploration of the resistance to feminist research ostensibly in the name of a concern with objectivity. My co-panelists are going to say very smart things about issues within their fields. Most of what I'm going to draw together in mine will be familiar to this CSWIP and FEMMSS crowd, but I hope it will help set the stage for our crossdisciplinary conversation about feminist research practices.

The first thing I'd like to do is to explain my title somewhat, since there is a metaphor I'd like to use as I talk about philosophical resistance to feminist work (and work in critical race theory, and disability theory, and queer theory), and what it means for philosophical self-identity.

Robert Bolt's play, *A Man for All Seasons*, is about Thomas More and his refusal to publicly assent to Henry VIII's decision to marry Anne Boleyn and his proposal to split the English church from

Rome. (It's a great play and was made into a great movie). This of course leads to Thomas More's execution.

At one point, one of his friends, the Duke of Norfolk, pleads with him just to go along with it, in order to save his skin. (Not unlike Socrates's friends in the *Crito*, pleading with him to escape). The friend also points out that More is becoming dangerous to know. More decides to pick a fight, to distance himself from the friend. The conversation goes as follows, after More asks Norfolk what the latest trendy dog to breed is:

MORE: What's the name of those dogs? Marsh mastiffs? Bog beagles?

NORFOLK: Water spaniels?

MORE: And what would you do with a water spaniel that was afraid of water? You'd hang it! Well, as a spaniel is to water, so a man is to his own self. I will not give in because I oppose it — *I* do — not my pride, not my spleen, nor any other of my appetites but *I* do — *I!*<sup>1</sup> (Act 2, 72-73).

What I'd like to suggest is that there is something philosophers do that is akin to water spaniels and water. Now, some of our PR might suggest that this is something like wondering — after all, both Plato and Aristotle tell us this is where philosophy begins (*Theaetetus* 155d; *Metaphysics* 1.982b12). But it's not just wonder on its own, but more specifically a kind of incessant questioning. This is highlighted by such blogs as *Philosiology: a guide to living with your philosopher*, which has an entry about how to cope with the incessant questioning of philosophers (Philosiology blog, 2011). It is worth noting that both Plato and Aristotle point out that there is a kind of leisure required to engage in this questioning; it needs to be separate from everyday practical concerns which would require quick decision-making. Being able to properly philosophically explore a topic involves turning it over and examining it from all the different sides.

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<sup>1</sup> The rest of the scene goes: "MORE: Is there no single sinew in the midst of this that serves no appetite of Norfolk's but is, just, Norfolk? There is! Give *that* some exercise, my lord! ... Because as you stand, you'll go before your Maker in a very ill condition! NORFOLK: Now, steady, Thomas... MORE: And he'll have to think that somewhere back along your pedigree — a bitch got over the wall!" The scene as it plays out in the 1966 film is on YouTube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M\\_X5WrDk6js](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M_X5WrDk6js) -- interestingly, the film dialogue replaces water spaniels with bulldogs, good at gripping.

My own departmental website, in describing philosophy, says “At its core a search for understanding, philosophy helps students recognize their deep-rooted beliefs and ideas and challenges them to examine these ideas in detail. We often make certain assumptions about the world around us without even realizing it. Philosophy helps us uncover and analyze these assumptions.” I forget who wrote these words. We jointly edited the whole page. Critically questioning ourselves and the world around us is not incidental to philosophy, it is essential to it, such that amidst the pluralism of the discipline (and the pluralism of my own department), it is something we all agree defines what we do. Even something we’re proud of.

Let’s put this to one side for the moment, and turn to something else: epistemologies of ignorance, and epistemic vulnerability.

Nancy Tuana’s discussion and taxonomy of ignorance is helpful for noting the ways in which power and privilege structure knowledge claims. It is likely familiar, but I’ll just review so it’s fresh for the whole panel:

The first form of ignorance is “knowing that we do not know, but not caring to know” – in other words, that figuring a thing out is not perceived as important to those in authority (Tuana 2006, 4-6). The second is *not* knowing what we don’t know, “because our current interests, beliefs, and theories obscure them” (6-8). The third form of ignorance is withholding information from affected groups or cultivating their ignorance (9-10). The fourth, which is related, is the positioning of some people as not worthwhile knowers, not worth taking seriously (13-15). The fifth form of ignorance is willful ignorance, when privileged groups “do not know and do not want to know” (10-13). It occurs when genuinely coming to *know* and *understand* something would require a change in practices, a change which a privileged, dominant group is unlikely to want to undertake.

The sixth form of ignorance Tuana discusses is somewhat different: it is what she calls “loving ignorance,” and, positioned against the previous pernicious forms of ignorance, involves an attitude of humility toward what we cannot know of others’ experiences. On this note, writing about the relationship between white feminism and women of color, Dawn Rae Davis points to an “ability of not knowing” which involves putting aside “the will to succeed in the knowledge game”: as Davis writes, “we cannot give up on knowledge altogether, but we must give considerable attention to

what knowledge cannot make available” (Davis 2002, 155, 152, 147). I’ll come back to this later.

Erinn Gilson has taken up Tuana’s taxonomy in order to explore the relationship between vulnerability and knowing. Gilson argues that some agents are not just ignorant about the fact of their own ontological vulnerability, but also the denial of vulnerability affects knowledge claims about the world. If vulnerability is a kind of openness to others, an openness to being affected by those around us (as Gilson argues in this article and in her recent book, and as Judith Butler and others have argued), then denial of our vulnerability limits the sense we can make of what others reveal to us if it is likely to be disturbing to our sense of how things are (Gilson 2011, 319-324).

She closes, then, with the endorsement of epistemic vulnerability, or “cultivating the attitude of one who is epistemically vulnerable rather than that of the masterful, invulnerable knower who has nothing to learn from others” (Gilson 2011, 324). She notes that it has five features; I will list the first four briefly, and quote the last at a bit more length: (1) being open to not knowing; (2) openness to being wrong, but still trying to engage in dialogue; (3) to engage in situations in which one is uncomfortable or an outsider, and so unsettled; (4) to pay attention to “affective and bodily dimensions of knowledge”; and (5) “one must be open to altering not just one’s ideas and beliefs, but one’s self and sense of one’s self. If one changes only what one believes but does not allow this alteration to go all the way down, to affect what one does (the practices that shape self-identity), how one thinks about and defines oneself, then the power of vulnerability is limited” (Gilson 2011, 325-6).

This sounds great! And as far as this openness goes, it sounds like what philosophers should totally be doing all the time, right?

I want to suggest that if one’s self-conception is *already* that one is a responsible knower who engages in questioning, that it is possible to use that questioning-identity as a way of deflecting real challenges to self. This is not just an issue for epistemologists to worry about; this is something about how the philosophical habits that shape our identities as philosophers work.

This squares with a 2012 paper that found that cognitive sophistication does not mitigate the tendency to believe that others are more biased than oneself, and that in fact agents with a high

cognitive ability were both just as likely to exhibit classic cognitive biases while at the same time more likely to think they were *not* prey to such biases (West, Meserve and Stanovich 2012). As the study points out, on the one hand, agents with high cognitive ability are used to being able to outperform others cognitively. Further, they can't overcome this just by thinking really hard about it. An attempt to overcome bias by introspection is unlikely to turn up its unconscious mechanisms, and so, as the authors note: "When we fail to detect evidence of bias, we are apt to decide no bias has occurred and that our decision-making process was indeed objective and reasonable" (West et al 2012, 515).

It could be, then, that this kind of introspective work reinforces our sense of our own objectivity. Consequently, the Very Reasonable and Intelligent Critical Questioning we do of what others report to us will not appear to *us* to be shaped by bias, but will seem to be entirely objective (These are the Responsible Questions to Ask!), whereas the unexpected testimony of others seems entirely subjective.

There is a particularly good line from the FAQ of the "What is it like to be a woman in philosophy?" blog can help to highlight this clearly:

(Q) How can I tell which stories are the most representative ones, the good ones or the bad ones?

(A) You can't. Nor can we. And what you think about this issue is probably something of a Rorschach test for what kinds of experiences you have had, or heard about from people you know.

The question seems like an entirely responsible question! And from a water spaniel perspective, the response can't help but be unsatisfying – and yet I think it's an entirely apt one.

In practice, incessant questioning works to shore up a kind of invulnerability – one's identity as philosopher remains unscathed as long as questioning can happen. Being comfortable with this kind of uncertainty – putting aside the questioning for a minute and just taking in the stories themselves – is to exhibit a vulnerability that seems at odds with philosophical water spaniel identity. To engage in questioning can be a strategy to avoid being put *in* question.

To some extent, this is a luxury of dominant individuals in the profession. Feminist philosophy has done much to explore uncertainty, vulnerability, and the social situatedness of knowledge, drawing on the experience of women in a profession in which they are not the norm.

And yet, insofar as feminist philosophers are still philosophers, it's not as though we are magically free from bias in our own work; it may even be possible, that since we are used to noticing bias in others, that we may become defensive when it is called out in our own work. Women of colour feminist philosophers regularly work to remind everyone that calls for intersectionality can be a mask for the very failure to actually engage in it; as Vivian May writes, "Paradoxically, recognition can entail avoidance, even suppression, of black women's knowledge, even as it may signal engagement" (May 2014, 94).

Mariana Ortega discusses the attitudes of white feminists who use the work of women of color in academic and political discussions, and who see themselves as caring about the situation of women of colour and wanting to "give" them a voice – Ortega calls this a "loving, knowing ignorance" (Ortega 2006, 62). As she writes,

Those guilty of this kind of loving, knowing ignorance have learned the main sayings of such well-known feminists of color as hooks, Lorde, and Lugones, and are aware of Spelman's claims about the problems of exclusions in feminist thought. They theorize and make claims about women of color. However, they do not check whether in fact their claims about the experience of women of color are being described with attention to detail and with understanding of its subtleties. In other words, this ignorance goes hand in hand with the production of knowledge about the experience of women of color. The result of this ignorance is that women of color continue to be misunderstood, underrepresented, homogenized, disrespected, or subsumed under the experience of 'universal sisterhood' while 'knowledge' about them is being encouraged and disseminated... (Ortega 2006, 62).

Recall the Dawn Rae Davis quotation from earlier: “we cannot give up on knowledge altogether, but we must give considerable attention to what knowledge cannot make available” (Davis 2002, 147): in other words, not everything is there for *me* and *my* theorizing.

An example of how this failure to check in plays out in my own corner of the philosophical world involves the way that I notice philosophers writing about disability – even very well-intentioned writing. I’ll give an example.

To set the stage: Licia Carlson documents how philosophers make use of the trope of people with severe intellectual disabilities in thought experiments and counter-examples (Carlson 2010, 106-187), and how they fall into the various forms of ignorance listed by Tuana (Carlson 2010, 201-204). In general, they are described as a homogenous group who largely represent the unquestioned *other* of reason. One pattern Carlson explores in detail is the association of intellectual disability and suffering.

Research has shown regularly that nondisabled people tend to assume that disabled people’s quality of life is much lower than the disabled people themselves report, in a phenomenon Ron Amundson describes as “the *anomaly* of the QOL of disabled people” (Amundson 2010, 374). As Amundson reports, the “standard view,” that people who live with disabilities have a low quality of life, has problematic effects in social policy, medical policy and bioethics.

Carlson, consequently, notes that “a primary objective of many disability rights activists and theorists has been to challenge the conflation made by the non-disabled between having a disability and suffering” (Carlson 2010, 164). Much of the work of disability rights activists and theorists has been to try to make clear the difference between suffering caused by impairment effects, and the suffering caused by stigma, social exclusion, and social and economic policies. There has also been a lot of contentious argument (in articles, listservs, blogs, conversations at conferences, Facebook posts, etc.) about when it’s rhetorically, theoretically, or politically safe to discuss experiences of suffering within the disability community, due to the frequency of the “standard view” about disability and suffering. Claims about “suffering” within writing on disability are really quite fraught and need to be very careful.

So. In an otherwise excellent article in *Hypatia* arguing against Peter Singer's deployment of a comparison between animals and people with cognitive disabilities for an argument about moral worth and speciesism, Rachel Tillman writes, in her conclusion:

Can we, as a moral community of philosophers, for example, condone Singer's use of cognitively disabled human beings as the basis of a thought experiment, particularly when, by Singer's own account, they already suffer a great deal? It is unacceptable for Singer to exploit, for the purposes of scholarship, a group of underprivileged, suffering human beings... (Tillman 2013, 29).

Then, in the following paragraph, Tillman notes that there can *also* be suffering as "the consequences of policies made on the basis of such analysis" (like Singer's) (29).

She does not differentiate between the suffering invoked in the two paragraphs, and it reads as though she simply accepts the claim that *of course* intellectual disability entails suffering. The fact of suffering, as she has it, just seems obvious, assumed. (It's worth noting that the only suffering Singer mentions in the article Tillman directly cites is suffering within institutions, not suffering intrinsically from the impairment (Singer 2010, 343)).

The article is generally well-argued, and I don't mean to pick on it (in fact, her argument about cognitive ability and moral worth doesn't require the claim about suffering, which could just have been omitted from her conclusion). But it's a recent example of writing about a group of people without stopping to check in on their experiences, and so struck me as really jarring, as someone who has done some work on philosophy of disability, and who engages with disability studies scholars. As such, it displays a form of ignorance.

But ah! says the philosophical water spaniel. What can we *know* of the experiences and views of people with severe cognitive disabilities? How can we check in?

Well, this is tricky. And Carlson makes a good point when she examines the tension between the form of ignorance of not knowing what we do not know, and loving ignorance. Arguing that

resolving the epistemological challenge of intellectual disability is not simply a matter of better educating philosophers about intellectual disability, she writes:

Perhaps there are dimensions of severe intellectual disability that will always lie beyond a philosopher's (or family member's or advocate's) epistemological grasp. To acknowledge this is to engage in a form of 'loving ignorance,' whereby we 'accept what we cannot know.' In some ways, the tension between these last two forms of ignorance [i.e., not knowing that we do not know, and loving ignorance] may be the space in which to best capture some of the challenges and lessons offered by persons with severe intellectual disabilities. At the very least, the curious fact that those closest to these persons are often most readily able to accept this form of ignorance puts into relief the desperate need for a rethinking of authority, humility, and responsibility. Reclaiming ignorance: what an intriguing and potentially dangerous notion when spoken in the context of fighting oppression and empowering persons with intellectual disabilities. What an odd sounding phrase in a philosophical context, what an absurd slogan for epistemologists... (204).

In an article about disability, quality of life, and moral imagination, Catriona Mackenzie and Jackie Leach Scully note that: "however far the imagination reaches, **imaginative projection is founded in personal experience**" (Mackenzie and Scully 2007, 342).

They write: "imagining oneself differently situated, or even imagining oneself into the other's shoes, is not morally engaging with the other; rather, it is projecting one's perspective onto the other. When the other person is very different from ourselves, the danger of this kind of projection is that we simply project onto the other our own beliefs and attitudes, fears and hopes, and desires and aversions" (Mackenzie and Scully, 345).

As philosophers, even feminist philosophers, we are particularly likely to exhibit biases around the value of intelligence. Which means we should go out of our way to try to think against those, even if it means admitting ignorance – we might have to say "well, I don't know if it's X; but I know that

believing Y comes probably too easy to me...”. As Vivian May puts it, we need to “*think against* dominant imaginaries”, even to the point of having a bias in that direction (May 2014, 101). In this case, we need to think against the standard view.

In describing leaving philosophy as a discipline, Gayle Salamon contrasts philosophy’s need for justification with queer theory:

If justification is concerned with the ordering of beliefs, the reconciliation of one thing with another, the making congruent of different objects or worlds, then queerness as a method would proceed in the opposite way, by supposing a diversion or estrangement from the norm and using that divergence as a source of proliferation and multiplication with the aim of increasing the livability of those lives outside the norm (Salamon 2009, 229).

This is a long way from Plato and Aristotle’s eschewal of practical concerns for the pure value of philosophy. If philosophy were to try to do this, it would mean finding ways of having a little faith in the unknowable, the unresolvable, the messy, and of squaring that with our water spaniel questioning. (Salamon notes: “questions of what we are cannot be extricated from questions of what we do” [Salamon 2009, 230]).

The water spaniel identity has a tight hold on us. Just as Davis says “we cannot give up on knowledge altogether,” Mackenzie and Scully note that “a willingness to be open to, respectful of, and sympathetic towards, the perspective of another does not mean that we cannot engage in critical assessment of the other’s views or check the accuracy of her testimony” (Mackenzie and Scully 2007, 347). We want this, to be responsible!

But what happens if the knowledge to settle the question is beyond our reach?

Really thinking through what feminism, critical race theory, disability theory, queer theory, have to teach us – really thinking through what loving ignorance is – involves a reshaping of our identities around an epistemic vulnerability at our core. But hopefully this can help us to be reborn, again, in

wonder. Maybe we can use critical questioning not just to shut down or exclude, but also to open up.

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