

The Secret Agent

Women, agency, and the colonisation of argumentative space: taking multi-tasking to task.

‘John’s marvellous. He successfully manages to juggle his career with a profound interest in sitting slumped in front of the t.v. watching sport and drinking lager. I don’t know how he manages it’. Why do we never hear anyone say this? Why does it sound absurd? Yet why do we constantly hear accolades to women who ‘juggle’ careers with looking after their families and other domestic tasks? I suspect that the answer to this question will tell us a lot about the relative failures of women to gain the same level of recognition for their achievements that men have managed to attain. No, let me correct that. I do not ‘suspect’. I do not ‘suggest’. I ARGUE, I ASSERT, I CLAIM, I MAKE THE CASE THAT, I SINGLEMINDEDLY DEMONSTRATE THAT, I ADDUCE A NUMBER OF CONSIDERATIONS TOWARDS THE END OF SHOWING THAT women’s agency is seen as dissipated and therefore as relatively ineffectual, compared to the single minded agency of men.

First let me note that the metaphor of women ‘juggling’ multiple tasks is an odd one, for how many women actually do juggle? Hardly any, possibly because they are too busy ‘multi-tasking’ their busy (yet strangely tedious and fragmented) lives to bother to learn an almost completely useless activity which has more or less the sole purpose of getting other people to look at you.

And what is juggling? With what do we juggle? With atoms. You cannot juggle with custard. You cannot juggle with soup. You cannot juggle with baby poop, it’s too runny. You have to juggle with things which are separate to each other. These things have to be in the air all at the same time. These things must remain totally separate, they must not collide. At essence, juggling is inherently fragmented. To live a life of juggling is to live a life in bits that fly past in a dizzying blurr, a blurr that only appears to have a bogus unity, for the success relies essentially on keeping the components apart.

I know someone who juggles. He is a man. He is my nephew’s father. His name is Mark Jordan, and he plays the clarinet professionally. He also plays a large number of other instruments, including the Northumbrian pipes. He also rides a unicycle. He does lots of things like this, in fact. My sister says he is a great father because basically he still likes to play himself. He subscribes to a catalogue of expensive gadgety ‘stuff’ called Big Boys Toys. Peter Maxwell Davies wrote a piece of music for him, Cross Lane Fair, in which Mark is required to play pipes and to juggle with fire whilst riding a unicycle. It’s all scored for the same player in the one coherent piece of work, as a unified performance. This is a great achievement. But get to the point, woman, what are you on about? I am on about this: Although Mark literally juggles, *and* juggles riding a unicycle, *and* what’s more, juggles with fire, *and* juggles as part of a piece of music in which he also plays Northumbrian pipes, this has been knit together by the creative process of the composer into one unified piece of work. He is not someone who plays clarinet, and plays pipes, and plays guitar, and plays oboe, and plays etc etc etc. He is a musician. He is not someone who plays an instrument, *and* juggles. He is a performer. He is not someone who is ‘juggling’ his main career with his hobbies. His skills have been crafted into a whole, given legitimacy as a single act of agency, by someone recognised as a leading composer. His performance has the

unified end of interpretation of the score. He juggles, *literally*, as part of the piece, but he does not juggle, *metaphorically*, because the parts of the performance are not separate components but a unified whole.

Watch out, women, I advise you, when you are praised for being so great at multi-tasking. Deny it. Scorn this ability. Sneer at those who praise you. If a man says, “oh, we men can’t multitask, you women are so good at it,” demonstrate multi-tasking by slapping his face whilst stamping on his foot. (Actually, don’t, that’s assault and that will help no-one.) Actually there are two responses to this question of women and multi-tasking. One is pretty pragmatic. Of course many women do multi-task. Student’s essays get covered in jam, in my house, because I work on the kitchen table and literally check and write emails while the potatoes are boiling but before I need to start making the sauce. But to claim that women are good at multi-tasking is quite fallacious. No one is good at it. Simply keeping your email function on whilst working lowers your IQ by ten points. (As a comparison, going to work stoned only lowers your IQ by five points.) Men are not good at multi-tasking. Women are not good at multi-tasking. Or at least, they are good at multi-tasking in the same way as pregnant women are ‘good’ at going through labour: it’s that or death. We just have to multi-task. So we do it. We are not good at it. We are okay at it.

And some men do and can multi-task too, of course (some can even do really useful things like pat their heads whilst rubbing their tummies); I have not done the research to verify what seems to be the case, that women do more of it than men; but what I am sure of, is that there is a cultural assertion that multi-tasking is the special domain of women. This is a big trap. For one thing, it provides men with an excuse not to do it, and to continue to pile multi-tasking on to women. So deny that you are good at multi-tasking, point out your failings - that pile of philosophical logic essays got splashed with beetroot juice and a rigid designator fell into the soup and your husband nearly choked on it.

And the other trap of accepting the cultural trope that women are good at multi-tasking is that whatever women do is then seen through the multi-tasking lens. A woman’s agency is fragmented, and the energy is observed to be scattered. She is not performing in Cross Lane Fair. She is multi-tasking. She lacks, therefore, coherent unity of agency. She is less of an agent than a man. She is not, therefore, serious in intent. She is not concentrating properly. She is neglecting her career. She is neglecting her kids. She is neglecting her appearance. She is not even giving herself enough ‘me’ time. She is multi-tasking.

And this trope extends further than applying to things a woman does that seem to be clearly ‘non-work’. It includes things a woman does that include work. (It might be used to demean the achievements of some men, too; I am not saying here that all women suffer from this and all men benefit from this, simply talking in broad cultural terms. I think similar things happen, for instance, to men who are seen as popularising philosophy.) Here is an example.

I have worked as a lecturer. I have also worked as a study adviser. And I have also worked as a student counsellor. Now, I am not an expert in the work of David Lewis, but I am certain that *there is no possible world* in which experience of work as a study adviser, helping students to write essays, helping students to understand how to build up and present arguments, helping students to understand how evidence relates to conclusions; there is no possible world in which this

experience does not add to the expertise one has as a lecturer and as a tutor. Likewise, there is no possible world in which training and working as a student counsellor does not add to one's skills as a teacher. It helps you to communicate; it helps you to understand the pressures students are under; it helps you to advise, to know when to refer students for further help, it helps you to nurture students through difficulties. But yet, friendly and sympathetic men giving me advice on presentation of my c.v. advise me to hide or downplay these skills. Why? I am certain I know the answer. It looks as if I am multi-tasking. It looks as if I am not 'serious'. What is she – a lecturer or is she working in a mere adjunct role? Why doesn't she make up her mind? Her career is punctuated with side-shows. Her agency is dissipated. She is not working, single-mindedly, towards one coherent end of advancing her career in an academic discipline, and as a university teacher.

I once worked in a centre where the head was a man who had entered academia late in life after several years working in a hostel for the homeless. This is of course a non-academic job, involving a practical and caring role. He was widely seen to be 'marvellous' for doing this. Not only that, but it was widely seen as adding to his credibility because he knew something about the 'real' world. This was then of course, viewed as relevant to the work he was doing, which had a practical application. So although his past career, in many ways, was a very different role to the role of managing an academic research centre, somehow this was not seen through the multi-tasking lens, but through the Cross Lane Fair lens of being scored together into a coherent story of single-minded agency. Meanwhile, there were three senior women in the centre, each of whom had taken several years away from their careers to raise families. The work of looking after children is in fact very similar to the work of managing a hostel. But were any of us seen to be 'marvellous'? Not on your life. We were seen to have compromised our careers, made sacrifices, we were seen to be multi-tasking. In reality this was absurd. For one thing, research topics our centre covered included issues relevant to reproduction, to families, and to children. Our experiences were no less relevant than an experience of work with the homeless. But our agency was seen to be diluted, and in a way that arguably did not merely fail to advance our career status, but acted as a spoiler to it. Past status did not just stand still, it went backwards. The head of centre had been an undergraduate at university X at the same time that I was a lecturer at that same university. He had spent considerably less time altogether in academia than I. Yet he expected me to show him my work so he could 'check' it. Yes, that's right, I was lecturing when he was a student, and yet he made me show him my notes for seminar presentations so he could make sure they were adequate, as if, somehow, to quote that vile joke, my 'brain had come away with the afterbirth'. I had never had to do this, not once, not since I started lecturing in my twenties fresh from the Oxford BPhil. But teaching is not like ballet dancing or professional football or gymnastics – you are unlikely to become worse at it in middle age simply in virtue of the passage of time. I did this for him once then thought to myself, blow this for a lark, and found ways to sabotage what I thought was an utterly demeaning request.

The model of unfettered single-agency may be so strong in philosophy that any deviation from it may mean you are viewed as entirely excluded. I taught at a university which is divided into two: the faculties, where academics teach and research, and the research school, where they only research. (Well, it's not strictly true they only research: in the mornings, they have to go and have tea and biscuits, and in the afternoons, they have to go and have coffee and cake.) The academic

culture in philosophy there was especially monomaniacal. So a background to my tale is that those in the faculties often got lip from those in the research schools for not taking research more seriously – the explanation of a research seminar unattended because you were lecturing at the time was seen as a feeble excuse and indication of lack of academic endeavour. What then, of little ol’ me? The first person ever to give birth whilst employed as a philosopher there, I returned to work half time when my child was ten months old. A colleague rushed up to me one day *when I was at work*. ‘I hear from X Y-Z (someone in the research school) that you’ve given up philosophy!’ Repeat: he said this to me *when I was at work*. The finding that, whilst at work *as a philosopher*, I had *ipso facto* patently not ‘given up philosophy’ approaches Cartesian standards of indubitability.

Women academics are warned now to be wary of being seen to be associated too closely with skills at pastoral care, and to warn their referees about a tendency to stress pastoral care skills when writing references for women. The pastoralcareophilic nature of women is a cliché that often hampers a woman’s career because it is seen as a secondary and a lower status service industry to the central academic enterprise of research and teaching. But I argue that it is not simply that pastoral care is seen as of lower status, of a lower intellectual standing, but that those women seen to be too involved, or indeed involved at all, in pastoral care may be seen through the energy- and agency-dissipating lens of multi-tasking. They are not really honing in on advancing their careers and their intellectual endeavours. They are side-lined into an unconnected, domestic sort of activity. Oh, indeed, they are *juggling* research and teaching and pastoral care. How good of them somehow to fit it all in! How good of them to make time to see those sobbing students! (Jolly handy, since it saves others doing it so they can *get on with the job*.) Especially good for these women (and fuzzy men) to do all this pastoral case when it so obviously *saps their agency*.

That I think this is bollocks should be clear by now. This view of pastoral care as something additional to the role of lecturer is imposed, not given. It could just as easily be scored into a harmonious and unified account of agency, just as easily be seen as something which increases the professional standing of those involved in it, just as easily be seen as evidence of single-minded dedication to role. It’s just a pity that it isn’t. (In this case, a pity for students, for the health of institutions as a whole, as well as for individuals whose career progress and status in the eyes of colleagues is affected by this.) Pastoral care is seen as a separate juggling ball to the main enterprise of academic life, and likewise, in many contexts, concern with teaching is seen as a separate juggling ball to the main enterprise of research. This is, of course, a load of balls.

There is further research that lends credibility to these points. Men who can speak a foreign language have better job prospects and better pay than those who can’t. Women who can speak a foreign language have worse job prospects and worse pay. The explanation given by the researchers who discovered this fits neatly into my current rant. The men were seen as learning a foreign language in order to advance their career – learning a language was part of a unified strategic thrust towards a goal. Women were seen as learning a foreign language as a hobby, for fun, and therefore their seriousness of intent is dissipated. They are not really concentrating on their careers. They are multi-tasking. Yet a man doing exactly the same thing is a seamless unity of solid agency.

Likewise, if I had time (sorry, I have to go to clean out the chickens soon, write a tutorial report and do some shopping) (joke) I am sure I could adduce evidence to show that a man, who in his intellectual career, covers a variety of topics is a Giant of Achievement. A woman who does the same is a Butterfly (if her career achievements are even noticed at all).

This perceived dissipation of agency is a particular problem in an academic field where to advance one's career it is vital to be seen to be doing important, weighty work. It is important to be seen as a leader in one's field. 'Must have an international reputation' is now the norm for high level academic posts. But how does one get such a reputation? I shall here aside other serious issues such as the need to spend half one's life going to pointless trans-Atlantic conferences and greasing up to those who get invited to the academic celebrity 'A' list events, in order to concentrate, with full and thrusting agency, on the immediate question at hand.

How does one get to be a leader in one's field? By colonising the argumentative space. By having one's name associated with certain topics, with certain questions, with certain terms coined. By being seen to be a serious player. By a unity of agency with respect to the field in question. It is not enough to wander into an argumentative space, eat a picnic, take a few snaps on your camera-phone, and wander off again. It is not enough even, to use a Lockean metaphor, to have mixed the soil with one's labour, to worked the soil with one's own spade. One has to plant one's flag, rush off to the solicitor to stake a claim. And clear off the opposition, or at least, assign them to one of two groups: those who go ahead to clear the ground, the John the Baptist types, and disciples – or at the least, equal colleagues in a 'you cite me, I'll cite you' club.

There are so many examples and illustrations of this that I could go on *ad nauseam*. One particular instance that has especially got my goat is noticing how frequently Bernard Williams gets cited as being The One who first in the twentieth century started asking interesting questions about normative ethics by noting that moral philosophy was 'empty and boring' and did not in fact discuss moral issues at all. I've read pieces that give him this status several times in recent months. I've also seen him credited with being the person who revived virtue ethics. I think that how he did this was simply first of all by assertion – like Captain Cook arriving at Botany Bay in 1788, with a legal fiction, staking his claim to *terra nullis*, to a counterfactually empty land - by *simply asserting*, in 1972, that moral philosophy was empty because it did not discuss any serious issues. Now, there were men who had discussed interesting and substantive issues in moral philosophy before Williams started sounding off. But let's look at the work of some of the women, given that this is our focus. (It's always been obvious that the alpha males trample on other males as well as on women. Sorry, non-alpha males, no offence intended, but I'm concentrating on women here.) Long before then, Philippa Foot and Elizabeth Anscombe had between them discussed at least: war, nuclear weapons, abortion, contraception, the double effect. Anscombe discussed just war in 1939. The morality of nuclear weapons in 1956 and 1961. Moral authority in 1962. Contraception in 1965. Her classic essay 'Modern Moral Philosophy' discussing problems in normative ethical theory and introducing discussion of virtue ethics came out in 1958. Foot repeatedly discussed substantive questions about moral philosophy, moral beliefs and moral arguments, as well as the topic of abortion. (Moreover, Judith Jarvis Thomson's now classic essay 'A defence of abortion' appeared in 1971.) In what idyllic Shangri La is being blown up by a nuclear bomb merely 'boring'? In what skewed view of the world is

contraception, which has radically changed the lives of half the human race, not an important moral issue?

There is more than one way in which women's agency may be diminished, trivialised or ignored. A group of ways falls under the multi-tasking strategy of fragmenting agency. Another way in which such career-making coups are performed is, I suggest, simply by assertion. Simply to have the self-image of oneself as forging ahead with the express intent of clearing up some tangled thicket, or of sweeping triumphant over the endless empty steppes, can be enough. But to do this one has to have a clear sense of one's own agency. This is something that culturally men are more likely to have, for various reasons but including the ways in which, as I have outlined above, the agency of women is belittled. Clear assertion, and being seen to be making clear assertions, is needed in order to be recognised as the Ur coloniser of a piece of argumentative space. Those who happened to be in the thickets, or in the steppes, before you, were simply wandering around without this clear sense of agency. They had not filed their public claim. They lacked seriousness of intent. Or, perhaps, they were even there as handmaidens, graciously to herald your messianic arrival. They had not geared their work to a shining end, they were just beginning to mention it, just beginning to potter about with something that it took a man's single minded agency fully to understand and grasp. Or, at least, that's how it is being told.

I remember being thrilled in the 1980s when I read research in social linguistics that showed that often, when a woman speaks, she'll be ignored, and a short time later, a man will make the same point only to have it taken up as 'his' point. Eureka! Note to self: am not mad. All those undergraduate metaethics tutorials where I kept saying to my tutor 'But I just said that' explained at a stroke. All those philosophy department seminars and meetings where I made a point, only to have it taken up as 'Keith's point' or 'Andrew's point', were explained. More seriously, I felt a certain vindication. My undergraduate tutor had refused to write a reference for me on the grounds that I 'hardly spoke' in tutorials. Honestly, honestly, this was not true. He simply did not hear me as having spoken. (And the other tutor in these jointly taught classes actually confirmed this some years later when he included me in the 'thanks' section of a book as having contributed to the development of his ideas.)

And if women are heard, it is hard for them to be heard to be doing anything novel or really seriously critical. Asking a probing question of a speaker who has just presented their paper, the woman will be patiently told, 'You don't understand,' not, 'you do understand and oh dearie me, perhaps I'm wrong'. The woman is then treated to a Janet and John account of the subject she just wrote a thesis/book/lecture series on. Coming up with a new way of addressing the problem, that there is a good reason not to use methodology Y, presenting arguments that to claim X is misguided, she will be told, 'you don't understand. I am using methodology Y. I am claiming X'. I cannot recall hearing a man being told publicly and in such an abrupt manner 'you don't understand'. But it has happened to me so often that I am starting to think that maybe speaking up in public discussions of philosophy is actually a pyrrhic victory. I have wondered to myself by what mysterious a-causal means my students manage to pass their exams, given that they are taught by someone who just 'doesn't understand'. And it means that it's harder for women to be heard in public philosophical debate to be changing the game plan, bringing something fresh and different to the table.

This sucks the life-blood out of women speakers and renders anaemic their intellectual agency. The same thing happens too, to women writers. It even happened to Foot and Anscombe, in how Williams has come to be seen by some to have pioneered a field they had occupied for years. The changing citation practices in philosophy are a two-edged sword in this respect. (They might actually be a one-edged sword, I'm still thinking about that.) In days gone by, the average philosophy article did not have many references, sometimes none. Now there are far more. This means of course that other papers and books are thus referenced. And this then gives perfect opportunity to reinforce the dominance of those who have managed to get themselves known as the rightful inheritors of particular patches of argumentative territory. The Matthew Effect has in fact been demonstrated here: to him who has already conned people into citing him as having said something first, will yet more citations be given. Publishing styles now require more citations, and you may even end up being required to cite someone who had in fact nicked your ideas in the first place. And given a whole lot of other phenomena which tend to the same end, that person is more likely to be a man than to be a woman. Again, the intellectual agency of women is (disproportionately) diminished.

And the capacity to build up a reputation is further enhanced simply by being seen as being on the path of building up a body of work, simply by being seen as having purposive direction and single minded intellectual agency. You will then get firmly associated with this area of work, will be more likely to be cited, and you are on a roll. To work across a range of issues, or to change your mind, will undermine this. Or, rather, to be *seen to be* working across a range of issues – juggling, multi-tasking different areas of philosophy or even, heaven forbid, working in interdisciplinary areas – will undermine the perception of your intellectual agency, unless you can get yourself accorded Intellectual Giant status.

I have often gawked in sheer amazement at this common phenomenon: A man gives a philosophy paper. The audience rips it to shreds. It is full of staggering and obvious flaws. The man just stands there taking it all in his stride. He carries on asserting his insanely untenable views. He in fact writes and re-writes minutely re-worked versions of the paper, or just strides on with new work on a similar and totally untenable vein. He shows no sign that he creeps home and weeps. He shows no sign of recanting his views. He remains triumphant. People stop noticing how untenable it all is. Is there a secret workshop somewhere where male philosophers go to get themselves coated with some sort of intellectual Teflon such that they can remain impervious while the criticisms slide cleanly off? I'm not sure I would want to use this coating myself, but I would be curious to see the formula. The key, of course, is a supreme confidence and single mindedness of intellectual agency, of holding on to a particular piece of intellectual turf. There are those who have achieved eminence despite showing changes of mind. But the strategy of sticking to one's guns seems preferred by many who are recognised for their success.

The real key, of course, is sustaining the *impression* of serious intellectual agency throughout, which is why it is possible to do this even with large changes of mind. But I do suspect that sheer confidence of one's own intellectual standing and agency is a real help. I have not seen empirical confirmation of this, but I suspect that many female philosophers are more likely to self-censor their views and not publish because they can see the flaws in their position. If you are really confident, you'll be more likely, not necessarily to fail to notice the flaws, but to think they are minor hiccups you can easily address. If you are more circumspect in your views, you are less

likely to be seen to be staking a claim to a particular argumentative space, even if you do publish. I also have a sneaking suspicion that a possible reason for the worse performance of women undergraduates at finals might have something to do with the degree of intellectual agency in which they express themselves in their exam answers, or rather, the degree of intellectual agency with which they are perceived to express themselves. Okay, I do not have a sneaking suspicion. I assert, I argue, I affirm. I just haven't got proof yet.

None of this means that women doing philosophy – and the men who fall foul of some of these issues too – do not really possess vibrant intellectual agency. Of course we do. This agency has just been diminished, and where it exists, it has been under-recognised, by a variety of means. We have been agents, but we have been secret agents. Time to come out into the open.

Paula Boddington,
Kitchen table,
Somewhere in Oxford.