

Does feminist philosophy rest on a mistake?

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1.

My topic for today is the widespread hostility directed towards feminist philosophy by much of mainstream analytic philosophy. I want to say from the outset that this hostility might be best explained as an instance of a general hostility toward feminism, or indeed towards women, both within philosophy and within the broader culture. But, for the purposes of this talk, I want to take seriously the possibility that there is something wrong with feminist philosophy *as such*. That is, I want to take seriously the possibility that the hostility directed at feminist philosophy by mainstream analytic philosophers does not reduce to a hatred of feminism, or of women, but is instead motivated by a legitimate objection to feminist philosophy itself.

The objection I have in mind is that feminist philosophy rests on a mistake: namely, a conflation of epistemology and politics. Philosophy, at least on the conventional understanding, is an epistemic project, a project oriented toward truth or knowledge, and thus committed to the kind of unfettered inquiry that is conducive to the acquisition of truth and knowledge. Feminism meanwhile is a political project, a project oriented toward the emancipation of women and the dissolution of patriarchy. How then could something be at once philosophy and feminist? How could the unencumbered pursuit of knowledge itself have a political orientation? In other words how could there really be *feminist* philosophy?

I want to suggest that this is a worry worth taking seriously. Not just because, as I suspect, it partly motivates (or at least is taken to justify) the widespread suspicion of feminist philosophy. In truth, I have very little interest in defending the legitimacy of feminist philosophy to the philosophical hegemon. I resent that the burden-of-proof lies with feminist philosophers to demonstrate the worth of their activity, especially as so many feminist philosophy sceptics seem to have read very little of that which they scorn. The proper account of feminist philosophy will be given by the swell of philosophical history, as old figures and prejudices die out and new forms and figures rise up. Rather, I want to take seriously the idea that feminist philosophy might rest on a mistake because thinking about this problem raises a

worthwhile metaphilosophical question: namely, in what ways can philosophical inquiry be ethically or politically committed while still counting as philosophy, conventionally understood?

This way of framing the question shows why the issue extends beyond the particular intersection of philosophy and feminism, to every juncture where traditional philosophy and forms of political practice come together. Just as we can ask how there can be a *feminist* philosophy, we might also ask, analogously, how can there be such a thing as an *anti-racist* philosophy, or an *anti-colonial* philosophy, or a *green* philosophy. What room is there for politics – politics understood not just as subject matter, but as an orientation, a set of practical commitments – within philosophy? Can philosophy itself be political, or is it destined only ever, at best, to be *about* politics?

2.

Let me try to get straight on the worry. The sceptic who worries about feminist philosophy, but does not take any special issue with feminism, would grant that philosophy *of* feminism would be perfectly coherent – as would philosophy of X for just about any X. Philosophy *of* feminism might be boring or uninteresting or marginal (or, worst of all, ‘soft’), but it wouldn’t rest on some sort of conceptual error – at most just an error in taste. For philosophy of feminism wouldn’t be itself politically committed to feminism. It would instead be merely *epistemically* committed to the project of knowing the truths about issues that are relevant to feminism, e.g. the truths about the metaphysics of sex and gender, the nature of patriarchy and objectification, the ethics of difference and identity, and so on. And just as one needn’t be committed to the value or truth of liberalism to pursue the philosophy of liberalism, or to the value or truth of science to engage in the philosophy of science, one needn’t be politically committed to feminism in order to pursue the philosophy of feminism. Indeed, the philosophy *of* feminism might produce results that were hostile to feminist goals or feminist orthodoxies.

But *feminist* philosophy? The term suggests a project that is (somehow) at once epistemically *and* politically committed. And indeed, when we think of, as it were, the sub-disciplines of feminist philosophy – feminist epistemology, feminist metaphysics, feminist philosophy of science, feminist philosophy of mind – it turns out that feminism itself is hardly the sole or even primary subject matter of contemporary feminist philosophy. So we have a project that purports to be properly philosophical – which is to say, committed to knowing the truth – and also properly feminist, which is to say in some sense politically committed to women’s emancipation. And it is at least a *prima facie* puzzle to wonder how such a project could be possible. For any inquiry that is politically committed seems to be

epistemically suspect, but any inquiry that has no political orientation is *a fortiori* not feminist. (It would be, at best, the philosophy *of* feminism.)

Thus the critic of feminist philosophy Susan Haack writes that “[t]he rubric ‘feminist epistemology’ is *incongruous on its face*, in somewhat the way of, say, ‘Republican epistemology’” (2003, 8). She goes on to warn that:

What is most troubling is that the label [‘feminist epistemology’] is designed to convey the idea that *inquiry should be politicized*. And that is not only mistaken, but dangerously so...[T]he presupposition on which it rests – that genuine, honest inquiry is neither possible nor desirable – is, in Bacon’s shrewd phrase, a “factitious despair”....[I]nquiry is really best advanced by people with a genuine desire to find out how things are, who will be more persistent, less dogmatic, and more candid than sham reasoners seeking only to make a case for some foregone conclusion...(ibid, 15).¹

In other words, Haack accuses feminist philosophy of committing the sin associated with what she calls the most ‘vulgar’ form of pragmatism: the sin of taking the *usefulness* of a particular claim as grounds to believe in its *truth*. In this way, feminist philosophers violate an elementary epistemic norm: that propositions are to be believed only for *epistemic* reasons, never for practical ones. As such feminist philosophers are at best sham reasoners, and sham philosophers.

With a similar logic but in an entirely different spirit, the feminist philosopher Nancy Bauer expresses the seeming paradox thus:

From the point of view of sceptical philosophers...philosophy’s unimpeachable commitment to open inquiry is incompatible with feminist ‘theory,’ which, in their view, is by definition constrained by a political bottom line...‘[F]eminist philosophy’ can look like a contradiction in terms (2001, 19).

Bauer’s answer to this puzzle is that feminist philosophy must involve a radical re-imagining of philosophy itself – philosophy, to be feminist, must become more concerned with lived reality, and less concerned with the metaphysical goal, as Bernard Williams put it, of ‘getting it right’ (1989, 3). Thus Bauer endorses the view that ‘feminist philosophy’ is a sort of contradiction in terms, a contradiction that must be resolved through a radical revision of philosophy itself.

Pace both Bauer and Haack I want to propose that we can make sense of ‘feminist philosophy’ without a reconceptualisation of philosophy. In particular, there can be

¹ For a take-down of Haack and other critics of feminist epistemology, see Anderson [cite review]

such a thing as a *feminist* philosophy that displays due deference to the traditional philosophical demand to ‘get it right’. Susan Haack’s claim that feminist philosophy involves a confused and ethically pernicious commitment to ‘sham reasoning’ presupposes a naïve conception of philosophical method, according to which ‘honest’ inquiry must be free of moral and political commitment. But the political and the practical can – and by necessity, do – legitimately enter into our philosophical theorising. Or so I shall argue.

This does not mean I wish to dismiss Bauer’s call to a revolutionary marriage between feminism and philosophy. But I want to suggest that even if such a revolutionary partnership is desirable, a more modest, conventional marriage is also possible. That is, it is possible for philosophical inquiry to be politically committed to feminism and yet be duly deferential to the demand to ‘get it right’, to respect the distinction between what is true and what is merely useful. That so many philosophers seem to think otherwise betrays either their own failure to attend to what *they* are doing when they themselves do philosophy, or an ugly prejudice against feminism (or women) as such. I’ll leave it to you to decide which would be the greater sin.

But before I get to all this, first a quick word on metaphilosophy. Metaphilosophical questions require us to decide on various first-order philosophical questions. There is no deep distinction between philosophy and metaphilosophy. If I am to have a view about what philosophical methods are conducive to knowledge, or which bits of philosophical discourse are empty and which substantive, I must take up, whether I realise it or not, a position within the logical space of first-order philosophy – I must, that is, presuppose various claims in epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of language, and so on. Thus there can be no philosophically neutral, or philosophically uncontentious, account of philosophical methodology. So my proposed way of making sense of ‘feminist philosophy’ will not be, and could not possibly be, philosophically uncontentious.

3.

In order to discuss my favoured way of making sense of the notion of feminist philosophy, I need to say something about that famous feminist philosopher, Quine.

In his attack on the analytic/synthetic distinction, Quine famously invoked the notion of a ‘web of belief’ (1951). Each person’s set of beliefs can be thought of, he suggested, as an integrated array, with the beliefs at the periphery of the web those that the agent is disposed to give up in the face of recalcitrant evidence, with the beliefs at the centre those that the agent is disposed to cleave to, come what may. Our webs of belief face the tribunal of experience as a whole, and how each person will respond to new evidence depends on how that whole is constructed.

Quine's lovely image offers a model for a kind of permissive, minimal rationality, a model that acknowledges the fact we are distinguished from each other in not only what we believe, but in how strongly we believe it, how fiercely we cleave to it, and what beliefs we are willing to give up to hold onto those beliefs we feel most dear. What matters, on such a view, is how well the web as a whole stands up to the onslaught of experience, not the particular components that make it up.

As I said, this is a radically permissive view of rationality, one that does not sit well with the common epistemological thought that there exist objective evidential probability relations between bodies of evidence and propositions, or the even more common epistemological thought that certain combinations of beliefs (say, logical contradictions) are *a fortiori* irrational.

But whatever the merits or defects of the 'web of belief' as a model of epistemic rationality, it strikes me as a remarkably good model for explaining philosophical disagreement. Every philosopher has had the experience of encountering a thoughtful, reflective and brilliant colleague who simply disagrees with her, at a deep and bedrock level. With enough conversation, with enough excavation, it's possible to identify the fundamental difference that divides you: a clash of intuitions, a conviction one of you has but the other lacks, a theoretical trade-off to which you respond differently. One of you opts for simplicity at the cost of counterintuitiveness, the other embraces complexity in order to gain more plausibility.

At Oxford I have occasion to interact with utilitarians who believe that we are morally obligated to stop animals from killing each other in the wild, or that we should euthanise disabled infants, or that torture is sometimes permissible. When I try to understand how obviously brilliant people could believe something that I take to be an obvious absurdity, I reach for Quine's metaphor. At the centre of the utilitarian's web of beliefs lies the conviction that happiness must be maximised and suffering minimised. It is not a conviction that is open to revision in the face of recalcitrant data. What I see as counterexamples, the utilitarian simply sees as consequences. Meanwhile, if I ever had that utilitarian belief, it resided near the edge of my web, and it was swiftly discarded when I grasped what it would imply in ethical reality.

To take a non-moral example, consider the debates about vagueness. In defending his epistemicist theory of vagueness – according to which there simply is a fact of the matter about how many hairs it takes (or rather, doesn't take) to be bald – Tim Williamson appeals to his fundamental conviction in classical logic. Epistemicism about vagueness is necessary to save classical logic. Opponents of epistemicism, meanwhile, would rather abandon classical logic so as to be able to deny what they take to be the absurd consequences of Williamson's view. Again in explaining these

differences, we might appeal to Quine's web metaphor: what explains the difference between Williamson and his supervaluationist rivals is where the commitment to classical logic sits in their respective webs of belief.

We can similarly employ the web metaphor to think of arguments between naturalists and non-naturalists, internalists and externalists, compatibilists and libertarians, Humeans and non-Humeans, and so on.

But how are we, in turn, to explain the differences between people's webs of belief? Why is my web structured in one way, and yours another? Here we find ourselves appealing to psychological, cultural and sociological explanations. We might say: so-and-so studied epistemology at Oxford and so is deeply committed to externalism. Or: so-and-so has a strong need for simplicity and rules, and so is inclined toward utilitarianism. Or: so-and-so is the descendent of Holocaust survivors, so has strong Kantian instincts. Or: so-and-so studied under Michael Dummett, and so is driven by an Oedipal urge to defend the law of the excluded middle. These kinds of explanations give us a way of understanding philosophical disagreement when we no longer have any reasons to offer each other.

Of course, if you ask a philosopher why he is an externalist, a utilitarian, a Kantian, or a realist, he probably won't say: because I studied at Oxford, or because I like simplicity, or because I'm the descendent of Holocaust survivors, or because I'm trying to symbolically work through my desire to kill my father. That would be to explain his views in terms of *causes*. Instead, being a philosopher, he will offer *reasons*: he will point to the nice, intuitive implications of his view, and to the ugly, counterintuitive implications of contrary views. But in the end, if met with a staunch sceptic, he will finally have to admit that his reasons give out, that his spade is turned.

This is not to say that philosophers don't *know* their views, just because our views are shaped by accidents of birth and enculturation – contrary to what some experimental philosophers seem to think. For reasons cannot go all the way down. If we are capable of knowing anything – that is, if scepticism is false – then it must be that some beliefs are justified without our being in a position to say why to the satisfaction of the sceptic. If scepticism is false, it must be possible to say: "I only believe this because I was born in this particular place or time or in this particular body, but yes, I know it all the same." So recognising the sociological, psychological and cultural contingency of our philosophical worldviews doesn't necessarily mean embracing some general metaphilosophical scepticism. But it does not mean recognising that at a certain point we can only explain our philosophical views, not in terms of our *reasons* for holding them, but only in terms of the *genealogy* that gave rise to them.

I want to suggest that this is something most philosophers tacitly know. We tacitly know, that is, that our philosophical worldviews are shaped by the contingencies of time and place, of history and culture. It is not however something we generally talk about. It's not part of the official self-conception of philosophy. As philosophers we are armed only with reason, and we are embarrassed when our reasons give out. That they must at some point always give out is a collective shame we'd mostly like not to discuss.

Thus we can think of the label 'feminist philosophy' as a way of *outing* oneself as having a certain genealogy that gives a certain shape to one's philosophical worldview. The genealogy I have in mind is of course that of a particular political formation, namely feminist political formation. To call oneself a feminist philosopher is to declare that one's web of beliefs has been shaped by one's encounter and identification with the battle against patriarchy. Feminist political formation shapes the commitments one is most loathe to give up, how one weighs the balance of theoretical virtues, what one finds philosophically interesting or dull, and how suspicious one will be that received theories are driven by gendered dichotomies and elision of female experience.

Someone who 'outs' herself a feminist philosopher isn't saying that the identity of certain claims as feminist provides her *reasons* or *grounds* for accepting them. Rather, she is saying that her feminist formation is in part what *causes* her to find these claims compelling. Her *reasons* for her beliefs are as they are for all of us: certain claims, for example the badness of gender oppression, simply strike her as obviously true. And it is precisely her feminist formation that has led her to be able to see such claims as obviously true. To use a term from the philosophy of science, the 'feminist' in 'feminist philosophy' indicates something about the *context of discovery*, that is the background conditions that lead the feminist philosopher to form her theories of the world. But the mere fact that certain claims are part of the feminist orthodoxy, or are conducive to feminist projects, isn't relevant to the context of *justification*. There all that matters is that claims really are true, or at least that there is good epistemic reason to believe they are.

Crucially, on this conception of what is meant by 'feminist philosophy', there is no betrayal here of the metaphilosophical demand to, as Bernard Williams said, 'get it right'. For feminist philosophers can very well insist that it is precisely their socialisation as feminists that allows them to get many things in philosophy right, things that many others get wrong. It is not strange, after all, to think that one's ability to think about politics is limited without an awareness of gender oppression; or that one's thinking about metaphysics will be hindered if one does not take seriously the ontology of gender; or that one's thinking about epistemology will suffer if one hasn't reflected on the ways in which oppression shapes the possibilities for knowledge. It's not strange to think, in other words, that feminist formation

constitutes an epistemic advantage in philosophy, just as might other kinds of progressive and radical political formations.

So on the view I'm proposing, feminist philosophy is *not* a philosophy that takes the 'feminist' nature of a particular view as a reason to hold it, but instead a philosophy that consciously embraces feminist political formation as a way of doing philosophy better. As a way of getting it right.

4.

The critic of feminist philosophy will likely object as follows: *sure, it's true that our webs of belief are shaped by our particular backgrounds, and that people can rationally disagree because of the different constitutions of their webs of belief. But the problem with these 'feminist' philosophers is that at the centre of their webs of belief lie moral and political beliefs! It's fine to reject some ethical claim because it has counterintuitive metaphysical or epistemological implications, but you can't do it in reverse – you can't just reject metaphysical or epistemological views because you don't like their ethical or political implications!*

In other words, according to my imagined critic, one can arrange one's web of beliefs as one likes, so long as one doesn't have ethical or political commitments at its centre. One must always be willing to give up ethical or political commitments in the face of metaphysical, epistemological or scientific pressure. If there are strong metaphysical, epistemological or empirical arguments that women are inferior to men, or deserve to be subjugated, or that patriarchy is a myth, then we should be open to rejecting our feminist convictions in light of such arguments. Otherwise we are just engaged in *sham* reasoning.

This strikes me as a preposterous view, but sadly no less common for that. Notice that at work here is not Quine's web but a different metaphor: that of the 'hard' core of philosophy – logic, metaphysics, epistemology, language – versus the 'soft' periphery of ethics and politics. Whereas on the Quinean view we can and do arrange our webs as we like, on the hardcore vs. soft-periphery view, ethics and politics must always be relegated to the margins. This marginal status isn't just one of valuation: it's not just that metaphysics and epistemology are harder than or superior to ethics and political philosophy. It's also that they are *philosophically* prior: claims in ethics and political philosophy can be trumped by metaphysics and epistemology, but not vice versa. Our ethical commitments need to remain radically open to revision, whereas our 'hardcore' beliefs do not.

There is much to say against such a metaphilosophical view, but I will confine myself to a few observations. First, if feminist philosophy is guilty of prioritising ethical claims over non-ethical claims, then so are many others. Ronald Dworkin, Thomas Nagel and T.M. Scanlon for example all appeal to various first-order ethical

considerations to reject particular metaphysical conclusions and establish others, but they are rarely derided as sham reasoners.

Second, notice that epistemological claims are not any less normative than ethical or political claims – consider, for example, the epistemological claim that the brain-in-a-vat is *blameless* for his false beliefs. Given that epistemological claims are themselves normative, it's not clear why they should enjoy any priority over ethical claims. Why does epistemology get to be within the unrevisable the 'hard core', but ethics doesn't? If I can take as given certain *epistemological* assumptions, why cannot I equally take certain *ethical* assumptions as given?

Third and most significantly, *all* philosophy, like all theory, is value-laden. We don't just favour some theories over others on pure evidential grounds; to select a theory from an infinite array of equally evidentially supported theories, we appeal to *values*, such as simplicity and elegance. This is as true in the hard-core as within the soft. There is, as Putnam says, no fact-value distinction to be drawn. There are no theoretical claims that we accept for purely descriptive, value-less reasons.

If feminist philosophers are guilty of wrongly prioritising the normative over the non-normative, then it is a crime that they share with many other philosophers. But we should query the claim that it is a crime at all, given the value-ladenness of *all* philosophical theory.

5.

A second objection to my way of making sense of feminist philosophy comes not from the critic of feminist philosophy but from the feminist herself. What exactly does a 'feminist' web of beliefs look like? Isn't the very idea of a 'feminist' web of beliefs too reductive, not in keeping with a feminism that is properly attentive to difference and diversity?

I think this worry is a good one. I didn't mean to suggest that there is a single thing that constitutes a 'feminist' web of belief, a single kind of web of beliefs that a feminist formation, and *only* a feminist formation, will produce. Rather, feminist webs of belief merely share a family relation: an insistence on the reality of patriarchal oppression, a suspicion of certain gendered dichotomies, an interest in the social and political, a concern for the particular and the detailed, a suspicion that much of what is taken for fact is gendered myth. The connection here is not one of *necessity*: it will be hard to identify commitments, intellectual dispositions or styles of thinking that all and only feminists possess.

But it's important to note that the connection here isn't one of pure contingency, either. It is rather a statistically significant, historically and culturally produced

connection. Indeed, part of the value of the label ‘feminist philosophy’ is that it calls into question the usefulness of the philosophical distinction between contingency and necessity.

For example, my web of beliefs is, I think, correctly labelled as *feminist*, though there is no necessary connection between my feminist political identification and most of the features of my web. There is no necessary connection between my being a feminist and, say, my believing that racism or colonialism is a moral abomination; but to think there is no *important* connection here is to ignore the historical and cultural connectedness between feminist and anti-racism and anti-colonial struggles. The philosophical fetish for the necessary connection should not make us lose sight of other, politically significant connections that exist between our personal formations and our philosophical beliefs.

6.

So, just what is the political significance of outing oneself as being shaped, *qua* philosopher, by feminism? First and obviously, outing oneself as a feminist philosopher implies that feminism is not a shameful label: that it is a good thing, or at least not a bad thing, to be a feminist. Second, it implies that ‘feminist’ is not a label that any truth-loving intellectual should eschew. It implies that there is no tension between the goals of truth-seeking and feminist political commitment; indeed it implies that being a feminist is a particularly good way of seeking philosophical truth, and that those who aren’t shaped by feminism might as a result be philosophically inadequate.

Third, outing oneself as a feminist philosopher calls attention to what I referred to earlier as our collective genealogical shame – that is, our shame as a discipline that in the end we must admit that our spades are turned, that we believe everything we do for contingencies of birth and enculturation, that our reasons don’t go all the way down. Outing ourselves as feminist philosophers calls into question the official self-conception of philosophy as that which is done from no point of view at all, a practice that is immune from the forces of history, culture and politics.

One immediate practical upshot of this is that, once the official self-conception is shattered and has been replaced by what we all tacitly know about our disciplinary practice, the demand for greater diversity in philosophy becomes a matter of not just political but *philosophical* urgency. Given philosophy’s official self-conception, it is all too easy to think that the requirement that philosophy become more diverse is purely ethical: it is *ethically* important, given a commitment to equality, that philosophy include more women, more people of colour, more disabled people, more queer people, more socioeconomically oppressed people.

And that is of course true. But once we recognise that the outputs of our philosophical theorising are radically shaped by how, where and with whom we are thrown into the world, then we will see the *philosophical* pressure to diversify philosophy. A homogenous discipline means a homogenous set of ideas, a homogenous set of intellectual products and projects. If our goal is to collectively explore logical space, collectively seek the truth, then a genealogically homogenous search party won't be particularly good at the job.

Thus the movement to diversify philosophy is not some attempt to bend an epistemically impeccable discipline to the forces of progressive politics. It is rather an attempt to save a discipline from a state of epistemic impoverishment born out of its reactionary politics.

7.

I said at the outset that I wanted to find a way of making sense of 'feminist philosophy' that is consistent with the demand that, in philosophy, we try to 'get it right'. In particular I wanted to find a way to make sense of feminist philosophy that didn't conceive of it as embodying a kind vulgar pragmatism, whereby its practitioners believe certain claims on the grounds that they are useful for feminism. I hope I have offered one such way: namely, thinking of the 'feminist' in 'feminist philosophy' as a kind of *genealogical* label, one that points to the causal formation of some philosophers' worldviews, thereby making a claim for the *epistemic* advantages of feminism, while at the same time calling attention to philosophy's own neglected genealogical anxiety.

But now I'd like to return to the putative sin of pragmatism – that is, the sin of taking the political usefulness of a claim as reason or grounds to believe it. This is the sin of which many would like to charge feminist philosophy. But is it a sin that's even possible to commit? Is it possible to take the usefulness of a claim as reason to believe it? One can of course take the usefulness of a claim as reason to *try to get oneself* to believe it. But that is a distinct matter. To take yourself to have a reason to believe p in the epistemic sense of 'reason' is to take yourself to have reason to believe that p is true. Since truth and usefulness come apart, it's not clear that it's even possible, given the conceptual connection between belief and truth, to take the political usefulness of some proposition as a reason to believe it, as opposed to reason to *try to get oneself* to believe it.

This is all to say that it's not clear that the sin that feminist philosophy stands accused of making – of conflating epistemic with practical reasons – is even conceptually possible. Earlier I quoted Susan Haack, charging feminist epistemology with just this sin, which she calls the sin of "sham reasoning". I quoted her as saying:

[I]nquiry is really best advanced by people with a genuine desire to find out how things are, who will be more persistent, less dogmatic, and more candid than sham reasoners seeking only to make a case for some foregone conclusion...(15)

But then she goes on to say: “except that, since it is a tautology that inquiry aims at the truth, the sham reasoner is not really engaged in inquiry at all” (15). So in fact the sin supposedly at the heart of feminist philosophy – that of conflating political reasons and epistemic reasons – turns out, even on Haack’s view, to be a conceptual impossibility. So then Haack shifts to accusing feminist philosophers of a different sin: that of *pretending* to inquire into the truth when in fact they are only advancing views they think politically expedient.

But there is a difference between believing a proposition because it’s politically useful, and *advancing* a proposition that one doesn’t believe because it’s politically useful. The first activity, if it’s even possible, involves the conflation of practical and epistemic reasons, and so is *a fortiori* a deficient form of inquiry. The second activity, that of advancing a claim that one does not believe, involves no such conflation: on one hand there is the *epistemic* question of what we take to be true, and on the other the *practical* question of what we try to get other people to believe. So now I want to ask: can a philosopher argue for a claim that she doesn’t believe because it would be politically good if others believe it? Would such a person still count as a philosopher, or would she be a sham reasoner?

It might seem that the answer to that question is obvious. Insofar as feminist philosophers advance claims that they do not themselves believe, but because those claims are amenable to feminist projects, they are engaged in an activity that is not philosophy at all, but ideological warfare. Feminist philosophy of *this* sort really is a contradiction in terms, really *does* rest on a mistake.

But I want to apply some pressure to that thought. I want to suggest that at least in some cases it’s philosophically legitimate to argue for views that one does not oneself hold. And I want to suggest that this is something philosophers do very often.

For example, when I write and talk about epistemology, I often advocate for an externalist conception of epistemic justification. And in so doing, I offer reasons for believing that externalism is true, and reasons for believing that internalism is false. Indeed I *present* myself as believing that externalism is true, and that internalism is false. But in reality I’m not convinced that there is really a substantive debate here. For I think there are many concepts of epistemic justification, some externalist and some internalist, and so it doesn’t really make sense to talk about which is the ‘correct’ theory of epistemic justification. In some sense, I am inclined to think that

internalists and externalists are having a merely verbal dispute, talking past each other. So I don't really believe that externalism is true and that internalism is false, although I present myself as believing just that. So why do I this?

I engage in the debate, and present myself as believing in externalism, because I think there is a good question about which concept of justification is *best* to use – by which I mean, which concept of justification can be best put in service of radical politics. My own view is that externalist epistemology has enormous radical political potential, for reasons I won't go into here. But suffice to say when I offer arguments for epistemic externalism, I am not making a claim about what justification really is, but instead am trying to persuade others to adopt a concept of justification that I think will advance justice. Of course, if enough people were to join me in doing this, and our efforts were successful, then our concept of justification really would be externalist, precisely because the content of our concepts is determined by how we use those concepts.

It's worth comparing here the project that the feminist philosopher and metaphysician Sally Haslanger describes as 'ameliorative metaphysics'. When we attend to a concept like *race* or *woman* or *terrorism*, we can and do ask ourselves a descriptive question: what is the content of this concept, what are its necessary and sufficient conditions? Sometimes what we will find, especially with concepts that describe the social rather than natural world, are warring conceptions of the same concept, or many overlapping but distinct concepts. We should then, Haslanger argues, ask ourselves a *prescriptive* question: which of these warring conceptualisations or concepts best serve our needs, which is to say the needs of justice? And finally, we should explicitly exhort others to adopt one concept over another on the basis that doing so better serves our political ends.

It is important to see that Haslanger's ameliorative metaphysics is not a radical break from philosophy as it is normally practiced. Consider, for example, Nelson Goodman's infamous predicates *grue* and *bleen*. Why should we prefer to use our predicates green and blue over grue and bleen? The conventional metaphysician's answer is that green and blue, but not grue and bleen, cut 'nature at its joints', fitting more closely with the underlying natural properties we aspire to track. That is, green and blue serve our practical interests better than grue and bleen. Here too we have ameliorative metaphysics, a metaphysics that moves beyond description to prescription.

What is new in Haslanger's approach is first her insistence that *ethical* and *political* ends are just as legitimate metrics of conceptual aptness as the end of 'cutting nature at its joints'. Second, the novelty of Haslanger's approach rests in her recommendation that we be explicit and self-conscious when we engage in

ameliorative projects in philosophy. Herein lies the contrast between Haslanger's ameliorative metaphysics and what I take myself to be doing when I do philosophy.

When Haslanger does philosophy, she explicitly announces that she is engaged in a prescriptive project, while I pursue a prescriptive project under the guise of a descriptive one. She exhorts others to *use* a concept on the grounds that it is politically *apt*. I meanwhile exhort others to *believe* a certain conceptual analysis, while myself being motivated not by the truth of that analysis, but by its political usefulness.

Haslanger's call to be explicit when we are engaged in ameliorative metaphysics carries the appeal of candidness, the rhetorical virtue that the ancients called *parhessia*. It also allows her to avoid the accusation of sham reasoning, since she is explicit that she's offering practical reasons for the *adoption* of a concept, not political reasons posing as *epistemic* reasons to believe.

But feminist philosophers do not work against a background respect for the norm of *parhessia*. After all, mainstream philosophers are not willing to admit that their own seemingly descriptive theorising is often in service of their own practical ends: the spread of terms and concepts and techniques that will advance *their* reputations. How many philosophers really believe everything for which they argue, and how many of them advance their views in the hope that they will be taken up, thereby serving *their* will to power, domination and fame? I suspect the number of pure believers is lower than we might like to think, and the number of those serving their own will to philosophical power much higher than we would like to admit. Against such a background, we should ask how honest feminist philosophers can and should be about what they are doing when they do philosophy.

8.

Politics seeks to change the world, but philosophy leaves, as Wittgenstein says, everything in its place. But this of course is a false dichotomy. The world is shaped by the concepts and words we use to describe it. Whether we call what happened in Charleston *terrorism*, or non-consensual sex between married people *rape*, or what happened to the Armenians *genocide* – these questions of description have real, material effect. And so how philosophers choose to describe the world can have real, material effect. Indeed, sometimes by saying something often and persuasively enough – that marriage isn't just for straight people, that men and women are equal, that transwomen are women – we can make it true. Perhaps there is a sort of sham in trying to change the world while seeming only to describe it, to present oneself as believing something one only *hopes* is true, or one hopes to *make* true. Perhaps someone engaged in this kind of politicised philosophy is at best a sham philosopher.

Perhaps. But I'd also suggest that what philosophy itself *is* is up for grabs. How we practice and talk about and theorise philosophy makes it what it is. So perhaps a fully politicised philosophy, a fully feminist philosophy, is right now a contradiction in terms. But perhaps one day it will no longer be.