

## **Can We Separate the Philosopher from the Philosophy?**

While efforts have been made to include women and minorities in the structured discipline of philosophy, little has been done about the content of philosophy itself. There are issues of what counts as philosophy; the stamps of approval usually going to Western texts. There are issues of what counts as canon; the voices of men are typically given more credibility. The issue I wish to focus on today is the inclusion and often wide acclaim given to philosophy produced by individuals who hold inhumane views. The #MeToo movement has compelled American society to reflect on whether or not it is ethical to consume art produced by violent individuals with inhuman beliefs. I think it prudent that philosophy should likewise take a moment to reflect on itself. Can we separate the philosophy from the philosopher? If not, then should they be removed from canon, should they be kept under certain conditions such as warnings in syllabi, or should we not care at all? These are enormous questions. How we try to answer it and what answer we come up with, will have a profound impact for how we conduct philosophy and how we treat the people who do philosophy.

One of the first times I became aware of this issue in a philosophical context was in a discussion group about Nietzsche. Someone made a joke about his views on women and everyone laughed. I didn't, because I had no one idea what they were talking about. When I asked for clarification, the group atmosphere became instantly uncomfortable. I was given a brief paraphrase, referred to specific textual citations to peruse later, and then the group moved on in discussion. The subtext of the social cues being that this part of Nietzsche's belief was irrelevant to the conversation for our purposes. I don't remember what the topic was about, or what our

goal was. But I did read those passages later, and was left with a nagging sensation in the back of the mind that I'd somehow been cheated. Like I'd been told to "look over there" while a large pink elephant in the corner of the room was covered with a painting tarp. Moreover, I felt like the elephant was a danger specifically to me and I was being told that it didn't exist.

Those that have authority get to say whose product remains ideal and untouched by its context, and whose is forever colored by it. Heidegger gets a clean pass. His work has been called "seminal", he has been labeled as one of the most important thinkers of the twentieth century, and we are suppose to consume his work without shuddering to prove just how serious we are about philosophy. We are suppose to forget his views on German Nationalism and the incalculable suffering his complicity helped cause. But Arendt is laid low as a self-hating Jew and stunted woman who could never get passed her affair with him. Her work is nearly always prefaced in some biographical way that mentions her relationship to him. I don't think it a coincidence that the members of that discussion group I mentioned were all white males, and that both Nietzsche and Heidegger as members of that same socio-group were given a free pass.

Should we contextualize Schopenhauer's "On the Basis of Morality" with his "On Women" and his misogyny? Does a philosopher's beliefs infect his, and it is usually a he, philosophy? I have purposely not used the term "political belief" because it is a misnomer and implies that those beliefs exist in a separate sphere from which they can do no harm. So let me be clear. I'm not talking about taxes and disagreements about a national budget. I'm talking about the belief that certain people are inherently deficit in humanity, and because of that deficiency are not only entitled to less, but are legitimate targets for harm. At issue, is the borderland between belief and philosophy which we as philosophers must navigate in terms of ourselves and

each other. How are we to navigate it? Should teachers expose students to material from bigots? Should such material, and such people, be ignored so that they slowly disappear or should they excised drastically from the field? Is either even possible? When questions like these are asked, especially by those of us on the margins who lack the authority to legitimately speak, we are shouted down with platitudes like “separate the art from the artist”, “it shouldn’t matter, judge the work on its own merit”, “times were different then”, “you’re letting your emotions get the better of you, toughen up”, and “we wouldn’t have anything left”. Let’s examine each of these in turn, and see what we uncover.

It is an odd statement, “separate the art from the artist”, considering that the artist is intimately tied into the art. Putting aside metaphysical issues of just how much of a person is present in their work, humans across cultures and eras recognize art through the artist. We love the context and the drama, especially if there is tragedy and suicide involved. Artists sign their work because it is theirs and it is a product of their spirit. We as consumers readily accept this and come to recognize the brand. A Louis Vuitton brings to mind a certain aesthetic just as a Kahlo does, because we know a liminal boundary exists between the creator and the creation. In Kahlo’s painting “The Broken Column”, we can see the painter and her struggle with intense pain caused by spinal injury. A Kahlo wouldn’t be a Kahlo without the artist behind it, and the art lives because of the artist. So too with philosophy, and philosopher can’t be dislocated from it. When we talk about the categorical imperative, we talk about *Kant’s* categorical imperative.

Related to the separation imperative is one that puts emphasis on objectivity in addition to detachment. Philosophy prides itself on analytic and critical thinking, which has produced a bias that philosophy itself is objective. To question that objectivity elicits defensive retorts of

“judge the work on its own merit”, as if we could pull thoughts from a vacuum and throw them up in the air for us all to examine from discreet, disinterested distance. Discussions of epistemology aside, I do not believe that disinterest is possible because the simple act of engagement is in itself interest. We have gravitated to this field because of interest, and we participate in it because of interest. To then say that we should suspend that interest because it is not the right kind or isn't narrow enough for the purposes of the powers that be seems absurd.

An equally absurd claim is that “times were different then”, which presupposes that time is not continuous and we have some how stepped out of it. If true, we should find ourselves in more ideal circumstances. If times were different then, we should find “outdated” ideas obsolete. Alas, it is not so. We are still dealing with xenophobia, sexism, racism, slavery, and genocide. People are still suffering and dying because of these ideas and the acts that spring from them. Additionally, this imperative falsely presupposes that an era was homogenous. In no time, in no circumstance, and on no issue has there ever been homogenous consensus. One could argue that disagreement is universal law, and someone would disagree. Give me any racist, and I will give you someone who believed we can't be reduced the melanin in our skin. Give me a sexist, and I will give you someone who fought for the humanity of individuals regardless of their imposed gender. Time has not and will not change that. This claim attempts to excuse members of canon because forgetting is easier, and if there is no memory then it is easier to consume. Then philosophy will not have to deal with certain hard questions, which gives it time to deal with other difficult, but safer hard questions. I do not believe this is right, and even if we grant defenders of the time imperative the charity of forgiveness in relation to the passage of time, there are still questions to answer. How much time must pass for someone to be forgiven? Do all

individuals qualify irrespective of how strongly they believed or acted? Does the degree of suffering inflicted calculate into this mysterious equation? Even if these questions were adequately answered, the other concerns I mentioned have not been.

The next objection “you’re letting your emotions get the better of you, toughen up” is an imperative usually directed at victims. It invalidates experience and authority by claiming that emotions are inappropriate, and any indication of possessing this very human quality is latched onto as a reason to nullify the subjectivity of a target. This belittlement is particularly significant for women, who have been historically characterized as the overly emotional gender prone to hysteria. But even if emotions were somehow removed from the human experience and we all achieved the objective mindset some philosophers dream about, the imperative “toughen up” betrays itself. It recognizes that harm is being done, because you only have the need to grow a thick skin if the threat of a knife is present. Furthermore, there is no argument for why the victim should mitigate that threat. Why is the onus on the one that suffers, and not on the structure that perpetuates suffering or the one that inflicts such suffering?

The objection “we wouldn’t have anything left” points out the precise problem to limiting philosophy to only certain individuals. If the whole of philosophy is built only on a handful of racists and sexists, then perhaps we should ask ourselves what kind of company we are keeping and if it’s the kind of philosophy we wish to do. Fortunately, this is not the case. Philosophy is a rich and robust world filled with endless diversity in countless combinations. That certain individuals would think that removing the few bad apples would have us starve, demonstrates how limited their understanding of philosophy really is. Furthermore, this objection engages in a kind of nirvana fallacy that if we can’t immediately achieve our goals of a non-threatening

philosophy then the endeavor isn't worth it. As if to say that without the houses already built for us, we would have nowhere to live. Forgetting that we have the skills to build new houses for ourselves where everyone is welcome. History demonstrates that both the individual and entire societies are capable of rebuilding after everything is gone. Philosophy is no less resilient.

I have analyzed several objections some may have to rethinking whose philosophy we should consume, but have yet to offer you a reason why we should think about it at all. I could present you with arguments about how limiting philosophy to a certain canon could kill it in the same way that limiting a species to homozygosity is a prolonged death sentence in the evolutionary game. Perhaps the lack of diversity is why philosophy struggles as a discipline. I could present you with complex ethical reasoning about the good and obligation, or a logical justification against passively participating in unethical behavior. But I will do none of these, because I firmly believe that the most basic reason why philosophy should reflect on its canon is compassion. I realize how controversial this claim is in a field where everything, even our very existence, is called into question and our days are spent explaining the deconstructed parts of our reality. But I stand by compassion, because how can we justify philosophy as the pursuit of wisdom if that path excludes it? When those of us excluded from the stereotyped categories of "philosopher" and "human" are subjected to the works of people we know have contributed to our exclusion, it is not an exercise in philosophy or idealistic objectivism – it is an exercise in humiliation. It is another way to threaten us, to remind us that though the door has been opened just wide enough for us to squeeze through, we don't belong. Our time here in these hallowed halls is fleeting, and our impact is expected to be minimal. We will leave no trace. It is a privilege to have the luxury of separating the philosopher from the philosophy, and much easier

when you aren't the target or your head isn't on the chopping block. For the rest of us, it is a form of self-harm that reinforces our insecurities, shame, and even self-hate. Philosophy is often an abstract endeavor, and we forget about the bodies attached to the minds that do it. We overlook the violence visited upon those bodies and while most will go on record that violence against the body is heinous, there is a violence against the mind and spirit that is disregarded despite being interlocked with the former. Perhaps because the connection between the mind and body is still a contentious issue in philosophy, violence to the mind tends to be ignored while violence to the body is safely deconstructed to meta-levels in ethical treatises. For those of us are the margins, we are regrettably not so lucky to belong to that class of philosopher in which our identities, our very existence, isn't constantly undermined and threatened; making philosophy a lonely and often masochistic process. We are reduced to our bodies, and can't be separated from them, which makes the request that we separate a philosopher's "legitimate" ideas from those that wish harm upon those very bodies all the more bitter.

When problematic philosophers are engaged, there are competing interests within a complex institutional structure where certain groups struggle to maintain power. At the moment, there is no general acknowledgment in that structure that a problem even exists. That pink elephant in the corner still stands under that painting tarp. When we read Kant, Schopenhauer, Heidegger, or any number of others, there is no dialogue about the harmful views they held and how it may have affected their work. Most students remain unaware because instructors never discuss it. Nor is there is no moment of silence or reflection to acknowledge the people who lost their lives or suffered indescribably due to those beliefs; and even if there was, it is not clear that it would be enough. But at least it would be a start, and it would be more than we have now.

So what are our options? We can continue to ingest philosophy without any moral regard – dispassionately and un-compassionately. Or we can endeavor to do philosophy in a humane manner. What would that look like? I am not sure. I don't have any answers, but I do know this is an important issue that needs to be acknowledged and discussed. Perhaps by shifting our vision of philosophy, we might enlarge our view of it to include others we've overlooked or ignored. It's not so much that the mythical "canon" is destroyed, but that we have a better lay of the land from which pursue wisdom. We might find richer and deeper ideas that will refine our knowledge of what we thought we knew, and maybe then we won't cling so strongly to people we thought we couldn't live without.