

GenderGate: Some Comments

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These six comments presuppose knowledge of the story about Stew Cohen's resignation as Editor-in-Chief of *Philosophical Studies*—relevant links are at the end. I realize that emotions are running high in some quarters and I have no desire to increase the temperature. However, since this episode bears on important issues (and not just for philosophy), I think I should clarify a few things.

1. Robin Dembroff (in a Facebook post¹), writes: “Calls to censor an academic paper that has been accepted after a transparent and professional editorial process, especially one that has gone through the double-blind peer review process, violate this foundational value [academic freedom]”. Here we are in a complete agreement. I do not know of anyone who has called for the censoring of Robin's reply (or my original paper, come to that)—although in the current climate I wouldn't be surprised.

2. I would like to emphasize that my original paper is simply concerned with the question “What is a woman?” (Ditto man/boy/girl.) That is a longstanding question in feminist philosophy, and I thought I had something to contribute. Transgender women only figure in my paper because they appear as examples in the feminist philosophy literature that I engage with.

3. As soon as I read Robin's paper, someone asked me about it on Twitter, and I said: “I'll write a reply at some point. I do welcome the criticism, harsh though it is”. I was very pleased Robin engaged with my arguments, and I think our exchange taken together does make a contribution.

4. Both Justin Weinberg (in a post at Daily Nous²) and Robin focus on a quotation from the end of Robin's paper:

Byrne's paper fundamentally is an unscholarly attempt to vindicate a political slogan that is currently being used to undermine civic rights and respect for trans persons. And it is here that I return to Byrne's advice to question the

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/robin.a.dembroff/posts/10159278221643797>.

² <http://dailynous.com/2020/06/12/resignation-philosophical-studies-reply-editors/>.

motivations behind this debate. “If someone is personally heavily invested in the truth of p,” Byrne writes, “it is prudent to treat [their] claim that p is true with some initial caution.” I agree. So we may ask: What are the motivations of someone who would so confidently insert themselves into this high-stakes discourse while so ill-informed?

These are “the sentences of my [Robin’s] paper at issue”, according to Robin.

First, Robin’s agreement with my “advice” is relatively recent.³ The initial version of their paper, advertised as “forthcoming in *Philosophical Studies*”, did not end with a quotation from me. Instead, it ended thus:

Byrne’s paper fundamentally is an unscholarly attempt to vindicate a political slogan that is currently being used to undermine civic rights and respect for trans persons. All this leads me to wonder about the motives of someone who would so confidently insert themselves into this high-stakes discourse while so ill-informed.

The text was changed in late May. Robin’s paper has been on PhilPapers since April 20. Second, there are a number of other sentences in the paper that might be thought to be “at issue”.

5. I am not going to comment on whether Robin’s paper violated editorial policies at *Philosophical Studies*, or on the circumstances leading up to Stew Cohen’s resignation. My opinion on these issues carries little weight. I would, however, like to join many other people in expressing my thanks for Stew’s tremendous and selfless service to the profession.

6. Academic freedom is not just a procedural matter. Even more important than transparent and impartial refereeing processes is an academic culture that does not encourage self-censorship or throw up barriers to the examination of controversial or offensive ideas. Regrettably the discipline of philosophy has not been living up to these standards: in particular, certain feminist philosophers, who are arguing in good faith about questions of great public interest, have been shamed and shunned by their professional colleagues. This will have (and, judging by conversations, already has had) the inevitable effect of discouraging junior scholars from

³ As can readily be checked by examining the context, the quotation from me is not a piece of general “advice to question the motivations behind this debate”. The part of my original paper that is relevant here is on p. 19 (the manuscript) and the first paragraph of p. 16 (the typeset version).

working in this area, unless they can conveniently avoid having the “wrong” opinions. Whether these feminists are right is neither here nor there—what matters is that our discipline allows them to express their views without fear of banishment or censure. Of course the point holds equally well for philosophers who are sympathetic with Robin’s views. Robust evidence-based disagreement should be the norm. This is helpful if philosophy is to welcome everyone; it is essential if philosophy is to make progress.

Background

<https://leiterreports.typepad.com/blog/2020/06/stewart-cohen-arizona-resigns-as-editor-of-philosophical-studies-after-25-years.html>

<https://www.wildcat.arizona.edu/article/2020/06/n-cohen-resignation>

Papers

Byrne, A. “Are women adult human females?”, *Philosophical Studies*, forthcoming,

<https://philpapers.org/rec/BYRAWA>.

Dembroff, R. “Escaping the natural attitude about gender”, *Philosophical Studies*, forthcoming,

<https://philpapers.org/rec/DEMETN>.

Byrne, A. “Gender muddle: reply to Dembroff”, draft May 12, 2020,

<https://philpapers.org/rec/BYRGM>.