

Practical Suggestions For My Man Colleagues In Philosophy

[Posted to Medium 5th December 2019. This is a parody of this^[1] piece by Ray Briggs].

A Disclaimer

I'm not the official spokesperson for women. I did put myself up for election, but sadly I got no votes. You should be suspicious of anyone, woman or not, who claims to be giving you the woman point of view. There is no woman point of view. There are only disabled-lesbian-woman points of view, and poor-Chinese-woman points of view, and views like that. The exact number of identity combinations is three. If it's fewer, that's bad because people might think women are oppressed, and if it's more, that's bad, because where does it stop? We can't have a feminism for each individual woman.

Remember that women are most likely to have our voices amplified when we enjoy advantages like whiteness and wealth. So you should listen to women, but not any of the women whose voices are amplified. Does that make sense? If possible find a woman of your own, there are loads around, there's probably one at the cafe you're in just now with your turmeric latte. Get listening. But don't listen in, that would be rude.

I'll do my best to give broadly applicable advice, but all advice is defeasible. If the women in your life disagree with me, listen to them. (Listen to all of them, even if they contradict each other. If this means you end up paralysed into inaction, so be it. It's hard being a good ally).

Epistemic Humility

If there's an epistemic policy that's even worse than treating a single woman as the spokesperson for the entire group, it's treating men as experts about women's issues — or being a man who considers himself an expert just because he's devoted some perfunctory attention to woman's issues. It is good and valuable for men to think about women, our lives, and our contributions to knowledge and culture, but it's crucial that you approach this topic with the requisite epistemic humility. This is true whether you are a man who identifies as a man, a man who identifies as a woman, or a man who identifies as neither a woman or a man. Or a man who is fervently invested in his allyship to the men-who-identify-as-women-or-as-neither-women-nor-men communities. It really doesn't matter. *All men* need to have epistemic humility when they approach women's issues. Definitely don't be a man who lectures women about what a woman is. Definitely don't be that six-foot-something-logician-with-a-beard who lectures women about how a man they are friends with is actually a lesbian.

It is common for public conversations about women to rest on false empirical presuppositions (like that all women are kind and inclusive, and therefore will fall for your claims that men need to be in women-only spaces) and to be shaped by anti-woman propaganda (like that any woman who isn't willing to sacrifice her own liberation movement in order to service men's needs is a transphobic bigot). (At this point, some readers may start to protest about academic freedom. *Surely we can call women transphobic bigots if we do it in journals like *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*!* Actually, though, academic freedom is justified in light of the role it plays in knowledge production, and if you're not producing knowledge, and instead forcing a postmodern ideology upon unsuspecting progressives, then academic freedom won't enable you). As a result, in order to make a genuinely original contribution to feminist topics, you'll need both knowledge and effort; otherwise, you run the risk of repeating ill-informed misogynistic tropes that have neither pragmatic nor epistemic value. You know, like that there are such things as gendered souls. Or lady brains. Or that if a man likes feminine stuff he must be a woman trapped in a

man's body. Or that the content of a man's thoughts is worth more than the sum total of a woman's embodied experiences.

Off-the-cuff thoughts from a man—even a clever man—are unlikely to meet the standard required for fruitful participation. Women are often forced by practical concerns to think through some of the facts and philosophical distinctions relevant to being women; therefore, men start out at a significant disadvantage. If you want to understand feminist issues, you need to listen to women before engaging. Definitely don't wade in with opinions on such complicated questions as 'what is a woman?' when you've only read a few books written by men who say *they are women because they identify as women*. Definitely don't claim that transwomen are women because intersex, or transwomen are women because clownfish. (I'll provide a few reading suggestions at the end of this post. There are so many great women to read! Feminism doesn't start and end with Judith Butler. In fact it would do better to sidestep Judith Butler entirely).

[This 2019 editorial](#) [2] by Meghan Murphy provides an interesting illustration of how 'trendy' political issues like transactivism can encourage an over-emphasis on trans and nonbinary voices, to the exclusion of women's voices, and to the epistemic detriment of everyone. When the Vancouver Rape Relief and Women's Shelter (VRRWS) lost its city funding due to the zealous attempts of trans activists, in particular transwoman Morgane Oger, a spokesperson for VRRWS said that no one let them know about the meeting at which their grant would be discussed and they were given no opportunity to defend themselves. "We found out about this hearing and the intent to undermine us at midnight [the night before the meeting], from an ally who was watching social media. There was a lot of use of the words 'fairness' and 'process' today. This did not apply to us—your oldest rape crisis centre. We serve 1200 women a year... And none of you bothered to tell us: 'Come and defend yourselves'". The controversy was almost entirely due to opposition from men (identifying as women and insisting that either they be included should they need the services, or the services lose funding). We might ask, "What happens when you try to leave the men out?" and find that focusing on what women have to say reveals a near-complete consensus that Oger's actions were harmful.

Naming and Challenging Misogyny

What if you've internalized the message about epistemic humility, and you've started to recognize the misogyny that's widespread in philosophy academia — including "woke misogyny" under the guise of trans activism — but you want to do more?

A good first step is to practice naming errors and injustices when you see them. You can break this down into three smaller steps: explicitly stating the assumption or describing action that you want to critique, stating that you disagree with it, and giving a reason for disagreement. (In social settings where someone has just said something that calls for a quick response, the third step is optional.) Here are some examples of how the three steps might look in action.

- When someone describes the group of people affected by an abortion bill as "pregnant persons", they're obscuring the fact that more than half of all "persons" can't get pregnant. So you could point out that no men can get pregnant, and explain why it's important for women as a marginalized group to retain the terms they need to describe their bodies and their political situation (*stating disagreement and giving a reason*).

- "The article starts from the premise that transwomen are an exception to anything that is true of men as a class, because of their identity" (*stating the assumption*). "But that premise is unjustified," (*stating disagreement*), "it's harmful to presumptively treat a subgroup of men as non-threatening just because of their identities, especially when this means putting women at risk" (*giving a reason*).

- “You keep describing masculine men as ‘butch trans lesbians’” (*describing the action*), “and I find that unacceptable” (*stating disagreement*). “Would you appropriate the terms of other marginalised groups?” (*giving a reason*).

If you find it difficult to speak up this way in real-time conversations, you’re not alone; others do too. But it gets easier with practice. And you can practice in written conversations, where there is less time pressure. For instance, if you find yourself citing a source that bundles a misogynistic assumption in with an unrelated point, you can add a quick footnote that names the misogynistic assumption and distinguishes it from the useful point that interests you. (You can also choose to cite another source that makes the same point without the misogynistic assumption, if one is available.)

Once you’ve named and acknowledged a problem, it’s easier to think of solutions. Epistemic humility needn’t mean epistemic helplessness. Like other domains of philosophical inquiry, from logic to metaphysics to history to philosophy of science, applied ethics is hard, and you’re not going to manage it without making some mistakes. It’s worth acknowledging the difficulty of the problem, and then practicing your skills until you get better. Or, you can skip all that hard work and just make incessant reference to your *lived experience*.

Pronouns

Sharing your pronouns is increasingly common in academia. Aside from names, pronouns are the most salient linguistic markers of sex and gender in English, and they serve as a kind of reminder that there are differences between people that track both biology and socialisation; a person’s life experiences and her political treatment under patriarchy.

Colleagues sometimes want to know whether they should appropriate women’s pronouns (*she/her/hers*) for men who identify as women. I encourage you to be polite, while following your conscience. Remember that we use female pronouns for all sorts of things, like ships, and hurricanes, and pets. So it’s not a big deal to occasionally use them for people who are not female, especially if they would like that, and you like them, or just want to be polite in the social context.

But note also that some women feel strongly against female pronouns being used in this way, given the importance of the political category ‘women’ and the way that female pronouns go along with it. Their reasons for refusing to use female pronouns for men who identify as women should be respected. People should not be forced, in a liberal society, to do things that go against their political or philosophical beliefs. Radical feminism is both, and most radical feminists do not believe that identifying as a woman makes you a woman, and many (although not all) radical feminists want to reserve female pronouns for female people (women).

Citation Practices

If a woman has published work under an old name, how should you cite her? You might have the impulse to use the name she published under, but there is good reason not to do this—it could negatively affect her citation count! There is no established institutional policy for handling the name changes that come with marriage under patriarchy, but good options include asking the author how she would like to be cited, checking publicly available information like her webpage and her ORCID for information about how she would like to be cited, and using her current name if you’re unable to find information about her preferences.

Further Reading

Ti-Grace Atkinson, *Amazon Odyssey*.

Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*.

Somer Brodribb, *Nothing Mat(T)ers: A Feminist Critique of Postmodernism*.

Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse*.

Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*.
Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*.
Sheila Jeffreys, *Gender Hurts*.
Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*.
Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*.
Catherine MacKinnon, *A Feminist Theory of The State*.
Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics*.
Janice Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire*.

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[Description of photo below: a head-and-some-torso-shot of Holly who is looking off to her right (the viewer's left), wearing a *Standing for Women* t-shirt printed with "lesbian / noun / female homosexual", has shortish-brownish-greyish hair, a spiralling tattoo on her right arm, and is kind of smirking, to be honest. There are many Harry Potter books in the background of the shot, and a box of Marimekko print cards, and some other books it's hard to make out the titles of].



Links:

[1] <https://biopoliticalphilosophy.com/2019/12/02/practical-suggestions-for-my-cis-colleagues-in-philosophy/>

[2] <https://www.feministcurrent.com/2019/03/20/discontinuation-of-grant-to-vancouver-rape-relief-shows-trans-activism-is-an-attack-on-women/>