

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Deception by topic choice: How discussion can mislead without falsehood

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Abstract

This article explains and defends a novel idea about how people can be misled by a discussion topic, even if the discussion itself does not explicitly involve the making of false claims. The crucial aspect of this idea is that people are liable to infer, from the fact that a particular topic is being discussed, that this topic is important. As a result, they may then be led to accept certain beliefs about the state of the world they consider necessary for the topic's importance. What the article calls "importance misrepresentation" occurs when these beliefs about the state of the world are false or otherwise mistaken. The article explores different ways in which importance misrepresentation can occur, and it uses this idea to help clarify and strengthen some well-known criticisms of the topic choices of academic philosophers.

KEYWORDS

Charles Mills, critical theory, Marxism, philosophy as action

1 | INTRODUCTION

Philosophers occasionally recognise that the act of discussing a particular topic is itself an important topic for philosophical reflection and, occasionally, criticism (Geuss 2017). One reason we might think that it is important to reflect on the choice of topics—both within and outside academia—is that the choice of a particular topic can be a way of deceiving others, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Consider the following example:

Highway: A is driving a car along a highway. B is sitting in the passenger seat. A turns to B and says: “Where is the nearest fuel station?” B replies: “Two kilometers ahead on the left.” When they reach the petrol station, A keeps driving without stopping. B asks A: “Why didn’t you stop at the fuel station?” A replies: “I never said I would stop. I only asked where the nearest fuel station is.”

A’s answer to B in *Highway* seems to miss something important. A’s initial question led B to assume that A wanted to stop at a fuel station. B was not being extraordinarily presumptuous for making this assumption. The reason for this is that, if A really had no intention of stopping at the fuel station to begin with, it is considerably more difficult (not impossible, but still more difficult) to imagine why A would ask this question in the first place.

I think what is going on in *Highway* and similar situations can be captured by the idea of what I call *importance misrepresentation*. The most crucial aspect of this idea is the following claim:

If topic T is important only if a certain state of the world S obtains, then the act of discussing T effectively promulgates the view that S obtains.

The identification of instances of importance misrepresentation, then, will involve making two further claims:

1. T is important only if S obtains
2. S does not obtain

Importance misrepresentation can allow us to see how A effectively deceives B. A’s initial question, let us assume, is important only if A intends to stop at a fuel station soon. But A has no such intention. As a result, A has promulgated a false belief to B, namely, that A intended to stop at the fuel station.

My aim in this article is to give a general introduction to this idea of importance misrepresentation, and to suggest some ways in which it might apply to a variety of different topics that are commonly discussed. I think the idea of importance misrepresentation should be of special interest to critical theorists who think it is important to analyse how beliefs, arguments, and utterances *function* (Geuss 1981, 15–19). In addition, I hope this idea may be helpful for those who wish to analyse doing philosophy as an action in and of itself (Finlayson 2015; Bauer 2015, 113–28; Prinz 2016, 780–85). I do not here attempt to show that much of academic philosophy is currently engaged in importance misrepresentation of some kind. But if the idea of importance misrepresentation that I sketch here is plausible, it may well be something worthy of further reflection.

This article is in six sections. Section 2 distinguishes importance misrepresentation from three other accounts of how utterances can misrepresent the world without necessarily involving falsehoods. Section 3 considers some different ways in which importance misrepresentation can succeed (that is, actually mislead), each more subtle than *Highway*. In section 4, I examine two instances where the topic choices of academic philosophers have been criticized—by Charles Mills in *The Racial Contract* and by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*, respectively—and show how the idea of importance misrepresentation can help illumine and even strengthen these criticisms. The fifth section considers some possible objections to the idea of importance misrepresentation. The sixth section concludes the article.

2 | DISTINGUISHING IMPORTANCE MISREPRESENTATION FROM RELATED CASES

2.1 | Semantic misrepresentation

Semantic misrepresentation involves utterances that contain false propositions. Suppose a father asks his son, “Did you keep your promise to tidy your room?” but his son, as a matter of fact, has made no such promise. Here, the very act of asking the question contains a false proposition: the son promised to tidy his room. The son seems to concede the truth of this proposition if he gives either a yes or a no answer. The only way he can clearly avoid doing this is by refusing to answer the question, at least in the format demanded. He must preface any reply with an insistence that he did not promise to tidy his room.¹

As with importance misrepresentation, identifying cases of semantic misrepresentation involves making two claims. First, we make a semantic claim about the proposition(s) contained in the utterance. The utterance above contains the proposition: “You promised to tidy your room.” Second, we claim that this proposition is false.

The crucial way in which importance misrepresentation differs from semantic misrepresentation is that the former does not require any utterance that contains a false proposition. Accordingly, the first claim involved in identifying importance misrepresentation is not a semantic judgment but (at least partly) a value judgment, in the sense that it necessarily expresses something about the sorts of things we care (and don’t care) about.

2.2 | Unsatisfied “felicity conditions”

Austin (1962) identifies a certain class of utterances as “performative.” A performative utterance typically makes something happen in the very act of its being uttered. For example, when A says to B, “I promise to take you to the airport tomorrow,” A has performed an action: she has made a promise to B. Austin also identifies a series of “felicity conditions” that are necessary in order for the utterance to successfully and properly “perform” the action in question. Violations of these felicity conditions can take one of two forms: they can “misfire,” where the utterance fails to perform the act; or they can be “abuses,” where the act is performed insincerely (Austin 1962, 14–16). An example of the former might be where B says the words in her sleep. An example of the latter would be where A has no intention of taking B to the airport tomorrow in spite of her utterance.

Now one may be inclined to think that instances of importance misrepresentation count as abuses under Austin’s schema. If one were to apply this to *Highway*, it would mean claiming that A’s question was an infelicitous performative utterance because A was insincere in asking it. I think, however, there at least two problems with this.

First, it is not clear whether Austin’s notion of performative utterances can be stretched to include all sorts of utterances that might be cases of importance misrepresentation. This is because performatives are typically utterances that cannot be straightforwardly analysed as truth-apt propositions. Importance misrepresentation, by contrast, can still occur when truth-apt propositions are uttered, as long as the importance of uttering such propositions may presuppose that certain facts about the world obtain.

Second, and most important, importance misrepresentation does not presume an existing convention about the meaningfulness or appropriateness of certain utterances in certain situations. Rather, it presupposes a value judgment about what is important in the circumstances.

¹Bromberger (1966) and Van Fraassen (1980, 126–27) point out that questions of the form “why P?” have similar implications if P turns out to be false.

The act of uttering “I promise to . . .” clearly draws on a recognisable convention where the utterance of these words is taken to constitute an act of promising. But when A asks B about the location of the nearest fuel station, I take it that there is no such convention at work. Or if there is, it is much less clearly recognised. In fact, I suggest that if we are tempted to think that there is a comparable convention at work in *Highway*, it is only because it seems so obvious that A’s question is important only if certain other facts obtain (that is, A intends to stop at a nearby fuel station). Other instances of importance misrepresentation may be considerably more subtle and difficult to detect, as we will see in section 3. The important difference to note is that importance misrepresentation occurs not as a result of linguistic conventions but as a result of value-laden assumptions about what is and isn’t important.

2.3 | Relevance theory

Relevance theory offers an account of the meaning of language that seems to closely resemble importance misrepresentation.² Influenced by H. P. Grice’s (1989) theory of communication, relevance theory holds that sentences are a means of communicating the speaker’s intentions, and that these intentions can be uncovered by treating conversations as rational activity governed by certain standards. It also differs from Grice’s view in certain respects, however, the most significant of which is that it identifies *relevance* as the crucial norm governing conversations (Sperber and Wilson 2012, 2–6). It does this on the basis of two claims. The Cognitive Principle of Relevance holds that human cognition tends to be geared towards the maximisation of relevance, while the Communicative Principle of Relevance holds that every act of overt communication conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance (Sperber and Wilson 1995, 260–72; 2012, 6).

It may seem that relevance theory can neatly explain what is going on in *Highway* and can do likewise for any other example that might be described as a case of importance misrepresentation. I have no objection to relevance theory here. I note only that it makes a stronger claim than is necessary for accepting the central claim of importance misrepresentation. While relevance theory seems to hold that presumptions about the relevance of utterances are hardwired into our language, we need not accept this in order to recognise that importance misrepresentation can occur. All that this requires, I think, is a moderate version of the Cognitive Principle of Relevance, something along the lines of: people tend to interpret utterances in such a way that enables them to attribute at least some degree of relevance to them. This falls somewhat short of saying that people tend to interpret utterances in ways that *maximise* relevance, but it is sufficient for my purposes here.

3 | HOW DOES IMPORTANCE MISREPRESENTATION SUCCEED?

We have seen that there are two steps involved in establishing the existence of importance misrepresentation: a claim about the kind of world that would have to obtain in order for the discussion topic to be important; and a claim that this world does not obtain. In *Highway*, it is obvious that both steps are satisfied. But one consequence of this obviousness is that the importance misrepresentation does not succeed for very long. B is given the mistaken belief that A intends to stop at a fuel station, but B soon abandons this belief once A drives past without stopping. The instances where importance misrepresentation is more likely to succeed to the point of producing a lasting misleading belief, I conjecture, are those where, even though both

²Note that I treat importance and relevance as synonymous here.

steps are satisfied, *it is not so obvious that they are satisfied*. In this section, I discuss three circumstances where this might be the case.

3.1 | Conceptual confusion

The substitution of one concept for a related one can be an effective way of concealing importance misrepresentation. Part of what can make conceptual confusions dangerous is that they are often difficult to spot. They can produce mistaken beliefs regarding the sort of world that the importance of a discussion topic might presuppose, or mistaken beliefs about the kind of world that actually obtains.

Consider the following example. In 1983, Moira Gatens published “A Critique of the Sex/Gender Distinction,” in which she argued: “[I]t is not masculinity *per se* that is valorized in our culture but the *masculine male*’ (1983, 154). The distinction between a patriarchal culture that valorises masculinity as opposed to one that valorises the masculine male has great significance for the discussion topic that might be most pressing for a feminist critique of patriarchy. If Gatens is right, then one can plausibly argue that the focus of feminist critique should be the dismantling of practices and institutions that valorise the masculine male. A focus on the dismantling of practices and institutions that valorise masculinity, meanwhile, arguably engages in importance misrepresentation. It does this by presupposing a context where patriarchy is characterized primarily by the privileging of masculinity—a context that, if Gatens is right, does not obtain.

3.2 | Presenting a marginal issue as central

Part of what makes this kind of importance misrepresentation more likely to mislead is that it involves exaggeration of the significance of a causal factor, as opposed to a straightforwardly false proposition. It can be distinguished from cases where the cause is completely misdiagnosed, much like a doctor who mistakes the symptoms of a patient who is HIV positive for signs of an eating disorder. If the doctor then proceeds to counsel the patient on how to deal with an eating disorder, the doctor seems to have implicitly accepted a false proposition. But the person who commits importance misrepresentation by presenting a marginal issue as central does not necessarily do so on the basis of implicitly accepting a false proposition. It is only that, in light of the far greater significance of other factors, her attention strikes us as misplaced.

As an example of this, consider Bill Cosby’s now infamous “Piece of Pound Cake” speech at an NAACP awards ceremony in 2004. Although this speech has subsequently become infamous due to revelations about Cosby’s acts of sexual assault, the content of the speech was controversial at the time because it blamed lax parenting standards for high rates of incarceration among African American youth. Is it false to say that negligent parenting is a causal factor in African American incarceration? Not straightforwardly so—in a constituency of some forty million people, we might expect at least a handful of instances where more attentive parenting could have prevented at least some young people from committing crimes for which they received a prison sentence. But in light of other systemic factors, such as police racism, socioeconomic inequality, and a long history of exploitation and subordination, we might plausibly think that this focus on parenting is inappropriate. To talk about parenting standards in the context in which Cosby was speaking arguably amounts to tacitly depicting declining parental standards as the *primary* causal factor behind youth incarceration, as opposed to one factor (at best) among other more dominant ones. In so far as we think this view of the world is mistaken, we can plausibly claim that Cosby’s speech was an example of importance misrepresentation.

3.3 | Inadequate normative appraisal

Claims of importance misrepresentation stemming from inadequate normative appraisal are likely to be highly contestable, for the simple reason that people's ideas about the normative concepts that are most appropriate for a particular circumstance are themselves contestable. Still, this does not mean importance misrepresentation cannot so occur.

One possible example of this kind of importance misrepresentation is Simone Weil's reflections on the relevance of rights discourse for a young woman who has been forced into a brothel. The woman, Weil says, "will not talk about her rights. In such a situation the word will sound ludicrously inadequate" (1962, 21). Those who agree with Ronald Dworkin (1977) that "rights are trumps" will obviously disagree with Weil. Still, Weil's claim seems to fit the description of an argument purporting to establish importance misrepresentation. It implicitly contains two judgments necessary for importance misrepresentation: (i) describing the woman as having suffered a rights violation presupposes that the kind of wrong done to her is transactional in kind; and (ii) the kind of wrong done to her is clearly not transactional. If Weil is correct, there does seem to be something especially problematic about applying rights discourse to cases of sexual assault and predation. It implies that the culprit's main failure was one of resource distribution: the woman simply did not receive her fair share of profits. But, as Weil argues, the problem is not that the woman has been denied her due profit; it is her very humanity that is being denied.

4 | TWO CASE STUDIES

So far, I have given a description of importance misrepresentation and identified some circumstances in which it is most likely to succeed. Let me now consider two case studies where particular historical philosophical arguments can be illumined with the idea of importance misrepresentation.

4.1 | Mills and the Western philosophical canon

In *The Racial Contract*, Charles Mills criticizes Western philosophy for failing to address the problem of racism in any serious depth and seems to claim that this failure actually strengthens racism, as opposed to merely not dealing with it:

Where is Grotius's magisterial *On Natural Law and the Wrongness of the Conquest of the Indies*, Locke's stirring *Letter concerning the Treatment of the Indians*, Kant's moving *On the Personhood of Negroes*, Mill's famous condemnatory *Implications of Utilitarianism for English Colonialism*, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels's outraged *Political Economy of Slavery*? Intellectuals write about what interests them, what they find important, and—especially if the writer is prolific—silence constitutes good prima facie evidence that the subject was not of particular interest. By their failure to denounce the great crimes inseparable from the European conquest, or by the halfheartedness of their condemnation, or by their actual endorsement of it in some cases, most of the leading European ethical theorists reveal their complicity in the Racial Contract. (1997, 94)

Why does Mills think Western philosophy is complicit in the racial contract? It might just be that the complicity of Western philosophers comes from the brute fact that they could have done something about racism but didn't. But it seems to me that Mills is making a more subtle point.

He observes that the refusal of Western philosophy to talk about racism suggests that “the subject was not of particular interest”—for Western philosophers, at least. Mills seems to be claiming that, by not talking about racism, Western philosophers have helped promote a particular picture of the world according to which racism is not a particularly interesting subject. It does this by creating the impression “that race and racism have been marginal to the history of the West” (1997, 121). If racism really were only a small problem in Western history, then one might think the silence or, at best, occasional reference to racism by philosophers within the Western philosophical canon is entirely appropriate. But since racism is no small problem—to say the least—in Western history, the impression created by Western philosophy here is deeply misleading.

We can therefore describe Mills’s criticism of the Western philosophical canon as a claim that Western philosophy engaged in importance misrepresentation about racism. That it focuses—or rather does not focus—on certain topics (that is, racism) would be important or appropriate only if racism were a relatively small or unusual problem in Western history. But since this is not the case, it follows that Western philosophy promotes a misleading picture of the world by failing to give sufficient attention to racism.

4.2 | Marx, Engels, and the Young Hegelians

Marx and Engels begin *The German Ideology* with a stinging attack on the Young Hegelians. The problem with the Young Hegelians, they write, is not so much that they are mistaken in their views but that they focus on the wrong topics. “Not only in their answers but *in their very questions* there was a mystification” (1998, 59, emphasis added). I want to show how the idea of importance misrepresentation may help clarify their argument, and perhaps even strengthen it.

Marx and Engels begin by describing the approach of the Young Hegelians (1998, 60). They write that the Young Hegelians have “criticised everything by attributing to it religious conceptions or pronouncing it a theological matter” and insisting that it is these false or corrupted religious conceptions that are “the real chains of men.” When they do this, they suppose, perhaps tacitly, that these religious conceptions, like all ideas, have “an independent existence.” This means that the ideas that people form are “products of their consciousness.” If people accept bad ideas—and the Young Hegelians evidently thought that the religious conceptions they are referring to are bad—then this is an indication of deficiencies in their consciousness. The task of the critic is to point out these deficiencies and call for a change of consciousness.

Marx and Engels, however, deny that ideas have an independent existence. Instead, they think ideas are in some way closely tied to their “material surroundings” (1998, 61). This is not to say that Marx and Engels endorse a deterministic view of ideas, such that they are fully reducible to a person’s material existence. It is only to say that we cannot plausibly hope to understand the causal factors behind the production of ideas without paying close attention to their material surroundings. Marx and Engels wish to conclude from this that the fact that the Young Hegelians criticize ideas without criticizing the material circumstances in which they are produced indicates that they are not in any way criticizing “the real existing world” (60).

We might summarise Marx and Engels’s argument as follows:

1. Ideas are closely connected to the material circumstances in which they emerge.
2. If ideas are closely connected to the material circumstances in which they emerge, then the Young Hegelians’ act of criticizing ideas without criticizing the material circumstances in which they emerge does not criticize the real world.
3. Hence, the Young Hegelians do not criticize the real world.

Marx and Engels appear to make a stronger claim than this, however. They claim that the Young Hegelians are actually “the staunchest conservatives” (1998, 60). This would seem to imply that the Young Hegelians are not merely failing to critically engage with the world; rather, they are somehow producing a kind of apologetic for the state of the world as it currently is. Of course, as we saw with Mills, some might think these two positions are more similar than different. It seems possible, however, to distinguish between those who merely fail to criticise the status quo and those who produce pro-status-quo propaganda. As it stands, the argument above only establishes that the Young Hegelians fit the former description. I think that the idea of importance misrepresentation can demonstrate how they fit the latter description as well. Let me explain how this is the case.

What, according to Marx and Engels, makes a topic important? Their answer, at least in the context of Europe in 1846, is that a topic is important only if it criticises the real world (that is, aims at changing it). This answer is not value free. It reflects Marx’s aim in his famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: “[T]he philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways: the point is to change it” (Marx and Engels 1969, 15). Some might reject this thesis altogether, while others might wish to downplay it as expressing only one valuable purpose among others. In any case, it is clearly a purpose that Marx and Engels endorse and prioritise. In addition, it is something that will help form the basis of the first of the two judgments involved in identifying any case of importance misrepresentation. The Young Hegelians’ criticism of religious ideas without criticizing the material circumstances from which they emerge would be a way of “criticizing the real world” only if these ideas have an independent existence. Since for Marx and Engels a topic’s importance depends on the extent to which it criticizes the real world, it follows that *criticism of ideas without criticizing the material circumstances from which they emerge is an important intellectual task only if ideas have an independent existence.*

The second judgment is straightforward. Marx and Engels, we have seen, deny that ideas have an independent existence. Hence, the Young Hegelians’ criticisms of religion fail to be “important” in Marx and Engels’s sense: they are not criticizing the real world. Now, recall the basic claim of importance misrepresentation: if the importance of a topic presupposes a certain state of the world, then the act of discussing that topic promulgates the belief that this state of the world obtains. Since the importance of the Young Hegelians’ criticisms of religion presupposes that ideas are not closely linked to material circumstances, they effectively promulgate this belief by the very act of asking the questions they ask.

We can summarise this version of the argument as follows.

1. A topic is important only if it involves “criticizing the real world.”
2. If ideas are closely connected to the material circumstances in which they emerge, then the Young Hegelians’ act of criticizing ideas without criticizing the material circumstances in which they emerge does not “criticize the real world.”
3. Therefore, the Young Hegelians’ act of criticizing ideas without criticizing the material circumstances in which they emerge is important only if ideas are *not* closely connected to the material circumstances in which they emerge. (From 1 and 2.) (First judgment)
4. Ideas *are* closely connected to the material circumstances in which they emerge. (Second judgment)
5. If topic T is important only in state-of-the-world S, then discussing T promulgates the belief that S obtains. (Importance misrepresentation.)
6. Therefore, the Young Hegelians’ act of criticizing ideas without criticizing the material circumstances in which they emerge promulgates a false view of the world (that ideas are not closely connected to the material circumstances in which they emerge). (From 3, 4, and 5.)

This conclusion has a bite to it that the previous version of the argument lacked. The Young Hegelians, according to this argument, are not only failing to criticize the real world, they are

actively promoting a misleading view of the world. The Young Hegelians can thus be described as “conservatives” in the sense that their choice of topics—criticism of ideas without criticism of the material circumstances—effectively conceals the real source of these ideas, and as a result, conceals what is needed in order to bring about genuine change.³

5 | SOME OBJECTIONS

5.1 | Importance misrepresentation is sometimes useful

This objection would have considerable force if I were claiming that importance misrepresentation is always a bad thing. But I make no such claim. In fact, I am not making any particular judgment about its wrongness (or rightness). My only claim is that it is something worth paying attention to.

I will suggest here that the best way of approaching acts of importance misrepresentation is to analyse the way in which they are functioning. Whose interests do they serve or hinder? Answering these questions will often—though perhaps not always—lead us towards some kind of evaluative appraisal of the relevant instance of importance misrepresentation. If, for example, we find that it serves a purpose that is manifestly tyrannous, we may well be inclined to do our best to expose and denounce it, other things being equal (Cross 2019). This does not, however, imply any kind of general stance on the rightness or wrongness of importance misrepresentation.

5.2 | Topics are discussed for reasons other than importance

In *Highway*, it seems natural for B to suppose that A’s question about the location of the nearest fuel station is important because of their particular situation. But one might point out that people do not always initiate discussion topics because they think the topic is important. Sometimes they are motivated by curiosity. Or they may have some further ulterior motive. For example, I don’t think it would be completely outrageous to suggest that when contemporary academic philosophers decide what to write about, they are often at least partly motivated by beliefs about what they can and can’t get published, and how this might affect their career prospects. For this reason, we might think it a mistake to fixate on *Highway* and generalise about the capacity of other discussion topics to cause importance misrepresentation.

We can summarise this objection in the following argument:

1. If those who hear or participate in discussion of topic T know that discussion of T was initiated for reasons other than T’s importance, then they will not assume that T is an important topic.
2. If those who hear or participate in the discussion of T do not assume that T is an important topic, then discussion of T will not lead anyone to make any particular assumptions about the state of the world.
3. If discussion of T does not lead anyone to make any particular assumptions about the state of the world, then discussion of T is incapable of importance misrepresentation.
4. Therefore, if those who hear or participate in the discussion of T know that this discussion was initiated for reasons other than T’s importance, then T is incapable of importance misrepresentation.

³On the conservative political positions actually endorsed by the Young Hegelians, see Nola (1993, 293–95).

I think there are two problems with this argument. The first problem is that the first premise is mistaken. Even if hearers and participants know that the discussion topic was initiated to satisfy curiosity, it does not automatically follow that they will not assume the discussion is important. Perhaps it might be argued that they will not make this assumption *in so far as they are rational*. But, of course, people are not always rational in this requisite sense, and the fact that the requirements of “rationality” demand they avoid assuming such discussions are important does not mean they will.

Suppose, however, we assume for argument’s sake that, under certain circumstances at least, the fact that it is rational for people to do x makes it more likely that people will do x . If this is correct, then this might lend some strength to the first premise. Even if this is the case, I think it faces a further problem. We may question whether there is anything really “irrational” about a refusal to recognise a clear boundary between discussion topics that are motivated by considerations of importance and those that are not. A philosopher who chooses topics on the basis of what she can publish is motivated in part by what she considers “important.” What this example does illustrate, then, is not that her topic choices are incapable of causing importance misrepresentation but that the “importance” of a topic can often be explained in a wide variety of ways. This may also present a problem for identifying the practical implications of importance misrepresentation, but it is a distinct problem—one I consider in sub-section 5.4.

One may argue that being motivated by curiosity is genuinely distinct from being motivated by a topic’s importance. But even here, there may be reasons for refusing to buy into a hard boundary. Our curiosities, after all, do not emerge in a vacuum. Even if one asks a speaker why she chose to focus on a particular topic and receives nothing more than “I don’t know—I was just curious” for an answer, we might still wonder why she was curious, or rather what caused her to be curious in the first place. I don’t think it is particularly plausible to suppose that people can neatly separate their curiosities from what they consider to be important. If hearers and participants are aware that curiosity is the stated motivation behind the initiation of a discussion topic, the fully rational response—for all that it’s worth—may well involve taking this to be an indication that those who initiated the discussion hold certain beliefs about the state of the world that generated their curiosity in the first place. To be sure, they may well reject these beliefs, or view them with suspicion. But this is consistent with recognising that these beliefs seem to be prompting the discussion topic, and that the act of discussing it can function as a way of propagating them.

A second problem with this argument is that even if it is sound, its scope is highly limited. It applies only to discussion topics which are: (i) initiated for reasons other than their importance; and (ii) *widely known* to be initiated for reasons other than their importance. Most notably for our purposes, it does not seem to apply to topics discussed by philosophers. I assume there are still at least some philosophers—though by no means all or even many—who believe they are working on topics that are relevant to the needs and interests of human beings. But even if all philosophers contented themselves with answering questions in order to satisfy their curiosity (or for career-related reasons), the facts about their motivation for choosing topics are seldom widely known among what remains of their audience. Suppose, for example, many philosophers fixate on topic T only because doing so increases their chances of enjoying a lucrative academic career. A significant portion of their audience may not necessarily be aware of this, however. Hence, those who notice the overwhelming attention given to T in philosophical literature may still be led to believe—whether consciously or subconsciously—that the state of the world is such that T is of utmost importance. So even if the argument shows that *some* discussion topics are incapable of producing importance misrepresentation, this list of topics seems rather small, and it does not include those discussed by philosophers.

5.3 | Some topics are taken to be universally important

A different objection also argues that certain discussion topics do not presuppose any particular context. The basis of this objection, however, is not that these topics are motivated by considerations other than importance but that they are generally recognised to be important in all times and places. For example, it might be argued that the search for a cure for cancer is an important scientific inquiry everywhere because cancer is a problem everywhere. So, one might conclude, talk of curing cancer doesn't presuppose any particular state of the world.

We can summarise this objection as follows:

1. There are certain topics T_n that are widely believed to be universally important.
2. If T_n are widely believed to be universally important, then discussion of T_n will not lead anyone to make assumptions about the state of the world.
3. If discussion of T_n will not lead anyone to make assumptions about the state of the world, then discussion of T_n is incapable of causing importance misrepresentation.
4. Therefore, discussion of T_n is incapable of causing importance misrepresentation.

The second premise seems to be doing most of the heavy lifting. I am happy to grant that the first and third premises are true, but I think the second premise is false. The crucial point to note is that one must make certain assumptions about the state of the world in order to recognise that a topic is of universal importance. The importance of finding a cure for cancer does depend on certain facts about the world: that cancer is a devastating illness; that it afflicts a wide variety of people in often unpredictable ways; that it is extremely difficult to treat; and so on. And whenever the need for a cure for cancer features prominently in public discussion, it reinforces the belief that this is a universal concern, along with the facts about the nature and prevalence of the disease that make it a universal concern.

So it is a mistake, then, to say that discussion of a topic widely recognised as universally important will not involve promulgating certain beliefs about the state of the world. There is, however, a way in which the proponent of the objection might try to save the argument. It may be argued that at least some of the discussion topics that are widely believed to be universally important *really are universally important*. As a result, the sorts of beliefs about the state of the world that people might be induced to accept as a result of the discussion of these topics are likely to be true or reliable beliefs. Therefore, when topics that are universally important are discussed, importance misrepresentation does not occur.

This reply depends on the premise that at least some topics can be universally important. This premise may seem innocuous at first, but a little prodding reveals it to be rather controversial. It is not too difficult to imagine circumstances when topics that may seem to be universally important might not be high on a list of priorities at a particular moment. We might even wonder whether finding a cure for cancer would be a particularly high priority in a context like a genocidal war in which many or most people have few prospects of growing old. A topic may be generally important, but this does not mean it will be highly important at any particular moment.

Perhaps it might be suggested that certain philosophical questions are examples of topics that have a "timeless" quality. Questions about the nature of mind, personal identity, causality, the meaning of justice, and other such issues with which analytic philosophy has been preoccupied might be thought to rank among them. If this is correct, then we can at least be confident that philosophers are not routinely engaged in importance misrepresentation. The arguments of Mills and of Marx and Engels discussed in the previous section identify some unfortunate exceptions, but on the whole the topics that philosophers write about are not problematic in the same way.

There are at least two serious problems with this view. First, as we saw in the previous section, importance misrepresentation can occur through the sorts of topics philosophers choose *not* to focus on, not just through those that they do. We may grant that philosophers cannot write about *every* important topic. But a consistent neglect of certain topics across the discipline of philosophy as a whole can create an impression that the state of the world is such that these topics are not important. This was Mills's crucial point about philosophers' neglect of racism. As I understand him, Mills is not primarily arguing that the topics philosophers do choose to focus on are unimportant (though I suspect he may well think this too) but is arguing that the continual neglect of the topic of racism creates the impression that the state of the world is such that racism is a minor problem at most.

Second, there is something problematic—in my view, at least—about the assumption that philosophical questions have a “timeless” importance. This position may not be amenable to a straightforward refutation, but it does have to reckon with the fact that philosophical questions have a history. They emerge at a particular time and place, often in response to someone's contingent need or interest. In his genealogy of morality, Nietzsche (2006, 25–27) argues that the metaphysical ideas of free will and a self that persists through time emerge in order to suit the distinctive needs of slave morality. If Nietzsche is right, it seems hard to square this history of ideas about the metaphysics of the self with the view that these are “timeless” topics. In so far as philosophers present their work as addressing “timeless” topics, I wonder whether they may be engaging in importance misrepresentation by creating the impression that the topics on which they work do not have a history.

5.4 | Importance misrepresentation is insufficiently critical

A fourth objection is that importance representation lacks any serious critical teeth, since what is considered “important” varies from person to person. The point here is not that “importance” is necessarily an agent-relative concept (that is, that there is no such thing as something being “important” *simpliciter*, only something being “important to me” or “important to you”). Rather, it is that, as a matter of fact, people hold different ideas of what is and isn't important. These ideas may not always be well formed, but this does not make them less influential for those who hold them.

These differences in what people consider to be “important” may be thought to pose problems for the critical scope of the idea of importance misrepresentation in two ways. First, those who initiate a discussion topic may take it to be important for reasons that are quite different from those accepted by hearers and participants. Hence, even when hearers and participants are led to accept misleading views about the state of the world for reasons relating to why *they* consider the topic important, we may not be able to accuse the initiator of importance misrepresentation. Second, the reasons hearers and participants themselves consider a topic important may be opaque. As a result, it may be difficult to identify cases when importance misrepresentation has led them to accept a misleading view of the world.

The first version of this objection neglects the fact that importance misrepresentation is ultimately determined by the effects of a discussion topic on hearers and participants, rather than by the intentions of those who initiate the discussion. To return to the case of philosophy: suppose that its audience takes the fact that topic T is widely discussed in philosophical literature as evidence of the fact that T is of great importance to the needs and interests of humanity as a whole. Philosophers working on T may actually do so simply because this seems to them to be the best way to publish articles and advance their careers. The fact that the intentions of the philosophers may be different from the concerns of their audience does not in any way prevent the audience being led by the philosophical discussion of T to believe that the state of the world is such that T is important to humanity. We might then think it is unfair to say

that philosophers are engaging in importance misrepresentation, but we will think this only if we assume there is something morally wrong with importance misrepresentation. As I have already indicated, this is an assumption that I do not make.

The second version of the objection, by contrast, does pose a real problem for identifying instances of importance misrepresentation. There may be plenty of instances where it is difficult to identify exactly what people consider important, and as a result it will be difficult to determine whether importance misrepresentation is occurring. But there may be other instances where what people consider important is clear, or at least not entirely unclear. The existence of unclear cases does not make the clear cases any less clear. It does, however, suggest a reason for being somewhat cautious about labelling people as victims of importance misrepresentation. What we consider important and what others consider important are often very different things.

5.5 | Importance misrepresentation is excessively critical

A final objection makes the opposite point: importance misrepresentation proves too much. It may always or nearly always be possible to say that a question engages in importance misrepresentation in so far as it targets any issue other than the most important one.

I do not think that importance misrepresentation is liable to occur whenever the discussion topic is not pre-eminently the most important thing at a particular moment. I assume that people do not always expect one another to confine their attention to the one thing that is most important. We may choose to focus on topics of lesser but still substantial importance for a variety of reasons (for example, our abilities, interests, proximity, and so on), and people do not normally take our focus on such topics to be an indication that we believe these topics to be the most important.

At the same time, as I noted in sub-section 5.3, there may be certain scenarios where a focus on a topic that is not the most important at the moment of discussion may lead to importance misrepresentation. This may occur in at least two ways. First, it may be that on certain occasions a single issue really is of overwhelming importance, and that this may be effectively disguised by focusing discussion on less important topics. Second, as we saw when we examined Mills's argument, importance misrepresentation can occur in a systemic way. If an individual philosopher chooses to write on a particular topic that we might describe as "somewhat important," this is unlikely to lead anyone to believe that the topic is actually the most important. But if all or nearly all philosophers start focusing on this topic as well, this may well create the impression that the topic is more important than all others. Similarly, it may be innocuous for a single philosopher to neglect a topic, even if it is highly important. But things change if this topic is systemically neglected across the entire discipline. The important point to note here is that we cannot determine whether or not importance misrepresentation is liable to occur purely by examining the relationship between the state of the world as we know it and what hearers and participants in the discussion consider important. It is also essential to pay attention to the identity of those who are driving this discussion—especially their number and social standing—and the influence they are capable of wielding over others.

6 | CONCLUSION

My aim in this article has been to show that importance misrepresentation may be a helpful analytic device for understanding how the discussion of certain topics may shape the way people see the world in potentially misleading ways. This may seem an unnecessarily modest aim. Apart from the two examples I discussed in section 4, I have not tried to show that any

particular discussion topic currently featuring prominently in public or academic discourse is causing importance misrepresentation. What I do hope to have shown, however, is that the idea of importance misrepresentation may be both interesting and useful for those who think it is usually a good idea to analyse the initiation of discussion topics and ongoing participation in them as actions that may shape real-world issues in a variety of ways. I don't assume that everyone working in philosophy shares this interest. But perhaps acquiring a greater awareness of how discussions inside and outside philosophy can function, often in ways that we might regard as problematic or even nefarious, might motivate more people to think that this is something worth taking an interest in.

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