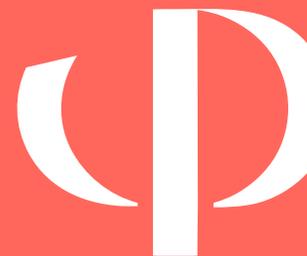


# Feminism and Philosophy



FALL 2016

VOLUME 16 | NUMBER 1

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Serena Parekh

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reliant on men. Importantly, they are becoming more economically independent and as a result their interest in having children with men is declining. This makes it harder for men to affirm their masculinity as breadwinners and procreators. Moreover, the traditional warrior role is no longer widely available to men. The prevalence of military service has declined across most developed societies and even if one serves, the kind of work one will do is less likely to affirm the traditional warrior identity. All in all, we don't need breadwinners, procreators, and warriors. Nevertheless we still enforce the gender binary, and this leaves men with few ways to achieve the roles we condition them to serve. We have produced what Digby calls a "dangerous masculinity cocktail" (102). Men, in order to affirm their masculinity, turn to alternative and increasingly destructive outlets. Digby's most disturbing passages describe some of the forms this can take. Lifelike sex dolls, gonzo porn, violent and misogynistic videogames, macho sports, gang violence, gun culture, and mass shootings are some examples.

Digby also offers a theory of the origins of tragic heterosexuality and cultural militarism. According to Digby, not all societies rely on war to resolve problems with other societies. Such pacifistic societies do not foster the tragic gender binary. However, societies that rely on war will exhibit tragic heterosexuality. This is because the cultivation of tragic heterosexuality is an effective means for a society to manage the burdens of frequent war. War-reliant societies need a lot of people who can effectively engage in combat, i.e., warriors, and because they will have members frequently killed in war, they also need to have proficient breeders. As it takes comparatively few men to maintain a high rate of reproduction, it makes sense to assign the role of warrior to men and the role of breeder/nurturer to women. Hence, war-reliant societies find utility in the gender binary and tragic heterosexuality. So long as societies continue to be war reliant, tragic heterosexuality will live on.

It is here that Digby finds reason to think we can and are overcoming the pull of tragic heterosexuality. Given the nature of what is currently the most urgent national security threat, i.e., the threat of terrorism, and the types of response it requires, the utility of warrior masculinity is decreasing. Thwarting terrorism is not achieved by means of conventional warfare. Killing terrorists is not going to end the threat of terrorism. In fact, a conventional military response will likely increase the threat of terrorism. The United States, for instance, has learned this slowly over the course of the decade and a half since 9/11. This discovery is evident in the changes the U.S. made in its counterinsurgency strategies in Iraq and Afghanistan. As a result, there is no longer the same need for warrior masculinity as there may have been in the past. This opens the door for a challenge to the gender binary. Digby sees evidence of the challenge underway already. An increased sensitivity to the needs of soldiers, an aversion to casualties, and the inclusion of women in combat signal a gradual degendering of war.

This seems too optimistic to me. Digby may be right about the effective ways of responding to terrorism, but

it is not so clear how widely agreement with his view has spread. Given the belligerent proposals for responding to the Islamic State out there (Donald Trump's suggestion to summarily execute members with bullets dipped in pig's blood comes to mind), it seems a traditional warrior response to terrorism still has a lot of traction. More importantly, though, I am not convinced that the gender binary ever had the kind of social utility Digby suggests that it did. On Digby's view, war reliance would seem to precede the gender binary and cultural militarism. But there is reason to see them as more intimately connected than this. For cultural militarism itself fosters a reliance on war. Culturally militaristic societies have, as Digby claims, a faith in masculine violence. This leads them to react to conflict militaristically. It wouldn't seem to matter to such societies if militaristic responses to conflict in fact prolong conflict. Peace is not seen as a realistic goal in such societies. In turn, they will be war reliant and see utility in the gender binary even if such things are contrary to the interests of peace. Perhaps tragic heterosexuality, cultural militarism, and war reliance should be thought of as a self-reinforcing system of militarism that is not so easy to dislodge rather than as a tiered structure with war reliance at the base.

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## *Women in Philosophical Counseling: The Anima of Thought in Action*

Luisa de Paula and Peter Raabe, eds. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015). 322 pages. \$100. ISBN: 978-0-7391-9165-1.

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Philosophers are doing quite a bit of hand-wringing about our discipline these days. Some of this is over the relative absence of female voices in the academic profession and some over the extent to which philosophy can or should be understood as a practical pursuit. *Women in Philosophical Counseling* brings these two concerns together, yet does not engage in or encourage more hand-wringing. Instead, the 18 contributors, from 13 countries, share their experiences of putting philosophy to practical use.

The book, which is organized into five main parts, offers what co-editor Luisa dePaola calls "a virtual journey in philosophical counseling" (5). Part I affords readers the experience of "Listening to Whispers" from people whose voices are frequently overlooked: clients who are especially vulnerable and philosophical counselors working outside academia. Two of its four selections describe philosophical work with clients: Turkish women who "feel, and/or are, controlled, abused or manipulated most of the time" (Moryahim, 16), and terminally ill patients whose hunger for meaning is "great, urgent and intense" (Sesino, 52). Both contexts produce experiences of loneliness and isolation that result from external circumstances largely beyond the clients' control. Hence philosophy might be thought to have little to offer them, especially if identified with abstract

thinking and didactic instruction. But the attentive reader can hear how they learn to articulate authentic feelings and thoughts. Philosophical inquiry boosts self-esteem, enabling women in Turkey “to set clear boundaries” and deal with “their concrete and difficult problems in increasingly sophisticated ways” (Moryahim, 21, 24). And philosophical reflection affords terminally ill persons “the chance to experience their own identity at a deeper level” (Sesino, 52). Importantly, these benefits are not the result of top-down applications of a counselor’s preferred theory or method; rather, they result from exposure to “a wide range of philosophical perspectives and tools” (Moryahim, 24), each of which is suggested by a counselor-as-dialog-partner, that is, a philosopher who is not only familiar with a wide range of potentially relevant concepts and theories, but skilled at “listening to a person” (Sesino, 53).

The specifically philosophical yet nonetheless therapeutic benefits of careful listening are the focus of the two other selections. Radovanovic—a school counselor in Serbia, where there is little support for mental health—suggests that the willingness of all therapists to explore a variety of different approaches is the only way to overcome the fear and social prejudice of asking for help. And Bakirdjian—a researcher and philosophical counselor working in Argentina, where philosophical counseling is more established—stresses the importance of understanding each client’s primary motivation, “given that he/she is not merely the passive guest invited to this banquet [of philosophical thinking], but the main protagonist in his/her own recovery” (Bakirdjian, 43).

Part II illustrates the therapeutic benefits of “Enhancing Doubt,” and the common theme among its four chapters is that “doubt is not a paralyzing state of indecisiveness or a difficulty in assessing a given state of affairs, but rather an existential opening to the situations in which people find themselves from time to time” (dePaola, 284). That doubt can be valuable is uncontroversial to anyone with an interest in philosophy, yet the first two selections question whether doubt has been accurately conceptualized within the discipline. Instead of following Descartes in viewing doubt as a way to clear the ground for certainty, Salaverria contends that “doubts *generate something new* about us, about our relation to the world and thus, generate something new in the world itself” (69). Similarly, Amir shows how “humor as a tool in the practice of philosophy” makes it possible for women to counter the emotions of disgust and shame that result from “interiorizing” the association of women with vulnerability, bodily functions, and the like (83). By exploiting various ambiguities in how women (and especially women’s bodies) are viewed, humor shows that it is literally impossible to take the claims that ground those emotions seriously. Yet rather than demanding the ambiguity be resolved, humor allows us to accept—and even take pleasure in—human ambivalence about the body. The final two selections take contrasting (though not contradictory) positions on the value of psychological understandings of human nature. Gruengard draws from case studies in her own practice to show why she doubts that psychological analyses of women’s “need to be needed” are accurate and whether this “need” can be an authentic expression of women’s values (Ch. 7). Kreimer also doubts the extent

to which people should listen to their natural or biological urges, though she does not doubt that they are part of us. Focusing specifically on “several irrational sources” that have been shown by empirical psychology to influence mate choice (121), she argues that men and women who visit her practice “are often ‘deceived,’ not by their partner but by [these] unconscious biological, psychological, and social factors” (128). Fortunately, philosophical counseling can help clients make more fulfilling relationship choices, not only by making these implicit urges explicit, but by enabling them to re-conceptualize love “as an art, as something we learn and improve on, not just something that happens to us” (121). So Kreimer’s case study, like Gruengard’s, serves to illustrate how doubt can facilitate concrete problem solving.

The first two parts of the book emphasize how philosophical counseling promotes epistemic humility and opens up space for clients to navigate life’s problems with greater flexibility. Sometimes this is enough to resolve a client’s problems. But few life problems are the result of mistaken assumptions and narrow patterns of reasoning alone; in many cases, what is needed is a radically new way of conceptualizing the situations in which we find ourselves, even ways of re-conceptualizing ourselves. This latter, more constructive activity is the focus of Part III, “Thinking Emotions,” which is really about overcoming dualisms of all kinds. Interestingly, both contributors are from Norway, where philosophical counseling is quite well-established, and neither is a model of humility in its traditionally female guise. Vahl not only challenges the historical assumption that emotions should be subservient to reason, but asks “when is our reasoning rational? When are our inferences rational? When is the use of logic rational? And which emotions are involved in these processes in order for them to be rational?” (139) She also draws freely from work in the social sciences in order to formulate her answers—we are rational “when our cognitive functions work appropriately with our emotional functions,” and respect and empathy are essential to “integrating or finding a good balance between emotions and cognition” (ibid.)—thereby challenging the supposed distinction between philosophy and other disciplines too. In a similar vein, Angeltun draws on both Martin Heidegger and Carol Gilligan while defending *phronesis* as the core of all philosophical work. “To engage a world ‘phronetically’ is . . . an attempt to understand its possibilities for relations and action as it ‘happens’” (152) and “depends on a process involving feelings and rationality” (154). Moreover, since caring is a basic structure of being-in-the-world, “it is important to pay attention to the psychological tensions and the implications which follow when emotions and actions are at odds” (155). Like Vahl, Angeltun forcefully challenges the picture of philosophy as objective theorizing that must be detached from basic human longings and day-to-day concerns. And she defends the work of philosophical counselors as people who “train to develop context sensitivity and to really listen and investigate the guests’ [aka clients’] experienced situations, moral dilemmas, relationships, feelings, and thoughts. From this context sensitivity we search for relevant philosophical thoughts from our educational background that can shed some light or challenge the guests’ perspectives” (Angeltun, 154).

The upshot of Parts I–III is that philosophical counselors (as a group) are just like academic philosophers (as a group) in terms of sensitivity to philosophical problems, knowledge of prior philosophical theorizing, and skill in theory-construction. Where they differ is in their interest in problems that emerge from clients’ own experiences, willingness to allow clients to “co-construct” philosophical responses through dialog, and conception of philosophical problems as being solved only when clients are able “to think their emotions and feel their thoughts” (dePaola, 288–89). The rest of the the book highlights these differences from two different angles: “Sharing Insights” about how philosophical counseling leads to growth and new ideas, for both clients and counselors, and hence is continuous with academic or scholarly pursuits (Part IV), and detailing how philosophical counselors are “Acting to Change” current paradigms of both clinical psychology and psychiatry (Part V). Five of the eight contributors work primarily as counselors, the other three as academics. The academics are especially critical of philosophical paradigms that favor a particular account of a problem rather than emphasizing the more general need for coherence. After all, while “we may never actually finish the project of producing such an account, . . . the activity of its production, no matter how large or how small a portion of our waking life it consumes . . . is crucial to a satisfying human life” (Piety, 213). And the counselors are particularly keen to show how gender inequality and skepticism about philosophical counseling arise in any context where “the neutral posture, the objective viewpoint of the knower—the non-situated, distanced standpoint—is valued higher than the particular standpoint of the situated viewer who works ‘in the field’ and who obtains philosophical insight through communication and interpersonal dialogue” (Moors, 234). The combined result is a persuasive case that “while there is nothing wrong with the pursuit of abstract or productive knowledge, . . . there is something wrong when it is out of balance with our concern and responsibility for others” (Douglas, 276).

The book, which merits attention from anyone with an interest in the nature and value of philosophy, also serves as “a point of departure for engaging philosophical counselors with the question of *différance*” (dePaola, 3). Readers are engaged with this question from the earliest pages, since each co-editor takes a slightly different stance in their individually written introductions. According to Raabe, “[t]here is no doubt that women and men are equal. . . . But being equal doesn’t mean being the same” (1). Still, both psychological research and his own counseling experience convince him that “it’s sometimes acceptable to generalize” (ibid.)—namely, when doing so enables the counselor to more accurately discern how a client initially perceives his or her problems and hence to respond more directly to each client’s most immediate needs. While equally keen to facilitate genuine dialog, dePaola is more wary of what generalizations may obscure. This is grounded in her experience of being “taught”—though never explicitly—that women were not philosophers. dePaola’s main objection is to a “one size fits all model” of philosophy (5), and Raabe is keen to point out that biological differences are “not always as clear and distinct as social convention would have us believe” (Raabe, 2). Not surprisingly, the book they have put together shows

contributors grappling with the question of difference in myriad ways.

The editors also have a more political goal “to encourage every reader to invest in and capitalize on philosophical resources as they seek out and develop their uniquely different way of life” (dePaola, 5). To my mind, this is admirably achieved. Each essay serves to illustrate a particular author’s “uniquely different” approach to doing philosophy, and many show how a philosophical approach to counseling enables clients to live happier, more thoughtful, and more productive lives. Collectively, the essays demonstrate that *The Anima of Thought in Action* has much greater philosophical import than those who ignore or seek to abstract from human vulnerability, bodily experience, emotional responsiveness, and interpersonal engagement have typically acknowledged or been willing to accept. And they also show that by engaging with concrete human problems, we can achieve that measure of transcendence that has long been one of philosophy’s most cherished aims.

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### *Ethical Loneliness: The Injustice of Not Being Heard*

Jill Stauffer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015). 240 pages. Hardcover, \$55. ISBN: 0231171501.

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*Ethical Loneliness: The Injustice of Not Being Heard* is a small book with immense breadth and insight into the difficulties of and harms incurred through the process of political reconciliation in the aftermath of atrocity. Stauffer’s book is part of a growing philosophical literature on transitional justice by feminist theorists.<sup>1</sup> While much of the research in this discipline is informed by legal and political theory, Stauffer’s approach to reconciliation is decidedly ethical and interdisciplinary. Her focus on Levinasian phenomenology and existentialism is paired with a serious engagement with empirical research about the efficacy and outcomes of criminal and testimonial approaches to reconciliation. The result is a work of moral theory that, with its emphasis on responsiveness and intersubjectivity, offers a decidedly feminist approach to justice.

Stauffer’s work extends other conversations within European philosophy and holocaust studies with her engagement with two central figures, both victims of the Jewish Holocaust. I say victims because although both survived (Levinas was a prisoner of war; Améry was tortured and held at work camps at Auschwitz), there is a real sense in which Améry in particular did not survive; he experienced what many call a “social death” before his suicide in 1978. This insight is key to Stauffer’s argument; Améry’s social death is a feature of having been abandoned. *Ethical Loneliness* offers a careful meditation on a basic social abandonment that is often at the heart of (and yet unarticulated in) other works on transitional justice. Stauffer’s work also engages