Colin McGinn: Not the Only Masturbating Philosopher

By NATHAN SCHNEIDER

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Colin McGinn has had a difficult summer. By early June, the prominent philosopher was forced to resign from his job at the University of Miami because of revelations about sexually explicit correspondence between him and a graduate student. The likes of Steven Pinker defended him, but not many others. Now, an article in The New York Times this past weekend has spread the debate about his case further and wider.

In the article, he appears to defend himself by casting his sexual remarks as mere philosophical teaching tools, as meanderings in pure abstraction. “Remember that I am a philosopher trying to teach a budding philosopher important logical distinctions,” he told the Times reporter, Jennifer Schuessler, in reference to remarks that anyone else would read as propositioning a student.

It reminds me of an aphorism by Ludwig Wittgenstein in which he imagines what a bystander would think upon noticing two philosophers debating their knowledge of a nearby tree. “This fellow isn’t insane,” one of them explains. “We are only doing philosophy.”

But philosophy is never “only philosophy.” While working on my book God in Proof, which is among other things a history of philosophical arguments about the existence of God, it gradually became clear that my undertaking was in fact a study of masculinity, so shot through were these arguments with gendered assumptions and ideals. And, as a study of masculinity, it was also a study of patriarchy.

Aristotle, whose argument for an unmoved mover was one of the primordial God-proofs, imagined his God as a caricature of characteristics associated with masculinity: a force of pure willpower acting on the universe while immersed in abstract thought about itself. Centuries later, the caricature played out once again in the influential fictional character Hayy Ibn Yaqzan, devised by the 12th-century Muslim philosopher Ibn Tufayl; Hayy, who was born by spontaneous generation, discovers his proof for the existence of God while living alone on a tropical island, dependent on no one, thinking through the universe for himself. His proof eventually makes him want to do away with his body altogether.

This is a trope you see again and again: the world of certain kinds of philosophical argument is a world without bodies, without politics, without families. Especially when philosophers deal with religion, which so many of us first learn from the whispers of our mothers, they are determined to cleanse their methods of any such origin. René Descartes once claimed of his own parents that it was not “they who in any way brought me into being, insofar as I am a thinking thing.”

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A similar logic has seemed to play out in the story of debates about the existence of God, and in Western philosophy more generally. Philosophy serves as a domain in which men can imagine a world made up only of themselves and what goes on in their minds. Our bodies are part of the discussion as well as our minds. Power carries responsibility. Sexual harassment is a problem.

As anybody who has attended a philosophy conference or been in a philosophy department knows, it remains a severely male-dominated discipline. And, men can imagine a world made up only of themselves and what goes on in their minds. A similar logic has seemed to play out in the story of debates about the existence of God, and in Western philosophy more generally. Philosophy serves as a domain in which men can imagine a world made up only of themselves and what goes on in their minds.

Words are not words. Distinctions have consequences. Our bodies are part of the discussion as well as our minds. Power carries responsibility. Sexual harassment is sexual harassment.