

ESSAY

August 5, 2013

Colin McGinn: Not the Only Masturbating Philosopher^{By} [NATHAN SCHNEIDER](#)

Gruff old 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 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."

Colin McGinn's communiqués to his student, which made explicit reference to masturbation, call to mind Susan Sontag's remark that, "Jerking off the universe is perhaps what all philosophy, all abstract thought is about."

I found some guidance in making sense of these things through a book by the late feminist scholar of religion Nancy Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever*. It's an examination of sacrifice rituals across cultures; sacrifice, she found, is often used as a means of creating an all-male lineage of spiritual power, through a rebirth with no need for the bodies of women. Just think of the Catholic Church, which more than any Christian sect insists with equal fervency on the importance of the eucharistic sacrifice and the necessity that it be performed only by men. Through ordination, sons are reborn as priests, able to perform the sacrifice, and thus as members of an all-male clerical family.

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.

As anybody who has attended a philosophy conference or been in a philosophy department knows, it remains a severely male-dominated discipline. And, [according to](#) one of philosophy's chief commentators, Brian Leiter, "Sexual harassment, from the mild to the severe, is widespread."

Colin McGinn's strange insistence that one can talk about sex with a female student in pure abstraction, and his resulting objectification of that student, is part of a legacy that has gone on for far too long in far too important a discipline. Indeed, these patterns seem to have something in common with the objectification that abusive priests (together with the bishops who protect them) often display toward victims. It's because the victim was never recognized as fully a person to begin with.

When one looks to the courageous women who slog it out in philosophy today, one finds a somewhat different picture; in a variety of ways, they challenge their male colleagues' old modes of operating. Eleanore Stump, for instance, is a respected analytic philosopher of religion whose recent work on the problem of evil has taken up the role of physical bodies, and stories, in a manner foreign to how the matter is normally discussed by analytic philosophers—but familiar to anyone who has dealt with it in real life.

"If you look at my new book, and you look at any book of a male who is in my generation, you're not going to have any difficulty figuring out that there's a gender difference here," she told me. "I'm not unconscious of that, and that's not an accident."

Anybody who sets out to pin down what, exactly, is different between how men and women do philosophy "has a death wish," Stump said, but a few things seem to be clear. Words are not *just* words. Distinctions have consequences. Our bodies are part of the discussion as well as our minds. Power carries responsibility. Sexual harassment is sexual harassment.

COMMENTS

0 comments

★ 0



Leave a message...

Best ▾ Community

Share

No one has commented yet.

ALSO ON RELIGION DISPATCHES

[What's this?](#)

Enlightenment's Islam: a "Necessary Fiction" | (A)theologies

27 comments • 24 days ago



Jon Hendry — Seems like you're missing the Islamic world's role in science, mathematics, astronomy, philosophy, ...

California Inmates Protest the Abuse of Long-Term Solitary Confinement ...

4 comments • 23 days ago



Galahad — Riddle me this, Riddler! We're they sentenced to prison for singing off-key in the church choir? Take your ...

Why I Fear The Post-Trayvon Martin Sermon | (A)theologies

197 comments • 21 days ago



Jim Reed — We appreciate your previous votes for Obama, and we can take it from here.

Arson, Torture and Murder Devastate LGBT Activists in Cameroon

13 comments • 20 days ago



Bill T. — This murder is a direct result of the hatred being imported into Cameroon from Scott Lively and his ilk. Blood is ...

Comment feed Subscribe via email

© Religion Dispatches 2013. All rights reserved. Reproduction of materials from any Religion Dispatches pages without written permission is strictly prohibited.