Singing the Post-Discrimination Blues: Notes for a Critique of Academic Meritocracy

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‘...There is a natural aristocracy among men. The grounds of this are virtue and talents[...while] the artificial aristocracy is founded on wealth and birth.’

Thomas Jefferson

‘There is for me an element of laughable exaggeration in the claims often made for the meritocratic purity of existing arrangements.’

Duncan Kennedy

1. Ain’t that Peculiar?

There seems to be an obvious puzzle about the supposedly meritocratic systems governing appointments to senior positions in many areas of public life: if merit is the sole cause of achievement, why is it that the preponderance of talent and hard work is to be found among a small class of white males? Faced with such a puzzle, do we continue to believe in the system of meritocracy as generating some modern version of Jefferson’s ‘natural aristocracy among men’, with status and right to govern conferred by virtue and talent? Or do we conversely find an element of laughable exaggeration in meritocratic claims? Meritocracy is supposed to replace inherited privilege as a way of deciding the allocation of rewards, power and resources to the talented and hard-working, and thus to both establish legitimate hierarchies and ensure the excellence of what is done. In academia, the rigorous application of meritocratic standards ought,
one would think, to be entirely in women’s interests as well as in the long-term interests of disciplines. Yet although meritocratic selection should lead to the best being chosen, it has also been argued to support the self-reproduction of elite groups (Brezis 2010, McNamee and Miller 2004, Thornton, 2004) and to limit the value of work produced relative to other, more pluralistic standards (Kennedy 1990). This chapter considers the self-reproduction of the discipline of philosophy in view of the systemic outcomes of its processes of selection and promotion, with a critical eye to how we might detect, or even learn to laugh at, the faith placed in meritocratic mechanisms. Such laughter, I hold, is much called for, in view of the depressing circumstances in which female academics so often continue to find themselves. Despite the elimination of the most ‘overt’ forms of discrimination there are still what I call here the ‘post-discrimination’ blues to overcome, a dismay at ongoing poor outcomes, both personal and collective, that can only be compounded by the sense that institutional arrangements are often imagined to have become altogether fair.

Among the indicators of merit in philosophy would be publications in top-ranked journals. The reward for merit would include a position at an elite institution, and promotion to the professoriate. There is a very low percentage of female professors of philosophy. Data Sally Haslanger has gathered shows the generally very low representation of women in top-ranked philosophy journals (2008: 220). Other data suggests a strong correlation between elite institutional status and the poor representation of women - or, more precisely, what I shall refer to as the ‘minor’ position of women, indicating at once minority status in a numerical sense and the exclusion from seniority that seems to mark women’s most common fate in this field. In philosophy, it is not only the case that the vast majority of senior positions are held by men; in addition, the vast majority of the top-ranked journals publish articles by women at a rate that is considerably lower than the already particularly low proportion of women working in philosophy at elite universities. Elite universities, for instance the Group of Eight in Australia, overall have the worst gender profiles for academic employment, particularly in terms of seniority.\footnote{QUT 2009 data. See also Haslanger, 2008, 222 giving a table listing numbers and percentages of women in the departments that rank highest in Brian Leiter’s ‘The Philosophical Gourmet Report’ for 2007, See http://www.philosophicalgourmet.com/ for a current version of the rankings.} If it is possible to track a negative correlation between numbers of women and the excellence of institutions or departments; or between number of papers by women and the excellence of a
journal, then what conclusions can we draw from these systemic outcomes? How should they be connected with women’s ‘failure’ to achieve seniority in equal numbers in the field, or even find themselves in the running to do so?

One crucial issue here is how we understand the relationship between goals of equity and goals of excellence. Where gender equity is construed as an ‘add on’ goal, one divorced from aims of excellence, it readily seems to enter into competition with the selection for qualities that are presumed to be absolutely integral or essential to the discipline. My suggestion will be that this should be viewed, at least in part, in the context of an innate conservatism in the way that disciplines reproduce themselves; such that the hegemonic conception of the discipline, which is itself reflective of the gender composition of those who occupy positions of authority and influence within it, is taken as a given, or as exemplary of what this discipline is properly about. If the current ‘winning team’ (the one deemed to produce excellent results within existing disciplinary terms) which happens to be all or mostly male, is asked to consider its poor gender profile, the response is likely to come that to prioritise gender equity would be to compromise the goal of excellence, a goal that is believed to be presently realised under ‘gender-blind’ selection processes. If it is suggested that new jobs be advertised in areas where we know there to be more women, the central importance to the discipline of traditionally male-dominated areas is likely to be strongly asserted. Analogies for this defensive conservatism can be found in other areas than philosophy, where the lack of women is at once explained and justified by reasserting the central importance of apparently key disciplinary requirements. If engineering, say, is argued to be essentially dependent on maths-skills (rather than emphasising skills in negotiating complex social relationships and team-based problem-solving) the poor representation of women will be explained in terms of the finding that ‘women are poor at maths’. But this begs the question of whether engineering, considered within its social context and as an arena in which women’s participation matters, might itself be poorly conceived in terms of a narrow range of skills and values that leave women indifferent to (rather than incapable of) practising it. If one then considers that there is in fact little about why engineering matters that is of a purely technical nature, the issues at stake might begin to be looked at in another light. More generally, gender balance might become an integral rather than ‘add on’ concern of disciplines by casting questions about what matters within them - or what they might be, become or do - as at least
somewhat open-ended; that is, as critical questions that ask disciplines to imagine more inclusive futures, or at least seek to off-set conservative tendencies within their own self-reproduction, their tacit ways of reflecting the current gendered composition of leadership and membership.

Thus the question of the relationship between disciplines and their self-reproduction, or projection of a future, I am speculating, is tied to questions (a) about how these disciplines conceptualize their nature and place in the world and (b) their negotiation of the distribution of ‘what matters’ across gender differences that are themselves not ‘natural’ but reflective of (contestable) constructions of both value and judgment. Along these lines one might also begin to critically question prevailing assumptions that to hire or promote more women, in ways that would step outside the parameters of existing disciplinary and meritocratic norms, would present a dire threat to the excellence of work in a discipline (invoking the spectre of ‘affirmative action’ as discrimination for women, at the expense of merit based considerations).

My aim throughout this chapter is to highlight ways in which we might reverse a picture in which gender is made to appear as a political or moral consideration that is external to the neutral and impartial deliberations of academies. On the contrary, I hold that the latter are saturated with the moral and political concerns integral to meritocratic judgments and work within a field of judgment that is profoundly shaped by gendering operations. Some possible indicators of this have been outlined above, and more discussion of them will follow. In this context, however, it is worth remarking that drawing attention to the correlations between masculine majority and the markers of excellence, may be a double-edged strategy for feminists. Elite status, whether of an institution or as marked by promotion to the highest tiers of the profession, is supposed to be conferred by (gender blind) merit. Indicators of achievement, like publishing in ‘the top journals,’ might appear to a feminist eye to evidence a masculine bias. Supposing this to be so, the problem feminists face in persuading others of it goes deep; for what needs to come into focus is the institutional frame promoting and protecting claims about the validity of judgment itself. Yet what constitutes disciplinary excellence – as measured by indicators such as ‘top journals’ – has, on the dominant view, nothing to do with gender. And if you were to look at the gender profile of the top departments with a purely instrumental eye to predicting success, and

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2 see Rini, in this vol
according to current criteria, it would not be too hard to conclude that the best strategy for a
department would be to continue to hire more men than women.\(^3\) If what counts as ‘success’ is
currently generated and inhabited by a predominantly male cohort, then this constitutes a
powerful mechanism of *affirmation* of subsisting institutional arrangements; and despite more or
less conscious awareness at elite institutions that the ‘gender gap’ is a problem, the
understanding of what *kind* of problem it is, in most cases will be insulated from perceptions of
what constitutes excellence and in the worst cases, suggest a zero sum game. It is a common
experience to find that any push to improve gender balance or to promote more women, is
immediately and without further argument, construed as a threat to or ‘dilution’ of quality.

My point here is less that our data on women’s minority risks working *against* the ends we seek
to promote, than that there is a powerful, largely tacit set of feedback effects that we need to take
the measure of. One might begin by remarking that disciplinary excellence as presently
established has a *great deal* to do with gender. However, there are important questions about
how we take up this insight. I argue here that the kind of example presented by the data
Haslanger has gathered on how rarely feminist work appears within ‘the’ leading journals, and
the overwhelming propensity of these to publish articles by men, can only partially be read in
terms of an unconscious set of ‘evaluation biases’ (Haslanger; cf. Valian 1998, pp 125-144)
working to distort individual judgments of merit. In addition, we need to critically consider a
justificatory level, inherent in widely accepted dimensions of existing practises, which constitute
the *conditions* under which judgment and evaluation is demanded and becomes validated, for
instance within the academy, or at a societal level. If a largely conservative bias determines the
form merit will take, and this in view of the affirmation of the prevailing institutional conditions
that are deemed to be responsible for generating and validating disciplinary ‘excellence’, then
such canons of excellence may themselves *shape* the contemporary ‘hyper-rational’ disciplinary
institution of philosophy and reinforce the idea that this is its natural form. Here it matters that
the ‘masculine’ coding of philosophy may also be a crucial means to establishing its success

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\(^3\) Consider in this light Rini’s speculations (this vol) about why in the last 5 and a half years (2005-2011) 14 men
and 0.5 of a woman were appointed to philosophy jobs in New Zealand, in the context of the intensification of
competitive assessments of research quality, like the ERA in Australia, or RAE in the UK. Rini comments “Because
this PBRF model is used to determine a university’s funding, simple accounting makes it clear that young women
philosophers are not as a rule a ‘good investment’ for a department or a university that is focussed on maximizing
scores.”
within institutions that are increasingly unfriendly to the humanities and demand evidence of a social value that philosophy is often hard-pressed to provide.

The following discussion takes up these issues in view of what might be described as ‘meta-justificatory’ frameworks for validating disciplinary achievement, ways in which standards of evaluation secure broad, typically unquestionable purchase, and are confirmed and reconfirmed by the practises and processes they authorise. I thereby aim to further the “growing recognition that merit, as it has been defined and measured in academe, intertwines aspects of gender and privileges males” (Krefting, 2003: 272). This chapter is a response to the *prima facie* peculiarity of the results that meritocratic regimes in philosophy deliver, and especially to the ways in which the issues this raises seem to become excluded from properly academic concerns; as if the problem of women’s minority had a purely social or political status, and thus would be strictly *external* to the discipline itself, or no real business of philosophers to address and resolve. In section 2, below, I consider how philosophy may be shaped by its position in the ‘gendered academy’ (Bailyn, 2003). In section 3, I look at how the problem of the minority of women can be constructed in a way that implies it is neither a problem for philosophy as a discipline, nor, indeed even a particularly important problem for women, thus foreclosing any seriously investigative question about how gender may inflect achievement within a discipline. In section 4, I argue that gendered relations of power are effective in making prevailing meritocratic arrangements appear equitable in principle, when in fact there are powerfully conservative tendencies at work in the field, operating through stereotypes to tacitly legitimate the prevailing pattern of outcomes. In conclusion, section 5, I argue that forms of evaluation currently prevalent in academia tend to intensify rather than ameliorate the problems faced by women in disciplines like philosophy, and that feminists need strategies of response that do not simply presume the perfectibility of meritocratic arrangements, but rather demand responsibility be taken for ensuring less conservative futures for the discipline.
2. Philosophy and the Gendered Academy

In thinking about the specific relation between philosophy and the gender gap in professional academia more broadly, it is worth remembering that the philosophy we are discussing is the version of ‘philosophy’ that has developed and been supported within institutions. The gendering of this philosophy and the ‘gendered academy’ thus deserve to be considered together. The gender gap in philosophy might be viewed as in part an effect of a specific colonisation of the resources and plural strands of philosophy’s own traditions; that is, of privileging certain aspects of the discipline over others, in view of a range of priorities that include philosophy’s pragmatic ways of establishing the conditions of its institutional survival and success. If there is ongoing evidence of the dominance of what Haslanger describes as a hyper-rational/masculine coding of philosophy (2008: 217) and especially as expressed in aspects of the discipline associated with elite status, one question that should concern us is how and why this disciplinary emphasis has been maintained and fostered. Perhaps this is at least in part for reasons to do with patterns of vindication of knowledge and achievement in academia more broadly, and thus with cross-disciplinary competition for resources, as much as anything intrinsic to philosophy as such.

There is, after all, very much in the history and ‘nature’ of philosophy that exceeds or troubles this hyper-rational norm; philosophy is no monolith, but historically riven by competing conceptions of its mission, terms of judgement and rationality. Could it be, however, that disciplinary philosophy, and those who hold the majority of leading positions within it, have profited professionally by favouring aspects of the subject that align with an elite and masculine coding of the forms of knowledge? And does the way in which this has taken place illustrate how the gendering of philosophy has gone hand in hand with the marginalization of certain orders of critical questions, including those of feminist theory, within the discipline (cf. Gatens, 1991)? In what follows, I shall take it that it would be a mistake to allow it to seem that we have, on the one hand, ‘philosophy’, pure and unsullied by its institutional forms, and on the other hand, meritocratic forms of judgment that would objectively track either its own high achievements, or the achievements of individuals working in the field. There are mutual forms of adaptation between what can establish a claim to distinction and where efforts are made in a field. We

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4 Again, consider the data Haslanger draws from the Leiter report.
therefore need to look with a sceptical eye at how disciplinary success correlates with a profound gender gap, especially at the most elite institutions; and where success is judged in the conventional terms of meritocracy, established in discipline-specific ways by philosophy, but nonetheless within the competitive space of the academy.

One important factor to consider here is how a discipline, or the individuals working within it, benefit from being able to present qualities that are readily recognized and assessed as being valuable, or of solid and convincing merit. Can these qualities themselves be gendered? We are familiar from the work of Genevieve Lloyd and other feminists with the powerful role historically played in philosophy by the figure of the ‘man of reason’, the embodiment of objectivity, good sense and neutrality (Lloyd, 1984). The minority position of women may well suggest that this is neither a figure that can be consigned to the past, nor is it one that we can separate from the organization of power within disciplines that perpetuate themselves in highly gendered forms. If impartiality, sober and legitimate judgement are throughout this history associated with the ‘man of reason’, and emotion, bias, and unruly thought with the feminine, then the schema Lloyd is identifying is deeply entrenched within the very systems of judgement that establish what counts as excellent work; that is, the ‘measureable’ kind of thing elite status is likely to be built on.

This sort of argument extends well beyond the realm of philosophy alone. Margaret Thornton (2004) for instance, has been able to make use of this order of analysis to examine how meritocracy favours men when it comes to appointments to the judicial bench, in part because of the greater ease with which men ‘embody’ the impartial mode of reasoning that is called for by the role. Just as importantly, however, one of the things that Lloyd is identifying within the figure of the ‘man of reason’ is how systems for legitimating knowledge denigrate rival claims and, by the same token, establish hegemonic status. The gendering of philosophy, in this dimension (and comparably with other areas where authority appears in masculine guise) is not simply about the alignment of men and women (considered as individuals) with certain qualities of reason or their lack. Rather, these attributions play a more systemic role and may appear in more concealed forms. Thus feminine stereotypes, of the sort we are familiar with from the pages of all the canonically ‘great’ philosophers, do not merely posit a set of characteristic
attributes of women, such as being emotional; rather, the attribution of ‘emotion’ is a way of positioning women outside reason, and thus of legitimating their subordination, establishing their minority, in other words, reconfirming a relation of domination and subordination. Such stereotypes are exaggerations of difference that stabilize and naturalize prevailing social relations. While taken to reflect natural differences, they in fact function to normalize hierarchical distributions of value and comprise part of a meta-justificatory framework that powerfully reasserts the results a selective system produces. I shall have more to say about how this works in section 4 below.

Contemporary, institutionally successful philosophy operates within a hyper-rational frame that seeks to align the ‘best’ aspects of the discipline with the status of science, for example in terms of ideals of neutrality and objectivity. Analytic metaphysics is thus heavily over-represented in the ‘top’ journals. Simultaneously, achievement in the discipline is coded in ways that skew its emphasis toward highly individualized performance, rather than tangible outcomes. Thus in philosophy, in its present disciplinary incarnation, what matters for the ‘rising stars’ of the profession is often that they are or seem to be, ‘cleverer than the next man’, as established within the arenas of dispute (top journals, important seminars etc) that provide the opportunity for demonstrating one’s distinction. To be good at philosophy within this arena is not to be good at doing something with an external goal, like interpreting the past or writing literary criticism, indeed interpretive and evaluative work is eschewed as lacking the proper display of rationality, and outcomes that can be evaluated in terms of the content of knowledge are rarely important. Rather, to be good at philosophy is to be good at argument, which is very close to being a display of the sheer intelligence that is taken to be the measure of merit. This claim about philosophy is, no doubt, at risk of seeming simply reductive (compare Hutchison, this vol, for a more nuanced reading). What it seeks to capture, however, is the need to pay attention to the form that ‘judgements of excellence’ can take in a field that has urgent needs to establish merit on the grounds of something like its sheer elite status, given the difficulty of establishing say, the social usefulness that other disciplines might claim. In the case of philosophy, this is on grounds that are very often inward-looking, attaching high value to individual distinction; and although aligned with scientific objectivity, divorced from the more obvious assessments of the social
value of outcomes we might associate with science (as a driver of technological progress, for instance).⁵

Indeed in philosophy, a pressing imperative for the demonstration of value, may give impetus to a particular construction of excellence that, in aristocratic fashion, surpasses and negates merely practical considerations. We might think of this as something like the ‘surplus value’ of merit that attaches to those elite disciplines, journals and institutions which are, to some extent, able to withstand the pressures on academic endeavours and on universities to demonstrate their social usefulness. Although there are aspects of ‘merit’ that can be associated with pragmatic concerns of efficiency and effectiveness in pursuit of given goals, what is of particular relevance in philosophy is a surplus virtuous quality, demonstrating being ‘excellent’ or ‘best’ in non-instrumental ways. And although clearly it is important to be able to mark forms of value that exceed instrumentality and to acknowledge the intrinsic value of academic pursuits, my question concerns how that is achieved in the contemporary academy and what its gender implications may be. The ranking of journals (including, in the recent Excellence in Research exercise in Australia, that notable and absurd superlative, A*) is one aspect of the contemporary gendered academy that is arguably party to putting an exaggerated version of ‘demonstrable’ excellence and a corresponding hierarchy (the ‘natural aristocracy of men’) in the place of the plural pathways and means of thought evident throughout the history of philosophy. Not only then, does philosophy continue to privilege the figure of the ‘man of reason’, but critical or simply alternate paths in the discipline are, in a classically gendering operation, exposed to denigration or to marginal status.

Accordingly, one might say that the problem with the way such a category of ‘excellence’ is posited and established is not only that it forecloses plurality, but also that it forecloses criticism by over-determining the kinds of questions that can be presumed to have ‘merit’. If feminist work is rarely published in top journals, we might read this as a sign of narrowness; but even

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⁵ John Armstrong argues that disciplines such as philosophy do have social usefulness, but that it lies in the opposite direction to the objective and science-like orientation of these disciplines in their current form. It would also be useful to think about the place of ‘applied ethics’ within the above analysis, which I take it does claim a social usefulness which has attracted significant research funding, but which correlates with its generally low status as an area within the discipline (that is, among philosophers who take themselves to be more paradigmatic of the discipline’s true nature and terms of ‘excellence’). Unsurprisingly, applied ethics is also ‘feminised’.
worse, as a sign that the serious questions feminist work raises about prevailing norms of authority, and the contributions this work makes to contesting entrenched bias and distortion, are blocked from speaking by being refused merit. Not only do we then have something that looks like the bad old form of aristocracy, but the meritocratic regime of the gendered academy may thus be responsible for failures on some relatively well-established academic grounds. An over-burdened normative frame for establishing what the excellence of the discipline ‘is’, gives rise to a serious tendency to narrowness and dogmatism. In criticism of such canons, and in particular in view of the gendered patterns of disciplinarity they present, one might then point out that their grip on judgment involves at least the following vectors: (i) concealing the contingency of the prevailing profile of the discipline, by reference to (ii) the ‘indisputable’ merit of current disciplinary priorities and norms and thus tacitly, (iii) assuming the acceptability for the discipline of a gender gap. The important implication of this, explored further in section 3, is that the gender gap is conceived as a ‘problem’ that matters (if it does) on grounds that are separate from philosophy ‘itself’; it might matter on grounds of general gender equity, but does not matter ‘for philosophy’.

3. The Problem of Women and the Construction of Philosophy

In order to gain a better sense of how the meta-justificatory framework identified above forecloses questions of gender from arising as questions internal to disciplinary excellence, in this section I want to return to the question: what kind of problem is the under-representation of women in philosophy? For whom or in view of what is it a problem?

In the course of working on this project, the very straightforward question – why should we care about equal numbers of men and women in philosophy? - was put to me by a professor of philosophy, sympathetic to the concern for women’s under-representation, but genuinely puzzled as to the answer about why it should matter much. He framed the issue first in terms of a question about the value of philosophy as a career. What do women themselves lose by not being able to participate in equal numbers here (its not, he pointed out, like missing out on opportunities such as those represented by really lucrative careers, say in banking, or the capacity
to exercise significant power, say as a judge)? But secondly, what is the importance of equal representation in this field; what goals of equity are being missed out on if not ones to do with individual satisfaction? Why would equal representation matter here in the way that it clearly does seem to in the context of political life, where there is the idea of the importance of some kind of direct identity-based representation informing the impetus to change? If law schools practice forms of affirmative action on the basis of the kinds of social goods that are at stake in having an inclusive membership of the legal profession, what is the correlative of this in philosophy? Why does it matter if philosophy is mainly done by men?

The difficulty I found in immediately answering is, I think, bound up with a powerful construction of the significance of the discipline and the nature of achievement within it. On the one hand, it seems, access to philosophy is not so important or so valuable as to be coveted; on the other hand, whatever importance it has is removed from the social and political spheres where gender equality might be internally related to the merit of certain practices. I want to focus first on the picture of philosophy this suggests as a practice that is largely indifferent to the issue of specific qualities of any person who engages in it, other than ‘talent’ of whatever kind is appropriate in the particular field. On this picture, once again, gender equality is construed as an agenda that is extrinsic to properly disciplinary goals, whose character is purportedly gender neutral. The correlative of ‘why should women care to join philosophy?’ is, to put it bluntly, ‘why should philosophy care about women?’ One issue that clearly does not appear in this rendering is the value for the discipline of philosophy itself of improving women’s representation, or remedying their minority. The assumption of irrelevance seems linked to a presumed disjunction between the nature of knowledge and those who produce it, one that is readily aligned with a fundamental meritocratic tenet that “in judging the value of a product, the race, sex, class and indeed all other personal attributes of the producer are irrelevant” (Kennedy, 1990 709). Duncan Kennedy, to whose critique of academic meritocracy I am much indebted here, points out that this assumption works closely in tandem with the idea that the “value of work is a function of the quality of the individual talent that produced it rather than of the inert matter of experience out of which the individual formed it” (ibid). The assumptions conjoin to produce a narrow understanding of a special quality, talent, to which merit attaches. Such academic talent, in turn, is the basis for production of a form of knowledge whose value floats
free of the impediment of subordination to any form of social end. As such, the product may pose as neutral.

According to Kennedy, this construction of the value of knowledge involves an aspiration to ‘neutrality’ which will entail that knowledge producers themselves must embody this virtue. By reference to capacities for neutrality, what is crucially established is the ‘integrity of the general system of unbiased judgment’ itself (1990, 710). This corresponds with aspects of the meta-justificatory framework described in the previous section. In the discipline of philosophy, neutrality that is indexed to indifference as to who makes knowledge claims (barring the possession of ‘talent’) is linked at an institutional level to a higher valuation of such claims, in ways presuming that such unbiased judgement constitutes the proper ‘form’ of academic work. Quite aside from the questionable nature of this assumption it has some unfortunate corollaries. One of these is the class and gender inflected bias that attaches to such work whose value is also held to altogether transcend social ends, generating its ‘aristocratic’ or elite form. Philosophy is a rarefied form of work that seems to debar it from being so much as an acceptable occupation for a single mother⁶; while it can be, conversely, a marker of prestige for any member of an established elite. Another corollary is the differential value attached to diverse disciplinary contributions. Here plural ways of thinking are subordinated to over-arching disciplinary norms that may be wholly inappropriate to their specific critical objectives (one thinks, for instance, of the way in which continental philosophy is judged by certain analytic philosophers).

Consider also the example Jennifer Saul has given of the different way in which her work is treated when it falls within the field of philosophy of language, versus what happens when she sends her feminist work to leading journals, supposed to represent the discipline as a whole. Whereas the former is sent out to reviewers the latter is most often declined (see Haslanger, 2008: 215). Assuming that the quality of work from the same author is uniform, what explains this difference? Perhaps something like a bias against practical and situated work is in play, in ways that could be interpreted with reference to the framework for establishing value. In areas of philosophy where the image of ‘neutrality’ becomes questionable and the ‘value’ of academic

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⁶ As Kyleigh Langrick pointed out in an eloquent talk about her experiences as a single mother and student of philosophy at Women in Philosophy: A Reflective Symposium, ANU, 10th August 2009.,
claims correspondingly drops, we will likely find that the idea of the importance of the knower as having a situated position, or particular point of view, has achieved more purchase. There is not, then, an unequivocal indifference within philosophy to the question of the relevance of who produces knowledge, but rather a differential allocation of value that will distinguish between different areas of the subject, according to where the question of ‘who’ does it (in a way that exceeds merely abstract ‘talent’) becomes more or less salient.

In some areas of moral, social and political philosophy, or, paradigmatically, in feminist theory itself, it is broadly accepted that it may indeed matter that the findings of knowledge are not reached exclusively by a cohort of elite, white males. Importantly, then, it is precisely these areas in which perspective and interpretation is acknowledged as irreducible, and thus the limitations of situated inquiry appear as inevitable, that we find what are deemed the ‘soft’ areas of philosophy; these being rigorously contrasted with the ‘hard’ areas, that do not bow to such conditions. The gendered dimensions of this division to some degree correspond to actual distributions of men and women across the fields of philosophy (there do seem to be far fewer women in the field of logic, say, than in ethics); but more importantly, perhaps, it corresponds to a normative distribution (Knights and Richards, 2003, 222-223). The ‘hard’ end of philosophy – logic, epistemology, metaphysics – as well as specific fields of ethical and socio-political inquiry that do not merely draw upon, but to a large degree defend the norms of neutrality, pose as more estimable in their achievements. Where journals are ranked as most significant in the field, what is perhaps being privileged is the aspect of the discipline more able to establish its credentials under particular conditions, for instance, to inflect its achievements with a quasi-scientific status that has done much to ensure philosophy’s success in an academic world that very often values science over the humanities.

Clearly implicit in the professor’s question is the assumption that the concern with gender is limited to a specific issue of equally representing persons of both sexes; and that this aim, on the whole, cannot be of concern for the disciplinary goals of philosophy. But the matter, I am suggesting, is more complex. The way in which gender ‘matters’ in this field has to do with the ways in which authority is constructed and sustained within the discipline, as much as the ways

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7 cf Dodds and Goddard, p.8 draft, this vol, citing Gatens, 1991
in which it is of concern for the fates and potential of individuals. As such, it has wider repercussions than for the discipline of philosophy, or, indeed for the question of whether women in particular find themselves excluded from what the professor was inclined to present as a narrow and not particularly enviable space of expertise, itself the product one might think, of exceptionally rare and abstract ‘talent’. Issues intrinsic to philosophy to do with means of establishing the authority, nature and the value of knowledge are overlooked here. But further, many questions that are not only of importance to philosophy, such as how the situation of production of knowledge should be taken into account, or what the standing of interpretative work may be, also shape parallel hierarchies between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ ends of other disciplines, perhaps most strikingly where there are comparable gender gaps to that exhibited by philosophy. This gives an indication of one way at least in which allegedly meta-philosophical questions have a profound bearing on the gendering of any discipline that invokes and preserves the ‘integrity of the general system of judgment’ by reference to transcendence of situation that a priori rules out the very relevance of gender in the production of knowledge.

Finally, the professor’s questions belong to what we might readily think of as a post-discrimination view of sustained inequality. On this view, overt discrimination has supposedly been countered by well-regulated systems of meritocratic appointment and promotion within the academy. We have seen how, within this picture, there is a presumed disjunction between gender concerns and properly disciplinary concerns; equity measures might address the former, but they fold in under the over-arching concern for rigorous meritocratic selection of those qualified to belong to the profession. Such selection determines an order of rank among those who belong to and can be said to speak for the discipline. To the extent that this appears to have been legitimately achieved, imbalances that remain must be supposed to bear some extrinsic explanation that allows us to consider that they do not matter too much. Whatever residual issues for women there appear to be, are to be explained away in terms that in no way question the discipline as it is currently practised: Perhaps women simply do not love philosophy so much as

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8 The parallel case of Political Science with respect to this particular division between the scientific and the merely evaluative, is vividly described in Kantola, 2008.
9 It would be an interesting question, which I cannot however pursue here, to examine how far the mainstreaming of feminist scholarship, or simply the acceptance of the equal validity of perspectival, situated and interpretative work in disciplinary areas, correlates to an improvement in their gender gap (but see Sawer, 2004; Curthoys, 1998).
men; perhaps men really are better at the logical reasoning so integral to it; perhaps women are ‘too practical’ to care for its abstractions; perhaps women simply do not get far because they have children (a *non sequitur*, in my view). Through all these patterns of reasoning the prevailing norms of disciplinary excellence and of achievement under their terms, can be protected from further scrutiny. No doubt there are contexts in which any or all of these claims might receive due consideration. What is interesting here, however, is how readily they spring up as ways of explaining women’s minority in philosophy without any further investigation proving necessary. As remarked earlier of engineering, it is not at all uncommon that a discipline identifies its very prowess with the factors that allegedly explain the absence of women. Hyper-rationality, logic, indifference to situation or application all mark not only the high end of this discipline but shape introductions to the subject, as Marilyn Friedman argues in this volume; and all can be and are evoked to explain why women do not choose to pursue it, without this often enough leading to questions as to why these aspects are deemed to be philosophy’s core business, nor indeed, whether these valuations derive their force from dogmatic, or at least un-self-critical tendencies.

4. The Myth of Meritocracy

These brief considerations lead me to offer some thoughts on a critique of meritocracy that would challenge not only what appears to a feminist eye as its current flawed operations but, just as importantly, examine at several levels the modes of investment or ‘faith’ in the basic, remediable fairness of this system. At the most obvious level, faith in the sound performance of existing systems presents a serious challenge to anyone wishing to question their fairness, since there is a profound presumption in favour of the rightness of the results produced by processes that select for and confirm excellence according to established criteria. Success may breed, but also prove success. Although, as feminists we can perhaps clearly see that the gendered ‘inputs’ and ‘outputs’ of the meritocratic system are in need of redress, this perception is far from being universally shared. There are thus likely to be very different degrees of conviction about how well meritocratic allocation of opportunity, reward and so forth is working. The feminist case for change may be especially hampered where, according to the relatively objective measures of success supposedly conferred by rankings of departments and institutions, excellence is being
achieved by a largely male cohort. Despite this, it is possible to have a large degree of suspicion about how well the system is working and still be convinced by its capacity in principle to deliver fair outcomes.

Yet while it is surely the case that feminists can make some inroads into improving the fairness of formation of judgment within existing frames, for instance by looking at how peer review is conducted and so forth, there is another level of critique of ‘faith’ in meritocracy that I take to be called for and to be suggested by the preceding discussion. Here we might usefully distinguish between two senses that can be given to the phrase ‘the myth of meritocracy’; on the one hand, raising questions about whether meritocracy delivers the results that it ought by its own lights, which assumes the in principle perfectability of meritocratic mechanisms; and on the other hand, challenging the kind of belief the meritocratic system commands, and this not merely as a mode of delivery of certain results, but by virtue of a being productive field of social meaning.

By speaking of ‘productive’ aspects of meritocracy, what I have in mind is the importance of giving attention within this system to the re-iterative dimensions of social meaning and performativity that are so central to Judith Butler’s understanding of the institutional forms of gendering (1990). Here I am especially concerned with the way in which forms of evaluative judgment are tasked not only with applying norms within a given field but (a) with constituting that field and (b) generating and protecting the very terms on which they exercise authority. The social productivity of meritocracy would thus include ways of creating hierarchies and validating the right to make judgments of excellence; ways of demonstrating neutrality, both in narrowly disciplinary terms and within the terms of ‘gender blind’ selection; and ways of explaining away apparent imbalances in the systemic production of results on terms that reinforce normative presuppositions. The critique of meritocracy sketched here aims to show that these dimensions of judgment can become objects of suspicion in view of what look to be systemically distorted results, even when those results do not readily show up as inequitable in case by case judgments of merit. To illustrate briefly, in view of this aspect of the critique of meritocracy, some questions that might arise are: How does this system for allocating entitlement, discerning merit and distributing power ‘protect’ itself as an authority beyond question, as incontestable (despite what we know to be its flawed operations)? How does it attribute agency and responsibility to
individuals (as cases to be dealt with) in ways that conceal the agency and responsibility of a ‘naturalized’ system of judgment? And, how does the system in fact produce the gendered differences that are normally imagined as raw ‘inputs’ into a given operation?

Such questions might lead us to reconsider the ways in which inequity becomes evident, or is concealed, in ‘post-discrimination’ times. It is worth noting that the other side of the meaning of meritocracy as a system for establishing legitimate hierarchy is that it is, by the same token, a system or an ideology for legitimating inequality (McNamee and Miller, 2). This way of putting things will quickly run into the objection that what meritocracy establishes, and particularly in academia, is a ranking of those who can count as ‘equals’ according to well-defined criteria. There is then no inequality that cannot be justified by reference to the comparison of merit in individual cases, and thus equal and unequal status is distributed appropriately. According to this defence, there may be inequality, but it is not inequitable. One strategy of response to this claim is to argue over the application and definition of criteria of judgement, questioning what evident gender inequality, for instance, tells us about the equity of current practices. Another strategy, however, and the one I am pursuing here, is to foreground the way in which the system of meritocracy not only defends its particular results as fair, but produces, at a meta-level of justification, a frame of reference in which its results will appear as unquestionably and exclusively valid. Moreover, if we are prepared to consider meritocracy as a system of power (albeit in a qualified sense; it is certainly not a ‘naked’ system of power, nor one which lacks powerful legitimating forms and content) then we need to take the measure of how power is not only distributed, but becomes operative and productive, internalized and self-confirming, differentially enabling and disabling. Whereas inequities may be concealed at the level of individual judgments of merit, they may become more apparent in view of some of the recursive dimensions of securing validity, or in terms of the ways in which the meritocratic system shapes the identities and experience of those who participate within it.

Thus to develop the critique I am sketching here, it would be necessary to look at how the systemic effect of decisions is both concealed and protected within a framework that, significantly, focuses narrowly on the individual case and not the general field of operative power. Viewed in this light, a gender differential might appear not as an ‘input’ but as one of the
effects of the system of distribution that we see writ large in the profile of disciplines like philosophy (cf. Thomas, 1996). For instance, this differential gives normative form to ways of evaluating outcomes for individuals according to a sense of the ‘typical’ relationship gender bears to the norm, where the deviation to be explained is invariably feminine. Consider here the use of such asymmetrical phrases as ‘the brilliant young man’ and the ‘exceptional woman’; or the differences in accounts given of career failure - the account of a stalled career given for the brilliant young man, ‘there are simply not enough jobs’, versus the professorial opinion that Haslanger cites in her essay, ‘I have never seen a first-rate woman philosopher’ (2008: 211). If we suspend the assumption that these phrases express attitudes - what we tend to refer to as prejudice, stereotyping or bias – these ways of thinking might be regarded as expressions vital to the preservation of conservative normative regimes; and as key elements in regulating not simply outcomes but the meaning of outcomes within the system: that is, their fairness, correctness, or justice, particularly in contexts where one group evidently is doing better than another. The man’s failure is explained in terms of context; the woman’s as her own failing, but indicative of her sex; the man is ‘brilliant’, as one outstanding among peers; the woman is ‘exceptional’ in the sense of being unusual, again, for her sex. Inequality is legitimated and normalised in this way; but the inequity attaching to the ways in which the outcomes of judgment are normalised risks being missed entirely, especially if the focus lies only with examining or challenging how decisions are being reached in individual cases.

Regardless of what we might take to be the disposition toward ‘fairness’ internal to its separate instances of decision-making, every time meritocracy works to reinstitute the gender norm for a discipline or institution, it does more than decide a particular case; it also works to shape the entire field of meaning of gender in that area, including the way in which gender is experienced, or counted, as mattering. To speak of meritocracy as a productive field of social meaning, then, is to draw attention to how generating and reconfirming a sense of the validity of its outcomes is constantly at stake within its legitimating practices, and in ways that reflect the terms of a self-reproduction of hierarchy over time. To establish a degree of self-evidence about judgments of merit, constitutes a moment of closure, or non-contestability in the system that is, in general, crucial for the conservative operation of norms. Or, to put this another way around,

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10 Cf. Beebee’s discussion of the gendered relation of norm and deviance, this volume.
conservatism, including the gendered dimension of this, can be the result of overly constrained or demanding understandings of the kinds of closure needed to justify decision. To this, for instance, we might attribute the tendency in philosophy to favour a masculine ‘hardness’ of a discipline vulnerable to questioning over its usefulness, relevance, or value.\(^\text{11}\)

Placing emphasis on the productivity of the meritocratic regime also challenges the assumption that individuals enter such systems ‘as they are’, bearers of talents and capacities; and that they fare as they do within the system in ways that are attributable to performance and identity construed in a strictly individual sense. For meritocracy is not only a system for legitimating social hierarchies, which involves the distribution of equality and inequality, but is also a system that distributes rewards and benefits, alongside reproofs and disappointments, and in these ways operates intensively to shape at once the performance and the social identities of its participants. The ‘system’, on this critical view, is not external to those who inhabit it, but rather, and in a sense that Foucault did much to elaborate in his account of disciplinary power, individuals are constituted through their participation in and subjection within disciplinary systems; and are lent a sense of interiority precisely as the sphere in which merit, or its lack, and thus individual responsibility and distinction, may be found (Foucault 181-3). This entails a form of vulnerability to the judgments passed upon one’s performance that requires us to consider how these draw upon the wider gendering of accounts of success or failure within the discipline, or interest and disinterest in pursuing it.\(^\text{12}\)

The essential claim I am making here is that every mechanism in the meritocratic system is ‘overloaded’ with a productive aspect. It does not merely judge, but seeks to present that judgement as fully grounded and unequivocal; it does not simply accord merit to individuals on the basis of achievement, but shapes the social identities of subjects and adjusts accounts of

\(^{11}\) To bring out the stakes here a good question to pose might be how far decisions about the value of work are marked as contestable, versus how far they are taken to be self-evident judgments of excellence. Indeed, this might offer another approach to thinking about the ‘hard’ versus ‘soft’ ends of disciplines; within this gendered distinction, the ‘hard’ is not simply aligned with scientific values but has stronger forms of argumentative closure embedded in its self-understanding, whilst the ‘soft’ is inherently contestable.

\(^{12}\) Indeed, I would hazard that this would be a fruitful approach to explaining the nature of the experience of ‘threat’ in the ‘stereotype threat’ that is evoked to explain how actual performance can be negatively affected by stereotypical expectations.
success and failure, cause and effect, in ways that reinforce a broad pattern of judgement, generally held to be that of ‘gender-blind’ justice in a ‘post-discrimination’ environment. I am also claiming that the production and reproduction of meaningful gendered differences that might appear either as given, or as unconscious prejudices, instead have a systemic form that is not adequately explained by treating them as at once attitudinal and somehow concealed from reflection.\footnote{As in the view of ‘unconscious biases’ in Saul, this vol.} It is not that I wish to say these attitudes are, instead, conscious and deliberate; rather the important question is what compels these attitudes, what energizes them, what authority do they exercise? On my account, they seem indeed to become exaggerated by the feed-back effects of the meritocratic system; in part by attributions of meaning that stabilize the ‘ideal’ operation of the system according to a perception of fairness; and in part then, by the way that the framework of meritocracy – its meta-justificatory dimension – is reconfirmed as binding. Thus I have argued that majority status is linked to the self-confirmation that is operative within this evaluative system, in ways that might be thought of as a recursive form of legitimation effect, establishing the rightness of success within the system by reference to prior outcomes. Minority status, conversely, is linked to a recursive process of dis-confirmation, or establishment of the rightness of failure, again by reference to prior outcomes.

I have also argued that disciplinary and academic power is authorized and rendered unchallengeable by reference to an ideal operation of the meritocratic system, one that organizes a certain version of what the ‘inputs’ and the ‘outputs’ of the system look like; and thus explains success and failure in ways that systemically produce and re-produce gendered positions, by treating gender as if its form were wholly external to the shape of a discipline such as philosophy. But it is of the greatest importance to note that within academia we inhabit these systems; criticism cannot proceed from a position wholly outside the places of belonging, respect and entitlement that academics enjoy, nor the power of judgement that is wielded, albeit in delimited ways, at every level. Thus those who would be meritocracy’s critics in the deeper sense I have outlined, risk undergoing the loss of a faith that, despite all its difficulties, also sustains one’s own sense of one’s rights, position and entitlement within a hierarchy. This is not an easy position; perhaps it is even an impossible one to maintain (Cf. Butler, 2009, 771). Moreover, as Linda Krefting notes, “those who seek to alter ‘merit’ processes are cast as
complainers, unable to compete” (Krefting, 261-2). This position is intensified for women whose presumptive inability to compete is itself one of the explanatory elements in 'balancing’ the gendered nature of meritocratic distribution. My final section, then, turns to the question of how we might imagine, and survive, the demand for change.

5. **Counter-discourse, Exaggeration and Laughter**

If meritocracy remains unavoidable in contemporary settings, despite all its limitations, it is to some degree because of its tautological character. How can we deny that we want to appoint and promote the best people, or that the quality of work, and the success and prestige of the institution will thereby be enhanced? When we judge work, do we not necessarily seek to determine what is ‘best’? This self-evidence grounds a ready sense of outrage at any question placed over such judgments, which seem to cast doubt on the integrity of the individual making them, rather than the integrity of the judgment system in operation. The tautological status of a proposition, however, should be seen as a clear limitation on its substance, and not simply as a sign of strength premised on the undeniable. One risk of focussing on the unrealized ideal of true meritocracy, rather than its inherent limits, is that tautology itself appears as merit, and the integrity of the general system of judgment, idealized and presupposed, appears completely unassailable. Another is that we assume that the content of the idea of what is ‘best’, or what counts as quality and success is relatively fixed and uncontroversial, in ways that tend to bypass not only current questions about the ‘fairness’ of these standards, but relatively open-ended questions about what the discipline we inhabit might become and how responsibility is taken or power assumed for shaping that. It is to provide a counter-weight to these tendencies, I suggest, that feminist critique needs to take on another form than accepting slow progress toward the perfectibility of the meritocratic ideal. It is also, perhaps, not enough to expect that philosophy will change itself. Institutional sites of pressure and accountability need to be devised that will challenge narrow criteria of achievement. Yet equally, I have claimed that forms of evaluation of excellence currently prevalent in academia, may work to intensify, rather than to ameliorate the problem. The academy needs to work at supporting sites where prevailing practices can be questioned, and new strategies experimented with, without recourse to full reliance on the
authority of its massively dominant masculine elite; while feminism might contribute here not only to asserting the goal of equity, but an excellence bound up with it, by reviving concerns proper to the ends of knowledge, as achieved through open-ended reflection and criticism. It should be noted that it is never the claim of my argument here that equity goals should drive out academic considerations; but rather that even our ‘post-discrimination’ era may fall short on both counts.

To be clear, the point of such critique is not to imagine that meritocratic evaluation can be completely overthrown, or even to claim that it ought to be. The point, rather, is to better understand and expose to question its logic, mode of sustenance and effects, and to develop sites of institutional power where such questions have some purchase, some legitimacy of their own capable of challenging the unquestionable power that whatever practices of meritocratic evaluation are current tends to wield. These might be the sites of feminist theory, though the issue of mainstreaming such scholarship becomes, on this analysis, all the more urgent. Feminist work is not only ‘about’ women in a sense that exposes it to all the charges of bias, by reference to some imaginary gender-neutral ideal of philosophy; rather, and taking up the level of criticism I have argued needs to be developed here, it is as much about overturning entrenched forms of authority that are severe restrictions on knowledge. As such, feminist work should appear not only in journals devoted to this special topic, but throughout the ‘top journals’, posing challenges to uncritical disciplinary norms. Some advantage might also be gained by insisting that norms of meritocratic evaluation be pluralized, acknowledging that it is impossible to judge everyone by identical standards, indeed that there is more than one type of person, more than one type of project that we could find very reasonable grounds for supporting. Thus to stock universities with individuals with highly comparable CV’s and forms of ‘excellence’ (only incidentally finding, by the way, that when we get to the top, at least 80% of these are men) may not, in the end, be academically justifiable despite the apparent concern for equity demonstrated by the means of appointment.

A further step to change perhaps involves refusing the naturalization of gender differences that figure in explanations of the gender gap. A particular issue to pay attention to are the

\[14 \text{ cf Butler’s discussion of how disciplines can challenge their own norms, 2009}\]
exaggerations of gender difference that emerge out of disciplinary fields, for instance in the polarization of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ aspects of the discipline, and their role in stabilizing the intelligibility of a complex interplay of cause and effect. I have argued that meritocratic legitimacy, in its most unequivocal form, turns on establishing a normative field in which it supposedly becomes possible to clearly discern where individual talent and merit lies, in a domain of interaction that, looked at more critically, is at once uncertain in direction and characterized by both feedback mechanisms and the problematic place of human agency within wider assemblages. The need to attend precisely to exaggeration in such a context is a point Judith Butler powerfully makes in her ground-breaking analysis of systemic gendering operations, *Gender Trouble* (1990). For Butler, exaggerated differences of the sort that beset the dichotomy of masculine ‘reason’ and feminine ‘unreason’, give evidence of the pressing need to establish them; that is, to stabilize through exaggerated demonstrations a dichotomous and complementary set of terms that will distribute gender differences unequivocally. This gives reason to be wary about equating stereotypes straightforwardly with the identities they invent, for that risks missing how stereotypes are ideological and prescriptive rather than primarily propositional and descriptive (Krefting, 2003: 262). It is the articulation of relations between groups, patterns of dominance and subordination conceived as natural and legitimate, that the stereotype is working exaggeratedly to sustain.

In view of this, I have argued that some loss of faith in the perfectibility of meritocratic systems might be called for from a feminist point of view. Likewise, or at least in a similar spirit, it is at the exaggeration of the purity of existing meritocratic arrangements that Kennedy, in the epigraph to this chapter, suggests we might laugh; and one idea for change I am elaborating here proposes an extension of this critical, even satirical spirit: We should mock the pretension that women can only come to the discipline either with lamentable slowness or at dire risk to excellence. We should laugh (for otherwise we might cry!) at the idea that questioning subsisting institutional arrangements leads to the collapse of all standards, the end of any capacity for discriminating judgment whatsoever. This anxiety might be read as a tell-tale sign that an order of meta-justification is growing uncomfortable, just as Butler attributes homophobic violence to a desperate bid to maintain a naturalized order of sexual difference (1990, 2004). Describing the atmosphere of many a philosophy department, contributors to this volume have noted aggression.
as one of their unfortunate yet common characteristics. Rather than attribute this to an inherently masculine cause, I suggest that we might consider ourselves witness to a benighted aristocratic regime holding onto the vestiges of inherited privilege, and justifying a problematic determination of talent, through such arcane rituals as the mortal combat of the philosophy seminar.

Yet this takes place in lieu of a more constructive project - that of giving attention to the subtle process of devising more equitable, less antagonistic approaches to conceiving of the plural and critical futures of the discipline. My proposals for change, then, concern how, within an institutional frame that goes wider than the discipline of philosophy and must involve the gendered academy, means might be found to reinvigorate a responsibility that draws energy from the democratic and academic values of plurality and critical contestation, and holds inherited or recursively legitimated authority to account. The feminist challenge here is aimed at how meritocracy aligns with established constituencies or elites to foreclose vital academic freedoms. The risk in posing critical questions of the mechanism for distributing value - that one is considered to be engaged in destroying all standards of evaluation - is itself telling. The institution or discipline that is so ‘threatened’ by dilution of standards can often be seen to be sustaining its own authority by threatening and discrediting others, determinedly concentrating a power that can never be ultimately vindicated and can in no way guarantee that it bears the only claim to value and rightness. The critique I am elaborating thus takes us in the direction of heresy, of a refusal of faith that bears the form of counter-discourse, and will require along the way some empowering laughter; notably, at the exaggerated fears that mask and enable exaggerations of power.

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