

What should feminist theory be?

An interview with Amia Srinivasan

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Radical Philosophy Over the past couple of decades, there has been a significant feminist re-activation of thinkers, ideas and texts of the so-called ‘second wave’. Shulamith Firestone, for example, has been given a new lease of life in feminist theory, as has the ‘Wages for Housework’ movement. Can you comment on this phenomenon in relation to your own work, particularly on the role that Catherine MacKinnon plays in *The Right to Sex*?

Amia Srinivasan In *The Right to Sex* I draw heavily on the work and ideas of earlier generations of feminists, especially from the Anglo-American tradition. Firestone and MacKinnon are important touchstones, as are Angela Davis, Adrienne Rich, bell hooks, the Combahee River Collective and ‘Wages for Housework’ feminists such as Silvia Federici, Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James. I draw on their work in a way that is intended to be respectful but non-deferential. For example, I find much to admire in MacKinnon’s account of heterosexual sex, the ideological function of pornography, and the nature of the state; and yet I am also relentlessly critical of her legalism, her embrace of coercive and carceral state power, and her investment in what I see as symbolic politics that (unintentionally) prioritise the punishing of men over the improvement of the worst-off women’s lives. For me – as with Firestone, Davis and Federici – class and capital must be central terms of feminist analysis; unlike MacKinnon, I see gendered domination as grounded most fundamentally in women’s assigned role in biological and social reproduction, rather than in heterosexual sex *per se*.

Some of my readers have been taken aback by my willingness to engage with those feminists, particularly MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, who have advocated for the growth of the carceral state and targeted sex workers for ‘salvation’ through restrictions on their ability to work legally, and thus with a modicum of safety. But I want to insist, at the level of method, that everything within (and indeed, outside) the feminist canon should be at our theoretical and political disposal. What would it mean to say that a thinker as powerful and wildly imaginative – not to mention politically consequential – as MacKinnon should not be looked to as a feminist resource? Should we say the same of Firestone? Valerie Solanas? I like this line from Andrea Long Chu’s 2018 essay ‘On Liking Women’, in which Chu insists on reading Solanas with what some feminists would see as undue charity: ‘[G]enerosity is the only spirit in which a text as hot to the touch as the *SCUM Manifesto* could have ever been received. This is after all a pamphlet advocating mass murder, and what’s worse, property damage’.

By saying that all these thinkers and others besides should be seen as at our disposal as feminists is not to say that I'm advocating for a view on which ideas should be sharply distinguished – or assessed in isolation – from their worldly consequences. We should think about what ideas mobilise, produce and sustain. It's important to think about, for example, what anti-pornography and anti-prostitution feminism have brought into the world: not only directly, in making the lives of some of the worst-off women harder, but also indirectly, by providing a carceral cover for the deep social and economic crises produced by capitalism. And yet, anti-pornography and anti-prostitution feminism often says things, at the level of diagnosis rather than prescription, that are deeply insightful about the workings of male power and ideology. I take my lead in part here from Juno Mac and Molly Smith's brilliant defence of sex work decriminalisation, *Revolted Prostitutes* (2018). One of the many extraordinary things the book does is to model how to engage charitably, indeed sympathetically, with one's opponents, even while being relentlessly critical of them. It's a good reminder that 'engaging the other side' doesn't have to be a gateway to a deradicalised or centrist politics – a point that Sophie Smith often makes in the 'Feminism and the Future' graduate class we co-teach.

RP We are interested in the operation of intergenerational dynamics in the book, as you are in dialogue with both older generations of feminist thinkers as well as younger students. For instance, to what extent do you find yourself in productive disagreement with your students? And how would you distinguish your emphasis on the significance of education and pedagogy from the practice of consciousness raising?

AS It's all too easy to portray feminist disagreement as, to invoke Lorna Bracewell, 'a catfight' – or, to invoke Kathi Weeks and Maggie Nelson, an intergenerational drama of mothers and daughters. And yet, as Sophie Lewis recently said when she was visiting my graduate seminar, there is *something* to these intergenerational, matrilineal dynamics within feminism. To be very candid, I detect in many older feminists (though not all – Ann Snitow, who died in 2019, is a blazing counterexample) an intense anxiety about irrelevance and obsolescence. Of course, under patriarchy, women have every reason to be worried about irrelevance and obsolescence as they age. But far too often, older feminists turn their anger on younger women, whom they see as insufficiently deferential or worried about the wrong sorts of things – like gender-fluidity or carceralism, rather than (say) sexual violence or wage gaps. Older feminists too often treat younger generations of feminists as ungrateful daughters trying to kill them off, rather than comrades in a collective struggle, albeit one whose strategies and aims must change with time.

It's an unfortunate dynamic, one that at its extreme leads to a deep, and anti-intellectual, cynicism, in which the work of younger feminists is misrepresented and straw-manned. I take Katha Pollitt's review of my book in *Dissent* to be a depressing and paradigmatic case of this: 'depressing' because one would hope for better from both *Dissent* and from Pollitt herself, given her very important work on abortion. At the end of the review, Pollitt characterises the concerns of my book – which she glibly sums up as 'incels and pornography and professors who sleep with their students' – as 'those of particular interest to the young', meanwhile suggesting that real, adult feminists take on 'the most important issues in the lives of most women'. As examples of the latter, she cites 'semi-fascist nationalist movements around the world' which she claims 'go unmentioned' in the book, and 'the millions of mothers who were forced out of their jobs, some permanently, when the pandemic closed day-care centers and schools'. I'll leave aside the facts that the Covid-19 pandemic was in its infancy when I submitted the manuscript of *The Right to Sex*, that I nonetheless talk about the large number of women who were laid off in its early days

(and often flocked to sex work as an alternative), that I devote a great deal of space to talking about the struggle of poor women for decent jobs and socialised childcare, and that I discuss the rise of right-wing authoritarianism in the US, India and elsewhere, and indeed its ideological and material entanglements with the incel phenomenon. The most important question is this: what makes Pollitt think that the central preoccupations of the book – sexual violence, racial domination, the state, the pathologies of capitalism, sex discrimination, the politics of sexual desire, sex work, the family – are only of ‘particular interest to the young’? One might just as sensibly ask of Pollitt’s own work: is abortion a ‘young people’s issue’ because post-menopausal people can’t easily get pregnant?

The absurdity of that question lies in its presupposition that the fates of young women are in no way bound up with the fates of older women, that young women never *become* older women, that the treatment of young women as sexual objects and instruments of biological reproduction has nothing to do with the treatment of older women as surplus to social use. Indeed, the absurdity of the suggestion that racial domination, sexual entitlement or carceralism are ‘young person’s issues’ suggests to me that Pollitt’s real complaint isn’t that my concerns don’t apply to her and other women her age; but more simply that they are not *her* concerns.

Prescinding from this particular skirmish, the deep question here, I think, is: What does it mean to make room in a social movement for younger people? How does one accommodate oneself to the idea that a movement one is used to thinking of as one’s own is, in fact, never just one’s own, and that its destiny is always beyond one’s control? And, indeed, that this is a *good* thing? What does it mean, in other words, to build radical coalition with the future?

To be clear, I’m not saying that this intergenerational dynamic is merely one-way: there’s a lot of reductive talk among younger feminists about the ‘whiteness’ or ‘TERFiness’ of the second-wave, which flattens out a very complex political formation in order to dismiss it – thereby ignoring, *inter alia*, all the work done by ‘second-wave’ feminists of colour and trans feminists. Some of this is certainly ignorance, but there is also at work here a sort of chauvinism of the present, and also, I fear, a patriarchal willingness to see older women as irrelevant.

On my students: it is hard to generalise, but I think I tend to be more critical of the nuclear family than they are, more alert to human frailty and fallibility and so less moralising, and more convinced that necessary social transformation will involve genuine loss and sacrifice. But perhaps I’m really describing the difference between my current and former selves. With my undergraduate students, I do often detect a yearning for something akin to consciousness-raising. I wrote about this recently in the *New Yorker*: ‘Many of [my students] come to feminism looking for comradeship, understanding, community. They want to gather to articulate the unspoken truth of their experience, and to read great feminist texts that will reveal the world to which they should politically aspire.’ But, as I wrote, these hopes are inevitably somewhat disappointed – as they were, indeed, for the feminists of the late 1960s and 1970s. In particular, ideological convergence and mutual understanding nearly always give out into difference and disagreement – among the students themselves, and within the texts they read. It is one of my goals to show my students that mapping the contours of feminist disagreement can be intellectually productive, even thrilling, and to show them that a profound kind of personal transformation is possible through the hard, granular work of reading, interpreting, arguing.

Jane Gallop, in *Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment* (1997), a book I engage with in a different context in *The Right to Sex*, describes what it was like to be a student at the very beginning of academic feminism, when faculty members and students were equally expert, or non-expert, and so were able to see themselves as equals in a collaborative pursuit of knowledge

and liberation. That vision – which Gallop calls ‘brave if naive’ – is no longer possible in the contemporary feminist classroom: ‘Students and faculty are no longer discovering feminism together; today, faculty who have been feminists for decades generally teach it to students for whom it is new. We are no longer discovering books together; instead, feminist faculty teach feminist classics we’ve read half a dozen times to students who are reading them for the first time.’ This is, I think, descriptively accurate – and, as such, there is little point in hankering after a lost moment of horizontality in the classroom (as Gallop does), even as we seek to think through ways in which the classroom can be made more, if not perfectly, equal.

RP In the book, you address fears of moralism and a worry that a ‘political critique of desire can be too easily mobilised against those who are themselves marginalised’. In response, you draw a distinction between the transformation of desire as a ‘disciplinary’ project and as an ‘emancipatory’ project. There is also a memorable moment where you discuss a letter you received from a gay man talking about how he has had to ‘work’ on his desire for his fat partner, and ask ‘is this an act of discipline, or of love?’ Could you please say more about the relationship between discipline and emancipation, and between discipline and love? For instance, can an act that begins in discipline become one of love? Or can we understand the discipline as being undertaken because one already loves? Or might it be undertaken because one wants to, but does not yet, love?

AS Yes, all of this. ‘Love takes work’ is a therapeutic cliché because it is true. I rhetorically counterpose discipline and love – ‘is this an act of discipline, or of love?’ – but really I mean to trouble the distinction. There can be discipline without love: ‘staying together just for the kids’. There is love without discipline: being ‘in love’ is characterised by, *inter alia*, utter spontaneity, and indeed a will that is not free but incessantly directed towards the object of infatuation. But when we place love in time and extend it, all sorts of things – human fickleness, the obstreperousness of the other, our craving for more, the spectre of lives unlived – make loving difficult. At some point, we all have to put in the work to see our loved ones – friends, lovers, comrades, kin – aright. Love understood as infatuation knows nothing of the challenges of temporal existence, which is why it bristles at the idea that love might ever take work, much less the discipline of the will.

RP Going back to the issue of moralising, how might one talk about ethics without moralising? And is it moralising in general, or moralising about sex in particular, that seems to be the problem? For example, in the book you say of sex that ‘there is nothing else so riven with politics and yet so inviolably personal’. Arguably, though, that could also be said of motherhood, and we’re interested in pushing the comparison of sex and motherhood further to interrogate why sex is, arguably, a more fiercely protected arena than motherhood or mothering in terms of political critique, and why it seems particularly resistant to being transformed in more socially just directions. For instance, arguments that existing forms of maternal desire and practice must be interrogated and re-made are met, it seems to us, with far less resistance within feminist/queer theory than the same kind of arguments about existing forms of sexual desire and practice. That could be because sex is commonly understood as more of an individual affair compared to mothering/parenting (though of course sex, including with oneself, is thoroughly relational). But is it also down to a sense that there is a kind of inherent ‘wrongness’ to sex (of the sexy kind), in comparison to mothering/parenting? So whilst childrearing would be collectivised and maternal/parental desire would be redirected or even eliminated in a postrevolutionary

feminist society, sex would still require, in some way, the eroticism of unequal power relations. What's your view? Do you think that this kind of assumption is in play in the debates your book has generated, and if so, would you say that this eroticism is something learned, and hence un-learnable?

AS I would deny any sharp distinction between 'sex' and 'motherhood', even though the two can certainly come apart, since one can become a mother without engaging in any sexual activity, and vice versa. What I mean by this denial is that a full political critique of sex must engage a political critique of motherhood, and indeed parenthood; my favourite text that does this – that reveals motherhood as a political institution – is Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*. That said, I of course recognise the asymmetry you describe. Plenty of feminist/queer theory, from Firestone's *Dialectic of Sex* onward, seeks to subject the heteronormative family, mothering and childrearing to not just scrutiny but a transformative agenda. Meanwhile, much contemporary feminism



and queer theory is reluctant to engage in the sort of political critique of sex and sexual desire that was so familiar to radical feminists in the late 1960s and 1970s. What's going on here? As you say, the family, like sex, is also deeply personal and at the same time profoundly political.

I think the answer is complicated, but let me offer one thought. For conservatism of all stripes – from traditional, religiously-inflected social conservatism to neoliberalism – the heteronormative, nuclear family is centrally important. (On the counterintuitive importance of the family for neoliberalism, I cannot recommend Melinda Cooper's 2017 book *Family Values* highly enough.) And, sadly, you see a similar attachment to the heteronormative nuclear family in many corners of the contemporary left. (Richard Seymour has a very good recent piece on this in *Salvage* called 'Abolition: Notes on a Normie Shitstorm', occasioned by leftist outrage at Sophie Lewis's new book on family abolition.) Meanwhile, the socially conservative right is all too delighted to engage in the political critique of sex and sexual desire: consider gay conversion therapy and the hysteria around trans kids. So I wonder if the answer is fundamentally dialectical – namely, that contemporary feminists want to distance themselves (for excellent reasons) from a resurgent right that is both 'pro-family' and 'anti-sex'. The result is a feminism that is 'anti-family' and 'pro-sex'.

I'll add one more observation. You're right that contemporary feminist and queer theory is, on the whole, very open to transformative critiques of motherhood and the family. But, especially within feminism, there is still a presumption that social (and thus biological) reproduction is good. You see this especially in some corners of contemporary social reproduction theory. Now, I'm hardly an anti-natalist or deep ecologist – these are worldviews that always implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, target the 'hyper-fecund' poor women of the Global South. But I don't think of social reproduction as a good *per se* – what 'world' is it, precisely, that we are so keen on reproducing? – and I do want to ask what it might mean if we didn't constantly defer the project

of human flourishing to the next generation, both individually and collectively. So I detect an atavistic attachment to the reproductive order even within seeming radical critiques of it.

RP This leads to our next question, which is: if desire is not pre- or a-political, how can we speak of a liberated or liberatory desire 'set free from the binds of injustice'? Does that function as a kind of regulative ideal?

AS Well, just because something is political – that is, shaped by our reigning schemes of social order and cooperation – does not mean that it is destined to be unjust. But one might wonder: *what* exactly is there to be 'set free', if there is very little of desire that can be said to pre-exist the political? It's analogous to the problem of agential freedom once we acknowledge our mutual constitution as subjects. The solution is that we have to rethink our idea of liberation: not the emancipation of transcendent, self-constituting selves, but a more compatibilist understanding that finds room for ideas like autonomy, respect, reflection, criticality and self-understanding against a backdrop of mutual co-constitution. In a sense, one needs to say, with A. J. Ayer, that there is simply a difference between having a gun held to one's head or being the subject of psychological abuse and being formed by one's *Bildung*. But, being feminists, we will also have to distinguish between different kinds of *Bildung*, and notice that many elements of what is understood to be normal enculturation is in fact perverse: that, under patriarchy, girls and women (and indeed many boys and men) are raised with a gun held to their heads. Of course, this is all a promissory note – and more can and has been said. Here, yes, I think a regulative ideal is a useful notion. Liberation – of desire, of agents – is not some final end state, but a process.

RP We're also interested in your engagement with psychoanalytic concepts of desire. For instance, what kind of understanding of the psyche does your discussion of desire rely on or presuppose? Are desires knowable? In relation to this, if individuals' 'bad' desires are understood in relation to the oppressive structures of society (i.e. located in the external world) does this end up with an understanding of desire that is almost like false consciousness? How do psychoanalytic concepts, such as the unconscious, complicate how society is understood to shape/influence desire (which would in turn impact how desire might be 'set free')? These kinds of questions were, of course, points of contestation within the women's liberation movement and engaged with by many of the thinkers you discuss in *The Right to Sex*. How would you respond to the kinds of criticisms Juliet Mitchell made of feminist dismissals of Freud in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974)? e.g.:

Feminist criticisms of Freud claim that he was denying what really happens, and that the women he analysed were simply responding to really oppressive conditions. But there is no such thing as a simple response to reality. External reality has to be 'acquired'. To deny that there is anything other than external reality gets us back to the same proposition: it is a denial of the unconscious.

AS Desires are sometimes knowable, and sometimes not, or not immediately to the subject herself. Psychoanalysis, beginning with Freud, has an extraordinary amount to offer feminism. It cautions against simplistic accounts of the psyche that would reduce the subject to a coherent and knowable set of desires, beliefs and goals. It reminds us that things are often not as they appear to be: that loathing can be love, that a fantasy can be a remedy, that shows of strength can be confessions of weakness. The question is how to bring together the Freudian account of the psyche – which, in its universalism, and notwithstanding Freud's own prejudices, is in a sense deeply egalitarian – with the deeply inegalitarian political reality of which psychoanalysis has long been embarrassed. What does it mean, in other words, to see all human persons as playing

out universal dramas of repression – as all, in an important sense, lost and thwarted children – while at the same time seeing that, in the immanent world of social ‘reality’, some of these same people are enormously, almost untouchably powerful, and others devastatingly unfree.

The person who I think does this most beautifully and powerfully is, unsurprisingly, Jacqueline Rose. She insists on holding together what are often thought of as contradictory impulses – between condemning male violence and recognising the psychic fragility out of which it is born, between seeking legal redress for sexual violence and recognising the essential ungovernability of sex, and between registering the ubiquity of male sexual entitlement and leaving open the possibility that individual men might distinguish themselves from the script of masculinity. Rose refuses both an orthodox radical feminism that would see male power as a perfect, totalising achievement; and also an orthodox psychoanalysis that prefers to de-emphasise if not totally deny the ‘real’ differences in power and material means that divide us.

You can see the important political work done by Rose’s psychoanalytic frame in her discussion of trans identities. She writes: ‘The bar of sexual difference is ruthless but that does not mean that those who believe they subscribe to its law have the slightest idea of what is going on beneath the surface, any more than the one who submits less willingly. . . . The “cis”—i.e. non-trans—woman or man is a decoy, the outcome of multiple repressions whose un-lived stories surface nightly in our dreams’. Rose is reminding us that alternative ways of being sexed and being gendered – different possible ways of responding to the ‘bar of sexual difference’ – literally haunt us, all of us, at night. No one, trans or cis, has a perfectly reconciled relationship to the socially-constructed script of sex/gender: the human psyche is far too complex and interesting for that. This suggests that trans-exclusionary politics is, at least in part, driven by an anxiety on the part of ‘cis’ people to reassert their own fidelity to a social order that, in fact, does not even serve them. This is just one way in which the uncertainty, instability and ambivalence thematised by psychoanalysis can be politically productive for feminism.

RP In your book, a primary concern is that the ‘consent’ standard shields existing desires and practices of sex from political critique, but there is another worry too – also articulated by Katherine Angel – which is that it precludes sexual exploration and the cultivation of desire because it assumes we know what we want in sex in advance of actually doing it, and can thus seem at a remove from the intimacy and immediacy of sexual encounters as experiences that unfold in the present tense. In Angel’s work, this emerges as a point about the temporality of desire, i.e. that desire doesn’t exist in advance of sex but rather is activated and emerges in process through mutual exploration. Could you say a bit more about that, and about current practices and promotion of ‘consent training’ – in universities for example. Is there an alternative way for institutions to combat rape myths and masculine entitlement?

AS The consent model, as Linda Martín Alcoff has argued, is fundamentally juridical – and so we should not be surprised that it has rather serious limits as a non-judicial criterion for ethical sex. In a courtroom, we need a criterion that distinguishes criminal sexual assault from non-criminal sex that has some hope of being operationalised – and non-consent is not bad for that, and certainly an improvement on historically prior criteria, like ‘presence of violence’. But why should we expect consent to be that which distinguishes ethical from non-ethical sex? Two considerations show why this is a mistake. First of all, there is a great deal of ethically ugly sex that, as feminists, we should not seek to make illegal, lest we want to further strengthen the hand of the carceral state. Second – and this is a point MacKinnon makes so well, though she and I draw different lessons from it – the presence of consent is compatible with ethically-vexed sex,

given that women often (because of their cultural training) consent to sex they don't want to have. In this regard, the shift to an 'affirmative consent' standard isn't a great help: now we have the phenomenon of women saying yes to sex (as they are culturally trained to do) they don't want to have. When, we want to know, will women feel emboldened to assert what they want, and men no longer be turned on by 'getting' what women don't want to give? (By this I'm not saying that consent-training is pointless. One of my recent graduate students has argued that, while consent might not be the mark of ethically OK sex, *consent-training* might well have the indirect effect of strengthening those things that centrally matter for ethical sex, like respect of other and self.)

The problem with what I've just suggested so far – that ethical sex involves people feeling free to assert what they want while being tuned into what others want – is that it can appear to presuppose a naïve conception of desire. People, all people, find themselves wanting conflicting things: for example, to act out a rape fantasy, and to not be the sort of person who is turned on by a rape fantasy. And, as I said earlier, what we want is very often opaque to us, and does not necessarily pre-exist in a stable form the sexual encounter itself. There is an issue of temporality here, as Angel says, and there is also the ever-thorny issue of the unconscious. So we've got to place our regulative ideal of ethical sex in time, and introduce all the complexities of the ambivalently desirous subject. To do this we have to turn our attention to the relationality of sex: to the process whereby people engage in a mutual exploration – and indeed sexual co-constitution – grounded in something like recognition of the other. And we've got to do so in a way that doesn't reinforce a reactionary ideal of the long-term, loving, monogamous couple. Any ideal of ethical sex worth having must be able to see anonymous, one-off sex as paradigms.

RP To follow up on this, a central focus of 'consent training' seems to be making consent and the withdrawal of consent intelligible. Yet your review of Joanna Bourke's *Loving Animals* in the *London Review of Books* ends on a note of scepticism about whether the consent of human as much as non-human animals can ever be completely intelligible given the will to power that seems to animate the sex drive. We may be more certain of our inability to trust ourselves to know what an animal wants, but given your thoroughgoing problematisation of consent, can we ever trust ourselves to fully know what a human wants?

AS Yes, I think we can, sometimes: it's an 'I know it when I see it' situation, though of course certainly people are mistakenly all-too-confident about what others want. One key, I think, is not to get epistemically lazy about other people, especially those one 'knows well'.

RP You are clearly wary of calling on the state to do things that feminism might want, whether this be the 'redistribution' of desire, the regulation of pornography or the more stringent punishment of sexual violence. Where does this place you in relation to socialist feminism and socialism more generally, which has sought to take control of the state even if only to hasten its demise? How, for example, should we read Angela Davis running for Vice President of the United States?

AS Angela Davis gets my vote any day, obviously. But to understand the state, and feminism's particular relationship to it, I turn to MacKinnon. In *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (1989) she writes: 'feminism has been left with these tacit alternatives: either the state is a primary tool of women's betterment and status transformation, without analysis (hence strategy) of it as male; or women are left to civil society, which for women has more closely resembled a state of nature. The state, and with it the law, have been either omnipotent or impotent: everything

or nothing.’ I think this is fundamentally right. Feminism must reject both a left politics that counsels a simple rejection of and retreat from state power, and a liberal politics that turns incessantly to the state. Neither will serve women as a class. (A similar thing can be said of Black communities in the US, who often see themselves as suffering from both over-policing and *under*-policing.) The state must be itself a terrain of feminist struggle; as MacKinnon says, this involves understanding the state as male (and we might add: white, straight and capitalist) in order to know how to engage it strategically, and in particular how to advocate for reforms that carry within them the seeds of transformative change. I don’t generally agree with MacKinnon’s specific strategic prescriptions – they involve, I think, an undue optimism about the law, an optimism that doesn’t carry through her own insight about the state as ideologically male. But her diagnosis of the problem, for feminism and the state, remains perennially apt.

RP We understand your background and training have been in analytic philosophy and we’re interested in your relationship to analytic philosophy today, and how you would identify your philosophical allegiances and positioning. For example, in a recent issue of *Radical Philosophy* (RP 2.02), Alice Crary argued that analytic feminist philosophy takes for granted that ‘ethical neutrality is a regulative ideal for all world-directed thought’ which is ‘fatal to feminist politics’; and elsewhere you have spoken about philosophy needing to be more world-oriented or world-directed. Can you elaborate on what you mean by that? Would you agree with Crary’s diagnosis, i.e. that the primary problem is the analytic conception of reason? And do you think that disciplinarity is also part of the problem here?

AS I’m a huge admirer of Alice Crary’s work, and share much in common with her philosophically. One point of difference is that I am not particularly invested in the question of how we should think about reason. Instead, I am much more engaged by questions of how we should think about knowledge. But we agree that taking up ethically-loaded perspectives is a precondition of seeing the world aright – for reasoning well or coming to know – and that we should reject aspirations for an ethically-neutral account of the social and political world, including the world of non-human animals. I think the difference in our focuses – rationality vs. knowledge – has to do with differences in our philosophical formations, and perhaps doesn’t amount to much.

It’s important to say here, and I know Alice would agree, that the ideal of ethical neutrality doesn’t characterise all analytic philosophy, even if it characterises some of it. (It also characterises, perhaps surprisingly, some contemporary Critical Theory.) Figures like Elizabeth Anscombe, John McDowell (Alice’s doctoral supervisor), Cora Diamond and my brilliant Oxford colleague A.W. Moore all share, in one way or another, the thought that human subjectivity has an essential role to play in the acquisition of objective reality. It is perhaps worth noting that all these philosophers are in one way or another indebted to Wittgenstein.

When I’ve talked about analytic philosophy needing to be more world-directed, I’ve meant to be picking up on the ways in which a certain common (and dominant) mode of analytic moral and political philosophy seems to be animated by an intense anxiety about social and political reality – as if the world of other people (and indeed non-human animals) cannot be faced until a theory can be found to mediate between the self and that world. In a sense, this just *is* the philosophical impulse: philosophy is born out of an alienation from the world. So much analytic moral and political philosophy appears to begin from the thought that the world itself contains no ethical answers: that one cannot learn about how things should or should not be by closely observing the world. Thus such philosophy has little use for sociology or history, except as a storehouse of examples.

RP In relation to this, do you think there is something inherent to analytic philosophy that has made it a major vector of transphobia in the UK? In other words, is it only coincidental that the transphobic feminist philosophy emerging in the UK is analytic? And what about the Britishness of it? For example, Alyosxa Tudor speaks of ‘TERFism’ as ‘white distraction’, but can you comment on the specifically British context we’re situated in at the moment and the form of academic transphobia that presents itself as ‘sound thinking’ and ‘common sense’?

AS This is a big question to which I don’t have anything like a satisfying answer. To begin with one obvious point: analytic philosophy is the ‘question everything’ discipline *par excellence*. So if any discipline is going to take up a politically vexed (or indeed culturally settled) question for apparently neutral inquiry – Is torture permissible? Should disabled infants be euthanised? Should wild carnivores be exterminated? Are trans women indeed women? – it is going to be analytic philosophy. That is not to say that analytic philosophy’s self-image as the discipline that questions everything is wholly accurate. Some questions are beyond the pale, even for analytic philosophers: I *think* that a moral philosopher making an argument for chattel slavery would get some pushback. (Though perhaps they would be welcomed to publish in the *Journal of Controversial Ideas*, two of whose editors have argued for, *inter alia*, the permissibility of torture, infanticide for disabled infants and the forced extinction of wild carnivores.) For my part, I am a firm defender of academic freedom – not to be confused with free speech (this is something I’ve written about with Robert Mark Simpson) – and worry about the tendency, in some quarters of the left, especially the student left, to look to authorities, especially university administrations, to regulate and punish speech. At the same time, I think there is something worrying – I want to say *ailing* – with a discipline that finds itself pulled again and again to these questions and these methods of investigating them.

Take, for example, Peter Singer’s discussions of people who are cognitively disabled. Why leverage such people’s rights to be treated with respect – rights, at best, precariously and hardly universally recognised – in an argument for the improved treatment of (certain) non-human animals? I find it difficult not to think that there is more than just a concern for animals motivating arguments like these – and this impression is deepened when I see repeated uses of the slur ‘retarded’ in the literature, and a reluctance to take disabled people’s testimony about their lives (especially that they are ‘worth living’) seriously. Is this just neutral inquiry into a philosophically interesting question?

I think a similar question can be asked of other interventions within analytic moral and political philosophy, including about trans-inclusion. Kathleen Stock, for example, is very invested in portraying herself as a reasonable, judicious philosopher, carefully making her way through the arguments and following them where they lead her. But anyone who has watched her on social media over the years knows there is also a good deal of vitriol there, a certain populist spirit that takes clear pleasure in riling people up, and a lack of intellectual generosity and rigour. It is these habits of mind and communication – habits that Stock is very good at suppressing when she needs to, as for example in her extraordinarily effective performance on BBC *Woman’s Hour* after she resigned from Sussex – that irk many of her critics within philosophy. There *are* interesting philosophical questions about gender, gender identity and sex raised by the experiences of trans people, just as there are interesting philosophical questions raised by the phenomena of abortion, rape, sex work and racial domination. I don’t hold with the view that we shouldn’t ‘philosophise about people’s lives’ – where would the work of Simone de Beauvoir or Angela Davis be if that principle were applied? – but I do think that such philosophising

demands a special quality of ethical attention and intellectual care that is too often lacking in certain (though by no means all) quarters of analytic moral philosophy.

I wonder too, when it comes to the ‘trans debate’ specifically, whether the fact that analytic philosophy has been so historically male-dominated has some explanatory role to play. There is a lot of justified anger among women in philosophy; as Michèle Le Dœuff writes, ‘When you are a woman and a philosopher, it is useful to be a feminist in order to understand what is happening



to you’. Perhaps for some cis women philosophers, who have had to fight so hard for a place in the discipline, the spectre of the ‘trans woman infiltrator’ becomes a convenient and psychically potent scapegoat. This relates to what I’ve found to be the most illuminating account of the Britishness of the trans-exclusionary phenomenon, put forward by the feminist journalist Katie J. M. Baker in a great piece called ‘The Road to Terfdom’ in *Lux* magazine (a socialist feminist glossy to which everyone should subscribe). Baker points to the importance of the parenting website Mumsnet as a site of anti-trans radicalisation; here, women who are justifiably aggrieved by the difficulties of child-rearing in a neoliberalised social sphere are taught to direct their anger at the so-called ‘trans lobby’. In the UK, I think this phenomenon – that of trans people (especially trans women) being scapegoated for

real grievances – generalises beyond Mumsnet, though I think it’s hard to overstate just how important social media has been in creating and sustaining this phenomenon, not least because of its tremendous influence on the mainstream British press.

There is also the fact that in the US the enemies of trans people are so clearly also the enemies of cis women, lesbian women and gay men; just look at recent developments in Texas, where a raft of legislation has simultaneously attacked abortion rights, trans rights and the rights of lesbians and gay people. So perhaps, in the US context, it’s more obvious who your political bedfellows are when you, as a feminist, engage in trans-exclusionary politics. In the UK it’s less obvious that trans-exclusionary feminists are giving succour to the right, though of course they are: not least by encouraging the mainstream press to obsess over ‘the trans issue’ while the Conservative Party orchestrates a project to drain the public sphere – the NHS, arts institutions, universities, the BBC – of all life, while increasing the privatised misery of ordinary Britons.

RP In ‘How to Do Things with Philosophy’ (2018) you write: ‘it’s not enough to take our familiar philosophical tools and turn them toward new topics ... We need instead to re-examine our tools, to ask ourselves what we are doing with them, and why’. How has this insight informed your own approach to writing *The Right to Sex*? In connection to this, would it be possible to say something reflecting on the fragmentary and aphoristic form of the Coda to the chapter ‘The Right to Sex’, which is written in a very different style to the book’s main chapters? And how

do you understand the role of a philosopher in relation to the role of the public intellectual? If, as you say in the opening paragraph of *The Right to Sex*, feminism is ‘a political movement to transform the world beyond recognition’, how do you understand the role of the feminist philosopher?

AS I think of *The Right to Sex* primarily as a work of feminist theory rather than feminist philosophy, since that latter term (at least in the world of analytic philosophy) is associated with a form of feminist theorising that attempts to use the proprietary tools of analytic philosophy (e.g. conceptual analysis, semantics and pragmatics, epistemology, metaphysics, etc.) to establish the truth or plausibility of claims that are relevant (in principle) to the lives and fates of women. It’s not a method that particularly appeals to me when it comes to writing about feminism. My favourite texts of feminist theory are more formally innovative than what you typically find within analytic feminism. These texts don’t just say things but also try to *do* things: create new desires and forms of political subjectivity, disclose new imaginative possibilities, encourage new kinds of political reflectivity and consciousness. You can’t read something like Silvia Federici’s ‘Wages Against Housework’ as just a set of propositions about household labour. The rhetoric of the text alone – ‘They say it is love. We say it is unwaged work. They call it frigidity. We call it absenteeism. Every miscarriage is a work accident’ – should make it clear that Federici, and her fellow WFH feminists like Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, are attempting to do more than give a conceptual analysis of ‘work’, or offer an argument for the waging of women’s labour in the home. As Federici says, the demand for housework wages isn’t a demand for a ‘thing’ but for a new ‘political perspective’; Federici is trying to bring into existence a new form of political consciousness, and create a new political constituency.

It is to this tradition of radical, utopian feminist theory that I see my book as a small contribution. In it I try to say true things about the political formation of sexual desire, about the workings of patriarchal ideology, about the dangers of invoking coercive state power, about the often sorry state of contemporary Anglo-American feminism. But I am moreover interested in contributing to that feminist tradition that incites women, and indeed men, to desire and demand more: that refuses to accept narrow reformism of the status quo as the best for which we can hope, and that not only sees but *feels* unfreedom in all its guises – class, race, caste – as bound up with the unfreedoms of sexual domination. I am interested in reinvigorating the feminist imagination, while at the same time making clear the material conditions, especially economic exploitation and immiseration, that are inimical to the workings of that imagination.

I think that for some philosophers, including some feminist philosophers, this sort of work is unrecognisable as theory (let alone philosophy). For example, in a review of my book in *The Raven*, Sally Haslanger accused me of lacking a social theory – that is, a theory of how a society works and how it changes, especially in progressive ways. Indeed, she declares that, whatever it is that I am doing in the book, I am ‘not doing theory’. Now, I’m a fan of Sally’s, both personally and philosophically; it’s hard to overstate her importance for the development of contemporary analytic feminism, especially feminist metaphysics. But I think her reading of my book reveals a fundamentally limited understanding of what feminist theory is and can do, one that is too much in the grip of the analytic worldview and too detached from the actual history of feminist praxis. By ‘feminist theory’ Haslanger seems to have in a mind an overt and systematic account of how society works under conditions of patriarchal domination. It is true that I offer no such account in *The Right to Sex* – as Haslanger notes, that is not the point of the book, nor (this is not noted by Haslanger) the point of many canonical works of what is generally taken to be feminist theory.

But anyone coming from the broad tradition of Marxist and socialist feminism would recognise the social theory that underpins my work. It is this theoretical tradition and orientation that explains my focus on biological and social reproduction as central to women's oppression; my insistence on the primacy of class as an analytic category for feminism; my specifically anti-capitalist critique of carceral feminism; my understanding of the heteronormative nuclear family as a central mechanism of capitalist production; my interest in forms of radical coalition across axes of identity; my conviction that poor women, especially poor women of colour, are agents of historical change; my anxiety about state power and bourgeois moralism; my embrace of certain psychoanalytic framings of sexual domination; and, above all, my insistence on a utopian spirit that Haslanger disparages as 'wishful thinking'. (For what it is worth, I find the dismissal as 'wishful' of demands – like socialised childcare and on-demand abortion – that feminists of the 1970s thought would be quickly met, nothing less than a capitulation to a neoliberal common-sense that opposes itself in every way to women's liberation. It also, I think, betrays a misapprehension of the role that demands can play in radical politics, as if the whole point of them was to be 'reasonable'. Kathi Weeks' *The Problem With Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* is excellent on the function of the feminist 'demand'.)

Haslanger takes special aim at, as you aptly call it, the 'aphoristic and fragmentary' fourth chapter of the book, which serves as a coda to the book's title essay. 'Does feminism need theory?', Haslanger asks rhetorically. 'Or can we make do with a scattered set of insights and questions, some of them numbered, that don't obviously cohere?' Again, what I think Haslanger is missing is the basic Marxist insight that social and political life contains contradictions – not in the sense of logical contradictions (I'm still an analytic philosopher!), but in the sense that a single political formation can contain within it tendencies that pull against each other. For example: does the family offer a refuge from capitalism or is it a site of its reproduction? The answer is: both. Is male sexual violence the expression of men's power or their vulnerability? Both. Is the criminal law a potential tool for feminist justice or is it a weapon of the capitalist state? Again: both. The point of the 'Coda' is to explore these and other contradictions – or, in a more psychoanalytic register, to embrace the ambivalences of political and social life. For example, I write, analysing the incel phenomenon: 'On one hand, there is the pathology of what is sometimes called neoliberalism: an assimilation of an ever-increasing number of domains of life to the logic of the market. On the other, there is the pathology of patriarchy, which has, in capitalist societies, tended to see women and the home as refuges from the market, as sources of freely given care and love ... That these two tendencies are in tension does not mean they do not serve each other, or that they do not form an organic unity.'

One thing I think Haslanger gets very *right* about my book is that I am trying to both perform and instil what she calls a 'critical feminist consciousness'. But she insists that this is not yet to do 'theory', because her idea of theory comes, ultimately, from philosophy: a theory is a total model of the world, or it is nothing. I wonder which other feminists would turn out not to be doing theory on this view of things: would Elizabeth Spelman? bell hooks? Andrea Dworkin? Cherríe Moraga? Alexandra Kollontai? Would Maggie Nelson, Sara Ahmed, Andrea Long Chu, Sophie Lewis, Lola Olufemi? What precisely is gained by saying that the work of such feminist intellectuals isn't something called 'theory'? And what might be lost?

One small irony here is that I often think that Haslanger, in advancing her project of 'ameliorative metaphysics' – in which philosophers offer analyses of concepts that they think best serve our political needs – has an impoverished social theory, one that gives the philosopher, as conceptual technocrat, an oddly privileged role in shaping social and political reality by way

of pragmatist fiat. On this view, the philosopher will explain to their folk audience which understandings of concepts it would best serve justice for them to take up. The problem is not only that this approach ignores Gramsci's reminder that theory is something that is not done just by intellectual elites, but encoded in and revealed through everyday action. It is moreover that it ignores what was supposed to be innovative about *feminist* theory. In a 1979 essay titled 'Feminist Theory and the Development of Revolutionary Strategy', the great Marxist feminist Nancy Hartsock counterposed the feminist understanding of 'theory' to that traditional left perspective that 'held that the working class was incapable of working out its own future and those who would lead the working class to freedom would be those who ... were equipped with an *all-inclusive theory that would help them organize the world*' (my emphasis). By contrast, Hartsock says, 'Feminism as a mode of analysis, especially when consciousness-raising is understood as basic to that method, requires a redefinition of the concept of intellectual or theoriser, a recasting of this social role in terms of everyday life.' Feminist theory, Hartsock is suggesting, is not about building models of the world that will serve as a map for the masses, but rather engaging in and encouraging a sustained critical analysis in conversation with those one sees as equal comrades in struggle. (My thinking about what is distinctive about feminist 'theory' – and its relegation to 'non-theory' by the disciplines of philosophy and political theory – is much influenced by Sophie Smith).

An interesting test case is Haslanger's ameliorative analysis of 'woman' in her 2000 paper 'Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?', a paper I regularly teach to undergraduates. With great analytic clarity, Haslanger arrives at an analysis of 'woman' that will be strikingly familiar to those acquainted with the history of feminist thought, especially the work of Simone de Beauvoir, Shulamith Firestone and Adrienne Rich. What, we might ask, is gained by using the tools of analytic metaphysics to arrive at this familiar place, especially given that few people not trained in analytic philosophy can make their way through a metaphysics article? I don't mean this as a rhetorical question. I think this sort of work is really useful for *analytic philosophers* who are struggling for a feminist consciousness – which, in large part thanks to Sally's work, increasingly many are. It's just that most people aren't analytic philosophers, and most feminists get on just fine without analytic philosophy. If you're an analytic philosopher, it makes sense for you to demand a full 'theory' (i.e. model) of the world before acting, to want specific action-guiding prescriptions, and to feel unsatisfied with a feminist intervention that fundamentally throws you back on yourself, trying to enliven you as a political subject rather than tell you precisely what to do. On my view of things – call it a 'theory' or not – intellectuals don't best serve radical politics by telling people what to do. I want more for feminist theory, and I want to invite others to want more for it alongside me: I want it to be, as bell hooks said, itself a liberatory practice.