

# First-Person Authority and Positionality as Bridges in Social Justice Education

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In the summer of 2019, debates contained in the pages of rarefied academic journals spilled into blogs and the Twitterverse, as philosophers fought to the professional death over the meaning of gender identity.<sup>1</sup> The barbs flying from all sides of the discipline were not becoming of a scholarly population that fancies itself measured and unbiased. Longstanding feminists were accused of bigotry; vulnerable people were publicly derided; and at least one scholar, identified as “t philosopher,” ostentatiously left the discipline, citing its “transphobia problem.”<sup>2</sup> Philosophy was represented as unsafe both for trans people and for those with politically incorrect views about gender.

Such tensions are confined neither to philosophy nor to gender, but this particular flare-up is as emblematic as any of the fractured state of academic discourse. In a sincere bid to rectify the exclusionary habits of traditional institutions, critics insist on the centrality of marginalized identity categories, and, in the process, subvert long-held assumptions about method. Western academia has historically considered questions of identity to be extraneous to the content of scholarship; the *what* does not depend on the *who*. In contrast, where politically charged topics like gender are concerned, the *who* of scholarship can sometimes precede the *what*, with far-reaching consequences for how we do our work. Insofar as questions of identity are central to the practice of social justice education, it is urgent that we come up with better ways to make sense of the relationships between philosophy and identity.

Philosophy has been embarrassingly slow to diversify as a discipline, but methodological collisions are well underway, as seen in last summer's gender wars. The disconnections are profound and, for some people, such as "t philosopher," unbridgeable. At stake here are two nested bridges: there is the bridge (or lack thereof) between different academic methods, and there is the bridge (or lack thereof) between people with certain identities and people without. In this paper I examine two practices that are intended to create a bridge of the second type. But first I contextualize them with reference to the diversification of philosophical method. The relationship between method and identity underlies many disciplinary tensions and provides a lens for understanding what divides us.

### METHOD AND IDENTITY

Analytic philosophy has for much of its history treated persons in maddeningly impersonal terms.<sup>3</sup> Long before Rawls posited his famous "veil of ignorance," modern philosophers were in the business of making sweeping claims about identity as a category over large and disparate (and often totally unspecified) samples. The nature of this approach is that philosophers often seek to secure conceptual ideas about identity that are irreducible, even blind, to their own subjective experiences, even as they inevitably consult their own phenomenology of selfhood to draw conclusions about the nature of identity.<sup>4</sup> This is, in short, what analytic philosophy does, and it is arguably the discipline's best contribution as well as its most glaring weakness. We need conceptual tools to make sense of patterns and categories, to challenge ad hoc determinations, and to probe our unreflective intuitions about the most fundamental topics. But the method entails exclusions and contradictions, takes lived realities out of context, and prioritizes privileged standpoints over other ways of thinking. Noted African-Ameri-

can philosopher George Yancy contends, “As a black male in the United States, to do philosophy in the abstract would be to deny the reality of my own existence.”<sup>25</sup> He implies that abstraction is both a form of self-effacement and a professional expectation. When scholars working on gender, race, and other social identities position themselves as philosophers, they risk being criticized for putting a political cart before a metaphysical horse.

Meanwhile, rapidly progressing discourses and standards of political “woke”-ness in other areas of scholarship demand their own methodological fidelity. For convenience, I will refer to these areas of philosophy and neighboring disciplines, which proceed from more substantive political commitments, as “critical theory.” When scholars working in these areas are perceived to waffle on the relevance of identity, or to apply abstract thinking too fastidiously or too open-endedly, they may be slammed as uncritical. Truly open-ended inquiry into, say, institutional racism, is anathema within some progressive studies, or at least so obvious as to be a waste of scholarly effort. Holding such phenomena to be unquestionable dogma is, in turn, anathema to more traditional schools of philosophy.

Roughly speaking, then, the methods of analytic philosophy and those of critical theory have been defined in opposition to each other. If analytic philosophy approaches method in the first instance by bracketing its own identity, aiming for generic knowledge that transcends the particular conditions under which it was acquired, critical theory forefronts the identity of the inquirer, assuming a necessary correlation between epistemic authority and subjective location. Analytic philosophy’s signature is its (supposedly neutral) method. On this paradigm, when philosophy is done well, the identity of the philosopher should be close to irrelevant. Critical theory’s method is different.

On this approach, the identity of the scholar is the non-negotiable bias that conditions a subjective inquiry. An inquiry that erases the scholar's identity is irrelevant, or even harmful, by these standards.

It is not difficult to see how the purportedly neutral method of analytic philosophy goes wrong when extrapolated to other people's identities. Eminent trans philosopher Talia Mae Bettcher laments:

I'm afraid there's a tendency among some philosophers to suppose that philosophical investigations into race, gender, disability, trans issues, and so forth are no different methodologically from investigations into the question whether tables really exist. One difference, however, is that while tables aren't part of the philosophical conversation, trans people, disabled people, people of color, *are* part of the conversation.<sup>6</sup>

Bettcher's table analogy helpfully crystallizes the uniqueness of identity among philosophical topics. When the *what* is actually a *who*, the identity of a philosopher necessarily enters the inquiry. Importantly, however, it cannot supplant the *what* and still call itself philosophy.<sup>7</sup> We need to find ways of incorporating identity into philosophy without calling a moratorium on sensitive topics.

In the rest of this paper I will focus on two epistemic postures that have been widely adopted in certain academic spaces with the intent of incorporating identity into method. First-Person Authority is a stance that recognizes someone as an epistemic authority in virtue of their identity. Positionality, as I will use the term here, is the stance of disavowing one's authority by identifying oneself outside specified classes of marginalized people.<sup>8</sup> These approaches acknowledge, in

a way that classical analytic philosophy often does not, the reality of power imbalances and the impossibility of universal objective knowledge. To this extent, they help to bridge the distance between participants in an academic setting or between an author and their audience, which may both be regarded as legitimate goals of social justice education. I will argue, however, that a narrow focus on the identity of particular academic players, or a reductive approach to identity as a series of social positionalities, both risks obscuring the larger philosophical issues at play and limits opportunities for meaningful learning.

### FIRST-PERSON AUTHORITY

What kind of knowledge comes from identity? The idea that identity translates into certain forms of epistemic privilege seems to proceed from the assumption that self-knowledge is unassailable in ways that other types of knowledge generally cannot be. Intuitively, I am the authority on myself, and even when my self-knowledge may be imperfect, I can be presumed to know things about myself better than others do. Philosophers distinguish several kinds of self-knowledge, all of which may succumb to epistemic doubt.<sup>9</sup> While it may be true that some knowledge appears to be acquired through introspection that is by definition inaccessible to others, many claims about ourselves are falsifiable by those who know us, and even those who don't. For example, empirical research and psychoanalytic theory suggest that our conscious beliefs about ourselves may be at odds with other processes that occur without our awareness.<sup>10</sup> The only type of self-knowledge that seems immune to such counter-evidence is the knowledge of phenomenal states, that is, the conscious awareness of some perception, belief, or sensation.<sup>11</sup>

First-Person Authority (FPA) is used by both analytic philosophers and people in equity-oriented fields to refer, roughly, to knowl-

edge of things about ourselves that are unfalsifiable by others. To take a familiar, if vexatious, example: a trans person experiences a sense of gender interiority that can only be attested to through first-person knowledge of mental states. There is no evidence, physical or otherwise, that a second person could use to overrule the trans person's declaration of who they are. Actually, this is true for all gender identities; but trans people have been systematically doubted because of the misalignment between their gender identity and the cues typically used to sort others by gender. The respect due to gender minorities requires valuing their FPA over our default judgments about human kinds.

This is not to say, however, that people have a kind of god-like, voluntaristic ability to categorize themselves into identities, or kinds of people. Ian Hacking argues that, while some types of human experiences have always existed, each era and culture offers an incomplete slate of "ways" to "be a person, to experience oneself, to live in society."<sup>12</sup> We interpret our sensations, beliefs and perceptions according to the available accounts of what people are like—according to ideas about identity. "Trans" identity emerged at a certain point in the West as a "kind of person," complete with definitions and diagnostic criteria. These classifications interact with the subjects they purport to describe, creating what Hacking calls the "looping effect."<sup>13</sup> For example, many trans people, in order to access medical support, have had to recount their identities in the terms dictated by gatekeeping institutions, as in, *I've always known since I was a little [blank] that I was actually a [blank]*.<sup>14</sup> While trans people on some definition have always existed, "trans person" is precisely one of the "kinds" that Hacking describes as "a moving target." The explosive controversies we've seen in recent years can be understood in part as a result of shifting cultural norms about what constitutes a gendered "kind."

Those who find themselves in marginal identity categories are often subject to “testimonial injustice,” a term that has entered the philosophical lexicon to denote injustice that is committed against someone in her capacity as a knower.<sup>15</sup> While FPA attributes epistemic credibility to someone on the basis of their perceived or reported identity, in situations of testimonial injustice, a person’s identity or perceived identity is used to discredit her as a reliable source of knowledge on a topic.<sup>16</sup> We can see FPA as a kind of overcompensation for testimonial injustice: a person with FPA is given *extra* credibility on a given topic *because* of her membership in a marginalized identity group. Ironically, the same individuals who may have FPA in one setting because of their identities may be more subject to epistemic injustice in other settings on account of them. Both attitudes may issue from people’s bewilderment over proliferation and changing borders of identity categories.

But if membership in an identity group is contestable, and if FPA can only apply to the internal states of one unique person, it remains unclear how belonging to a marginalized group necessarily confers epistemic advantage on topics that exceed the autobiographical. Where does my knowledge of myself end and my knowledge of the world begin? Critical methods often emphasize the role of “lived experience,” which may be seen as a kind of interface between the self and all that is external to it. It is true that, because people are treated differently on the basis of their identities, and because some identities involve deeply intimate aspects of life, our identities to a great extent condition our experiences. But experience is not the same as “knowledge” either. Rather than constituting an objective piece of evidence, “experience is at once always already an interpretation and something that needs to be interpreted.”<sup>17</sup> Reifying experience, like identity, as a straightforward source of epistemic advantage risks flattening out the

important questions about power and social epistemology that they are supposed to open up.

We must therefore retain some distinction between the authority to *say who one is* and the authority to be regarded as an expert on other people with the same putative identity, as well as on an assortment of loosely related topics. Bettcher's ethical-existential interpretation of FPA provides a guideline for distinguishing between knowledge of specific trans people's identities and inquiry into gender in general. This kind of FPA is not meant to stake a metaphysical claim that can be pursued as a line of argument in philosophical debates about gender. Rather, it "[answers] the question, 'Who am I? . . . What am I about? What do I stand for? What do I care about the most?'"<sup>18</sup> It helps to explain the importance of honoring people's self-understandings as persons of a certain kind, even while we may disagree over the inclusion criteria for that kind. On this interpretation, FPA does not dissolve epistemic questions about how to acquire or confirm knowledge of the metaphysics of gender, nor does it turn all trans people into gender theorists; but it provides a *prima facie* reason to treat trans people as the people they say they are.

The conceit of (some) modern philosophers that identity can be understood from a neutral subject position fails to make sense of identities that are by definition opaque to others or are predicated, like all marginalized identities, on the ignorance and indifference of those with more power. But knowledge about gender, race, or any other topic cannot be unassailable in the same way as one's own self-understanding as a person. Asserting authority over categories of identity elides the massive individual variation among people for whom one does not and cannot speak. There remains in all cases a gap between one's own identity and one's knowledge of identity. It is not clear that



this gap can, or ought to, be bridged.

### POSITIONALITY

Insofar as FPA or evidence of lived experience is thought to constitute a kind of epistemic advantage in discussing certain topics, then declaring a lack of these credentials is the virtue-signalling expected of the rest of us. Not only when we talk about identity, but increasingly, when we talk about anything even vaguely political, we declare a *lack* of FPA where appropriate as well as FPA.<sup>19</sup> This form of “positioning” is especially incumbent on those of us who have, or are perceived to have, inordinate social privilege. It can be a useful means of communicating self-awareness in a context where the background conditions of unequal power are an exhausting, even prohibitive, hurdle for some people to even participate in an educational setting. Yet, as I shall argue, it is generally understood too narrowly and can be called in as a proxy for the deeper philosophical work that we ought to do.

In many corners of education today, a certain type of comment is invariably prefaced with, “As a white person, I . . .”<sup>20</sup> Such declarations may be sincere attempts to further anti-racist causes, which accumulate into a species of peer pressure: being the only white person in a room to eschew the practice begins to look suspiciously like *opposing* anti-racism. Yet, beyond rhetorically distancing myself from racists, it is unclear what is accomplished by announcing my whiteness, especially absent further information about ethnic identity or family history. I seek to signal my awareness of white privilege and allude to some fuzzy limits on what I may know about race or racial oppression. It is true that, in so doing, I may help to create a bridge between myself and those for whom racial identity is a genuine barrier to academic participation. But this gesture—especially when executed

in a pro-forma way, by rattling off a growing list of social positionalities and forms of privilege—threatens to make a mockery of the whole project.<sup>21</sup> It trivializes the complexity and suffering of people I am not, as though a quick caveat at the beginning of a discussion could substitute for all my known unknowns, for any suffering in which I have been complicit or from which I inadvertently benefit. It re-centres *me* and my virtue as the focal topic. In its worst form, racially and socioeconomically homogenous groups of academics perform such rituals in a way that feels self-congratulatory, not to mention hypocritical, when there is no one there to challenge them, and without pursuing the requisite institutional change to ensure that problems of racial inequality are actually remedied.

We can see similar concerns about the limits of self-identification in pronoun checks, a practise that has rapidly gained tremendous currency in academic gatherings. The goal of the exercise is to promote recognition of and safety for gender minorities. Unfortunately, the pronoun tour of a classroom can have the effect of outing one of those members who is not prepared to be outed, or whose gender identity is perhaps under construction (see: moving targets), thereby defeating its own purpose. In some cases, there are no members who use pronouns other than ones correlating to their birth-assigned sex and current gender presentation, prompting the whole exercise to be called into question by the already-skeptical. Moreover, without a meaningful discussion or lesson about gender diversity, the ritual may bewilder the uninitiated and accomplish little more than shame them for not already having been educated about the function of pronouns before their arrival.

Rather than compulsory pronoun checks, the onus should be on cisgender people who are familiar with gender issues to volunteer their pronouns as a signal of allyship. Still, there are those who proudly

follow the convention of stating their pronouns at the beginning of some gathering, only to later utter some unfortunate ignorant or offensive comment about gender-variant people. The learning of the ritual has arguably replaced the learning of the social justice education that it is intended to precede. As a white, cisgender person who has been inducted into some contemporary norms of social justice education, I know that I am supposed to label myself as white and cisgender. But what else do I know, or not know, which may be relevant to the well-being of my peers and others?

The pronoun exercise, like other acts of self-positioning, quickly communicates some vaguely shared political agenda, or at least awareness of local conventions, but threatens to collapse questions of identity and social justice into pat conclusions. There are countless forms of oppression or exclusion that could operate in any given room, yet not be in need of explicit recognition, or not be associated with a convenient marker, such as a pronoun. The goal has to be educating people about identity-based oppression, especially when it affects the purposes for which a group has come together. Coerced statements of positionality are at best an indirect and impartial route to this end.

Self-positioning has also shown up in forms of printed scholarship, where authors tell the reader how they identify at the outset, as though to give the reader a roadmap for how to interpret what follows. The implication is that we ought to calibrate our credence for their argument in some proportion to the author's membership in relevant identity categories. The *who* is a limiting condition on the *what*. In some cases particular scholars may be shut out of a discussion because their identity deprives them of a legitimate motive for pursuing a topic; "because it is philosophically interesting and politically important" is apparently insufficient.<sup>22</sup> Yet, if a white cisgender scholar can say

something valuable about issues of gender or race, then it is unlikely to be exclusively in virtue of their self-awareness as a white cisgender person or exclusively in spite of it.

Our choices about how to position ourselves and how to select and interpret scholarly sources also give our students a tacit curriculum on what counts as “philosophy” and what is required for academic ethics. Teaching and research have evolved in concert with critical reflection on identity, and rightly so. In contrast to the canonical philosopher sorting through his reasoning alone, or in dialogue with other educated men, we may not approach philosophical questions about real people through detached circumspection alone. However, using more sources by, for example, trans, black, or other marginalized scholars, while undoubtedly a good idea, is no panacea either; it can displace the actual questions that are supposedly being raised in explorations of identity and social justice, not the least of which is: who can speak for an identity group?<sup>23</sup> It is re-essentializing and arguably appropriative to regard a marginalized identity group as one whose opinion can be sufficiently accounted for by piling on enough references. This, ironically, eclipses other aspects of the group members’ identities and re-constitutes a form of oppression that liberalism seeks to vanquish. Turning to those with different identities as a simple corrective for one’s own blind spots takes for granted the operations of power and epistemic authority that we are trying to solve in the first place.

The authority of lived experience may confer some epistemic gravitas to topics related to identity, but it does not resolve them. This is obvious from the fact that people with similar social locations do not agree on everything. The challenge is to address identity in ways that allow for generalizations without dehumanizing anyone.<sup>24</sup> As scholars and educators, locating ourselves with respect to the relevant social groupings is but a small step in the direction of social justice

education. It does not establish anyone's immunity from critique or inability to possess or acquire knowledge of a topic. In short, it is not so much a bridge as an acknowledgement of the gap.

### CONCLUSION: MIND THE GAP

Good teaching and scholarship require straddling the imperative of centering relevant voices in a conversation and the impossibility of doing so in any comprehensive and non-tokenizing manner. We need to say enough about who we are—and who we are not—to avoid the error of taking the majority experience, or whatever is familiar to us, as a stand-in for human experience; but we must do so without using identity—ours or anyone else's—as a stand-in for thinking rigorously about identity itself. Both conventional philosophy and its more critical variants have useful impulses that can be dangerously exaggerated. Philosophy's sin has traditionally been to hide behind supposedly neutral methods—or worse, to use “free speech” as an excuse to be provocative for its own sake—and critics are right to denounce such careless approaches. But rigid rules about who can speak or what words can be said only defer pressing philosophical and political challenges. As much as we want to dispel prejudice and abide by respectful norms, the test of healthy academic community cannot be unanimity among its members, or authority distributed on the basis of identity. Except in narrow circumstances, such as autobiographical narrative, identity alone does not constitute or verify any epistemic claims.

In the current climate, with our fractured discourses and accusations of political and academic failure, the metaphor of the bridge appears to be the solvent we desperately need. In this paper, I have argued that educational practices that promise to bridge identity-based differences, such as FPA and positionality, hold limited potential for resolving the kinds of deep differences that inspire animus. We are

unlikely to agree completely on how method and identity interact, though we can do a better job of avoiding extremes and respectfully acknowledging that the personal stakes are high. Bridges are aspirational. Perhaps a more realistic metaphor for our times is a modest sign: “Mind the Gap.”

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1 Justin Weinberg, “Trans Women in Philosophy: Learning from Recent Events,” *Daily Nous*, June 5, 2019, <http://dailynous.com/2019/06/05/trans-women-philosophy-learning-recent-events/>; Mark Lance, “Taking Trans Lives Seriously,” *Inside Higher Ed*, July 30, 2019, <http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2019/07/30/philosophers-should-recognize-serious-risks-trans-people-face-opinion>; 12 Leading Scholars, “Philosophers Should Not Be Sanctioned Over Their Positions on Sex and Gender,” *Inside Higher Ed*, July 22, 2019, <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2019/07/22/philosophers-should-not-be-sanctioned-their-positions-sex-and-gender-opinion>.

2 t philosopher, “I Am Leaving Academic Philosophy Because of its Transphobia Problem,” *Medium*, May 30, 2019, <https://medium.com/@transphilosopher33/i-am-leaving-academic-philosophy-because-of-its-transphobia-problem-bc618aa55712>.

3 In what follows, I will be using “analytic philosophy” to refer to most mainstream European and North American philosophy, except for the feminist and critical interventions that began to reshape that tradition in approximately the 1980s.

4 As examples, see John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London: Offor, 1819); Harry Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984).

5 “Philosophizing While Black,” *The 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue Project*, November 22, 2015, <https://www.stitcher.com/podcast/7-ave-project-kusp/the-7th-avenue-project-kus->

[p/c/41643256](http://p/c/41643256).

6 Talia Mae Bettcher, “‘When Tables Speak’: On the Existence of ‘Trans Philosophy,’” *Daily Nous*, May 30, 2018, <http://dailynous.com/2018/05/30/tables-speak-existence-trans-philosophy-guest-talia-mae-bettcher/>.

7 I take this form of writing to be something closer to autobiography.

8 Of course they can go coexist, as so many declarations of mixed-privilege-and-oppression suggest: “As a white, queer settler. . .” or “As a black, able-bodied woman. . .”

9 Brie Gertler, “Self-Knowledge,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Zalta (Fall 2017 Edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/self-knowledge/>; Talia Mae Bettcher, “Trans Identities and First-Person Authority,” in *You’ve Changed: Sex Reassignment and Personal Identity*, ed. Laurie Shrage (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

10 Richard Nisbett and Timothy DeCamp Wilson, “Telling More than We Can Know: Verbal Reports on Mental Processes,” *Psychological Review* 84, no. 3 (1977).

11 For a distinction between attitudinal states and phenomenal states, see Bettcher, “Trans Identities.”

12 Ian Hacking, “Kinds of People: Moving Targets,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 151 (2007).

13 Hacking, “Kinds of People.”

14 Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

15 Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

16 Fricker’s (2007) category of “heuristic” injustice also affects people on the basis of their identity; see Rachel McKinnon, “Allies Behaving Badly,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*, eds. Ian James Kidd, José Medina, & Gaile Pohlhaus

(New York: Routledge, 2017).

17 Joan Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (1991): 797.

18 Bettcher, "Trans Identities," 110.

19 To be more precise, it is not a lack of FPA that is declared when I say, for example, that I am *not* trans. I retain FPA over my gender identity—in this case, cisgender. What I lack is first-person experience of a particular marginalized identity and any attendant knowledge that is only available to those who have it.

20 For another critique along the lines of what I present here, see Anthony Appiah, "Speak for Yourself," *The New York Times*, August 10, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/10/opinion/sunday/speak-for-yourself.html>.

21 Similar critiques could be leveraged against indigenous land acknowledgements, which have become more perfunctory as they have become more ubiquitous.

22 The most fraught recent example in philosophy concerned Rebecca Tuvel's article "In Defense of Transracialism," *Hypatia* 32, no. 2 (2017). For analysis, see Lisa Duggan, "Hypatia and Cultures of Critique," *Bully Bloggers*, May 6, 2017, <https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2017/05/06/another-day/>.

23 For high-profile examples of racial minority representatives who have been "unmasked," see Chris McGreal, "Rachel Dolezal: 'I Wasn't Identifying as Black to Upset People. I Was Being Me,'" *The Guardian*, December 13, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/dec/13/rachel-dolezal-i-wasnt-identifying-as-black-to-upset-people-i-was-being-me>; Eric Andrew-Gee, "The Making of Joseph Boyden," *The Globe and Mail*, August 4, 2017, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/joseph-boyden/article35881215/>.

24 Jacob Hale provides a useful checklist of things to consider, if also inadvertently illustrating how rapidly the vernacular can change. Jacob Hale, "Suggested Rules for Non-Transsexuals Writing about Transsexuals, Transsexuality, Transsexualism, or Trans\_\_\_," November 18, 2009, <https://sandystone.com/hale.rules.html>.