

## **Research Ethics: Islam, Diaspora and Gender**

Philosophy's role in the ethical problems of interdisciplinary research is more interestingly metaethical than ethical in the standard sense. When we speak of philosophers directing the ethical dimensions of a project, we think of what ought and what ought not to be done. Often more challenging are questions about what we are doing when we are examining ethical questions, about what such questions mean and imply. I have identified four ethical issues involved in research of the sort we are now undertaking. I have tried to articulate the issues and to explain the insights that motivate the arguments. Often we accomplish more by raising a question clearly and showing its importance, than by providing answers. I attempt here to raise some questions that we can usefully keep in view in this project.

### **\* Voice and Authority**

The first issue is about who speaks and with what authority. There is an insight that is crucial to research about social justice that has to do with the privileged perspective of the oppressed. A woman is better positioned to identify and interpret sexism than a man, and a person of colour is more likely to understand racism than is a white person. Men, for instance, may fail to be aware of sexist practices simply because they do not run up against them in daily life. There are two insights here, one about the nature of understanding and the other about the nature of persons.

The first, the epistemological point, has been developed by Marxist theorists as well as by feminists, although it also has important sources in recent philosophy of science. The general idea is that when we understand the world, we rely upon expectations and background beliefs. We understand the world from a particular perspective and if we do not possess certain expectations and concepts, we can look at phenomena in the world and just not see them. Politically, this point implies that if I am privileged in some ways, I do not see the complexities of injustice. I do not see what it means in the lives of those affected, even if I care to. Only someone whose life expectations are different, because she is relevantly different, will be able to identify such practices as discriminatory ones. The specific epistemological point, sometimes referred to as the importance of the "view from below" (Haraway) is that if a society is systemically discriminatory, we may not see some people as existing as persons at all - the problem of invisibility. Anthropologist Levi Strauss wrote in his report "The whole village left, leaving us alone with the women and children in the abandoned houses". Evidently Levi Strauss did not expect the women or children to be people. Yet if someone exists from that invisible position, she can encounter, and identify the error in, the expectation. Thus, Celie in *The Color Purple*, after she's told that she's nothing because she's poor, black and a woman retorts "I'm pore, I'm black, I'm a woman .... But I'm here".

The second insight has to do with the nature of persons, more specifically, of the self-understanding of persons, and is a more deeply seated intuition of liberal philosophy. The idea is that the individual herself has direct access to her thoughts and feelings. I am the one who knows what I experience and I am best able to interpret my experiences. This idea is fundamental to a number of liberal philosophical conceptions of autonomy, respect for rights and of the relation between individuals and the state. For instance, it is taken to be uncontroversial by some that "every life goes better lived from the inside, with true beliefs" and that "no life goes better lived from the outside, according to beliefs that are not endorsed" (Kymlicka). The intuition about the primacy of individuals' perspectives on their own experience is important. People who are living a certain social reality are usually better positioned to identify that reality, and to make decisions about it. It is true of course that, as an individual, I have a certain stake in defining my own path, and in doing so on the basis of my own interpretations, even if I am wrong.

The important insight, then, is the primacy of the individual perspective, in particular, recognition of the privileged perspective of the oppressed. We should, without doubt, acknowledge the importance of these insights. The question is about what follows from these intuitions for researchers investigating the

situations of people whose lives and cultures are relevantly different from our own. There is an assumption that, as a privileged researcher, I cannot be justified in criticizing the evaluative perspective of the less privileged person, especially when I do not share her culture. If someone says that a traditional practice is not damaging to her, who am I to dispute that? Thus, it is sometimes assumed that because people possess a privileged perspective on their own experiences, and on those of their own group, there are no good grounds for respectfully criticizing that perspective from outside the group. And it is assumed that if I, as an investigator, suggest, or judge, that someone is mistaken about her experiences, I am patronizing that person and perhaps even robbing her of her autonomy. When the rhetorical response, "Who's to say?" is offered, the suggested implication is that one ought not to say, that one ought not to take authority in such a case. The investigator, correctly aware of the power of her position as investigator, may assume that in order to be acting respectfully toward the person whose situation is of interest, she should not make evaluative judgments about what is being expressed.

There are three reasons for thinking that it does not follow from insights about the privileged perspective of the oppressed and the primacy of the individual perspective that there are not good reasons for thinking that someone can be wrong about the nature and evaluation of their own personal experiences. The first reason is that such a response, by the investigator, is much too easy. It absolves us of making judgments about almost any issue or situation. If we cannot be justified in criticizing a situation in which we do not participate, we absolve ourselves of any responsibility toward acquiring proper understanding of that situation. We are only responsible for that which directly affects us personally. Such a conclusion is counterintuitive. For one thing, if we accept it, we should give up the commitment that motivated the insight about the privileged perspective of the oppressed in the first place. Namely, that it matters that we understand the experience of those whose experiences, because of difference, are invisible to us, moreover, that it matters to us personally.

A second reason for thinking the conclusion does not follow is that people's expectations for themselves can become diminished as a result of the social expectations informing their lives. People can come to accept injustices for themselves if those injustices are considered normal. If it follows from the fact that you experience your life as happy and fulfilling, that your life is in fact happy and fulfilling, then I can justify oppressing you as long as I can be successful in beating you down sufficiently and coercing you psychologically so that you think you are happy and fulfilled. If it is true that as long as you think you are doing well, you really are doing well, then it would follow that to the extent that a state is successful in indoctrinating its people about the benefits of oppressive, repressive policies, it can claim with good reason to be acting in the interests of its people.

A third reason for resisting the conclusion that the privileged researcher should remain critically removed, and listen, has to do with respect, and what it means and requires. When we respect people as equals, we engage with them. If I respect you, for one thing, I assume that you have at least as much intelligence and ability to reason as I do. So if you say something that sounds implausible, I assume that it is not in fact implausible and if it strikes me that way, I must be missing something. So I ask for an explanation because the implausibility, given my expectations about you, is surprising to me. If we respect people whose backgrounds and traditions we do not share, we expect their views also to make sense, to express at least as much intelligence as we ourselves possess. Thus, if the views expressed do not strike us that way, we ask questions, directly of the person or indirectly by researching other sources, expecting that something had been missed. The asking of questions, whether or not they are addressed to the individual, assumes a critical perspective. If we respect people, we engage with them and their situation on the assumption that they, as equals, can provide defense and explanation. When we do not engage critically with a view, it is sometimes because we assume that the view has no defense, that it is something less than a reasoned-out view.

There is an error involved in drawing from premises about the privileged perspective of the oppressed and the primacy of the individual, the conclusion that, as researchers, we should not take evaluative authority over information provided by interviewees. The logical error here has to do with the significance of the origins of beliefs, and the distinction between the origins of a belief and its justification. It is true that individuals possess a privileged perspective as regards their own experience.

But it may not be true that this privileged perspective provides adequate justification for the specific views expressed. The philosophical error here is called the "genetic fallacy". It is the error of confusing the origins of a belief with the grounds for its justification: A belief may come from an unreliable source but this does not, by itself, mean that the belief is false. It may come from a reliable source and be false. We should acknowledge the privileged perspective of the oppressed, but that privileged perspective by itself does not mean the beliefs expressed are reliable. This is simplistic and, in some cases, irresponsible.

There are several ethical risks. One is that additional dimensions of an issue are too easily dismissed and we fail to ask appropriate questions about the grounds for positions. At the Summit of the Americas, the Mexican President made the unfortunate remark that the protestors were just well-fed white kids, suggesting that the make-up of the group of people protesting provided sufficient reason to reject the validity of the protests. Even if it were the case that the protesters were mostly white and well-off, and even if it turned out that they were mistaken in their views, further evidence and argument would be required to support the claim that they were mistaken because they were white and well-off. The Mexican President dismissed the protesters on the basis of a judgment about the relevance of differences between North and South. But in doing so, he characterized the situation in a way that obscured the role of class interests that cut across North/South divisions. Importantly he relied upon his "privileged" perspective to dismiss from consideration the substance of the arguments of the protestors.

A second risk is that we do not take responsibility for the position on the basis of which we already attribute greater authority to some views over others. To ask "who's to say?" as if we are not, and cannot be, qualified to judge the relative merits of the positions involved is somewhat ingenuous. For in resisting critical engagement, we have already made such a judgment of authority, leaving unacknowledged and unexamined the role of social expectations in making some views more understandable than others. We sometimes think that, as investigators, we should refrain from making value judgments because we possess power over the people whose situation is being investigated. But when we attribute authority to a position because of some particular feature of the person's position, we are already making an evaluative judgment that structures the investigation and its interpretation. We need to take responsibility for the judgments we make and our relationship to them. We are already involved and we already exercise power. We need to be honest about our involvement and take appropriate moral and theoretical responsibility for it.

### **\* Generalizations and Particular Stories**

There is an issue about the role of generalizations and the implications for particular stories. This issue has arisen in political contexts in several ways. One way in which it has arisen is described as a concern about "essentialism". There is a view that when we make generalizations about, for instance, women, we make assumptions about the application of the general term "women" that rules out of the realm of consideration the experience of women of less privileged groups. So, famously, the claim of some decades ago, that the problem for women is to get out of the house was offensive to many black women whose problem was that they had always had to work in other people's houses, as domestics. The worry about "essentialism" is, supposedly, that when we rely upon a category such as "women", we assume a fixed set of properties that defines all women. But of course there is no fixed set of properties possessed by all women. There will always be someone who is in fact a woman who does not possess all of the qualities. Perhaps, also, there will be someone with all the specified qualities who is not in fact a woman.

This problem of fixed sets of properties has been much discussed also as regards natural kinds - the essences of species, for instance. If we think that there is a set of properties that defines cats, we will surely find something that is a cat that does not have all the properties, or something with all the properties that is not a cat. One of the problems with natural kinds, of course, is that species evolve and their defining properties change. We might think that this means that species have no essences. Alternatively, more promisingly, we might conclude that we have been mistaken about the fixedness of essential properties. Although the literature on natural kinds has explored reconceptualization of essences,

the political literature, perhaps largely because of the influence of post-modernism, has continued to conflate the implausibility of fixed, permanent essences with the undesirability of abstract, generalizing concepts. The worry, then, is that when we make generalizations about "women", we preclude the proper appreciation of women's differences. For in assuming the category "women", we presume a fixed set of properties defining all women, and such properties, as defining ones, are bound to be determined by practical and theoretical traditions expressing the arbitrary privileging of some groups of women, and the invisibility of others. The question is whether in fact essences are necessarily fixed permanent sets of characteristics, and what is implied by rejecting such a view.

Another version of the problem of generalizations has to do with theory, and the role of dominant interests and ideologies in general theories. The worry about "essentialism" as regards categories is that if we assume a general category, the role of dominant interests will lead us to pick out properties characteristic of the more privileged members of that category. Thus, "women" tends in practice to pick out white, middle-class women. Similarly, if we construct general theories about women's oppression, say, the role of dominant interests and dominant ideologies will lead us to misrepresent, diminish or make invisible the experience of Third World women. The worry is that generalizations are influenced by dominant traditions and lead us to disregard phenomena or people that are not traditionally recognized. The assumption is that general theories have an absolute quality to them and reliance upon generalizations "dictates" interpretations of experience in a way that works against concerns about social justice. Some feminists have referred to the commitment toward generalizing terms, claims or theories as constituting "tyrannical epistemologies" (Code). The important response to such worries is that particular, personal stories about lives and cultures provide a critical basis for dislodging assumptions directed by dominant traditions and interests.

Our observations and interpretations of our experience are rooted in practical and theoretical traditions and for this reason we do not easily see or give importance to the dimensions of social reality, locally or globally, that are the subject of concerns about social justice. It has become theoretically important to tell, hear and politically recognize personal stories told from alternative perspectives. The response to worries about the role in theorizing of dominant, distorting ideologies has been emphasis on particular experiences, including emotional experiences, through personal stories. The problem is that when we consider which personal stories are significant in criticizing "generalizing" concepts and theories, we do in fact rely upon general concepts and theories. For instance, we don't think that just any personal story is critically interesting; rather, we think that some stories are significant because such stories ought not to be excluded because they are relevant to our specific understanding. Thus, when we judge that certain stories ought not to be excluded, we assume that their exclusion is wrong for particular reasons related to specific goals for understanding. These are generalizing claims of a broad sort. The personal stories that are interesting are those that reflect difference but the differences we are interested in, in trying to understand consequences or causes of injustice, are those differences that are relevant to that concern. And in order to identify relevant differences, we do in fact make generalizing "essentialist" claims of all sorts.

Toni Morrison, for instance, has written stories from the perspective of black women in the United States. The telling of such stories has been critically important because American racism has made black women invisible. But when Toni Morrison describes how she came to begin telling her particular stories, she describes a process of acquiring awareness of the whole picture and a judgment about the general nature of the big picture of American literature. When she first read American literature she thought that the blacks just were not there in the picture. It was only when she became a writer herself and learned about how meanings are created through stories that she saw that the blacks are in fact present in the classics of American literature. They are present, but they are present in a way that suggests that they ought not to be present. For they are present without names, without physical descriptions, without voice. It was when Morrison understood that American literature as a whole was racist in this way, and judged moreover that it was wrong that American literature be so, that she began to tell stories in the way that she did.

According to Morrison, the telling of the particular stories, in the critically effective way that she tells them, is dependent upon a generalized understanding of American literature and American society. The problem here is that a mistaken understanding of the nature of general concepts and theories is confused with the idea that general concepts and theories are themselves mistaken. It is true that when we rely upon general concepts and theories, we make a mistake if we take such concepts and theories to be absolutist, that is, to be fixed and unrevisable. For then we disregard the empirical evidence before us. But general concepts and theories do not have to be absolute, unrevisable. Biologists do generally assume that species have essences. However, the properties defining a species essence are not fixed. The philosophical mistake has been to set in opposition reliance upon general concepts and theories, and the importance of particular stories, whereas in fact the importance of particular stories depends upon definite, normative judgments of a general sort. The ethical error, similar to the risk identified above, is that in assuming such an opposition, we fail to take responsibility for and to critically examine the general claims we are presupposing. We absolve ourselves of responsibility. We do make general claims relying upon abstract general concepts. We need to acknowledge that we do, take up the question of what this means and do the work of critically examining our generalized beliefs and concepts.

### **\* Responsibility for the Story**

There is a popular liberal view about the virtues of the "cultural marketplace" (e.g. Kymlicka). The idea is that if the information is available, and people are free to deliberate as equals, the best ideas will eventually win out. Many feminists are inclined toward the Habermasian "ideal speech" notion according to which, roughly, the idealized process on the basis of which differences can be resolved is one characterized by dialogue under fair conditions. The suggestion is that if we could identify fair conditions for dialogue among rational deliberators, we would have reason to think that the resulting resolutions fairly represent those who participate. The motivation behind such views is that it is wrong to impose values and priorities upon a society, for everyone's life goes best when directed by values that individuals themselves have endorsed. This view is appealing for reasons described in the first point above. Choice is a good and self-determination is a good. And often, we do not consider the complicating issues involved in the ways in which choices become appropriately meaningful. There is a worry, by some, that "master-theories", "metanarratives", and what Code calls "tyrannical epistemologies" are a threat because these stories impose meaningfulness and undermine free choice.

The naivety involved in the "cultural marketplace" and "dialogic" views, as well as in resistance to "meta-narratives", "tyrannical epistemologies", and so on, is that if it is recognized, as it is by those who make the latter arguments, that a society is systemically unjust, then it should be recognized that society is already "tyrannized" by an inadequate sort of imposed worldview. For what it means for injustice to be systemic is that such injustice is expressed in the norms and values of a society, making injustices acceptable. Choice and self-determination depend upon self-concept. I choose something, as imposed to just happening to bring it about, when I conceive of myself in relationship to the event. And if one's self-conception is already structured in certain ways by degrading sorts of social expectations, one's free choices are already undermined.

Toni Morrison, for one, has written that the American Dream, which expresses a moral vision, is a racist dream. If the existing national story, the existing meta-narrative, is already unjust, then the dialogue taking place within it - the "cultural marketplace", so to speak - is already regulated by an imposed view, that has not been endorsed, because it is barely even recognized. Moreover, in order to challenge a dominating worldview, there must be political work, as has been the case for the American Dream. For national stories, such as the American Dream, are not just stories of an intellectual sort. Such stories provide and constitute national identities, which can be strong and influential. There are two points here: One is that there already exists a single story dominating other stories, and generating formative expectations, in the "cultural marketplace", so that the market is not relevantly free. The second point is that national stories are not just intellectual issues; they are identities, and challenging them requires more than reasons and argument.

Consider the following anecdote from Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*: Once upon a time the leopard who had been trying for a long time to catch the tortoise happened upon him on solitary road. AHA, he said; at long last, prepare to die. And the tortoise said: Can I ask one favour before you kill me? The leopard saw no harm in that and granted it. But instead of standing still as the leopard expected the tortoise went into strange action on the road, scratching with hands and feet and throwing sand furiously in all directions. Why are you doing that? asked the puzzled leopard. The tortoise replied because even after I am dead I want anyone passing by this spot to say, yes, a fellow and his match struggled here. In Achebe's story, the tortoise doesn't fight for his own existence. He knows he's going to die. But the tortoise is concerned about the story that will be told. What story is told makes a difference to what more can be understood and acted upon in the future. Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* is a novel about democracy. It suggests that more important than politics is control of the story. There are some who rush to battle and some who tell the story afterward. Some think it is easy to control the story. According to Achebe's elderly storyteller, they are fools.

We often assume that democracy is about choice, about capacity to choose. Achebe's anecdote suggests that more important than availability of choices, or capacity to choose them, is control of the story that determines the credibility of choices, which determines whether we can expect choices to be important as choices of a certain sort, for us as choosers of a certain sort. The story that the tortoise wants told is a story about sameness: A fellow and his match struggled here. The tortoise expects that a story will be told about the likeness between himself and the fox. The tortoise fights for a story about unity, about similarities. It has been important to be appreciative of differences. But it is important to recognise that differences are always relative to similarities. If blacks and gays are "different", it is because what makes people "the same" is to be white and heterosexual. If being white were not characteristic of the sameness of "people", non-white people would not be considered different in the relevant sense, that is, as regards being people. Achebe's point, in the anecdote, is that the story of sameness, of unifying identity, the single story, is more important for democracy, for the control of one's destiny, than the political struggles around particular differences. The ethical issue depends upon the fact that we always interpret the world in terms of moral, political, historical, ontological and epistemological stories that we are often unaware of. Not only is it important that we acknowledge and take responsibility for such stories; it is also important that we realize that it is hard to do so and that it requires political struggle of an organized self-conscious sort.

### **\* Definitions**

There is often discussion in interdisciplinary research about what we mean by central concepts. We might insist, for the sake of the research, on agreement about the issue of how we are to understand, say, "diaspora". Or we may decide for the sake of the research that it ought not be defined. On the other hand, it sometimes happens that, for the sake of investigation, there is insistence that a term not be defined, moreover that it not be used. This has been the case with some terms in feminist theory, such as "autonomy" and even, occasionally, "rationality". There is an ethical issue involved in decisions to define or not to define central concepts. For when we decide to define a term specifically, we decide to take a position about the specific direction of research. If we decide to define a term, we express confidence in the current theoretical resources and in our perspective upon them. We are making a judgment that in fact the perspective is not in fact in question, and that we are in a position to insist upon specific criteria from the perspective that we now occupy. Sometimes, for instance, it is not appropriate to insist upon a specific definition because it is recognised that the appropriate referent of the term is dependent upon the results of empirical investigation, which is still to be undertaken. In science, for instance, research can be carried out effectively in awareness that the referent of the term is still to be discovered. This was the case, for instance, with "black holes". There was something there to be theorized about, but it would not have been appropriate to define the object of investigation. That would have been a theoretical error because the resources were not available and could not be expected to be available.

To insist prematurely upon a definition can constitute a failure to recognise the importance of the object of investigation. If someone were to insist prematurely that the term "black holes" be precisely defined, one might think such a person had failed to recognise the complexity of the investigation and the importance of that complexity. Interestingly, Armando Hart argues that the biggest mistake made by the leaders of socialist revolutions in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union was not to have taken up seriously the task of redefining terms like "human rights", "freedom" and "civil society". How could the failure to redefine concepts be a bigger mistake than all the other mistakes made by the Soviet Union? Philosopher of science Ian Hacking points out that social and human kinds, that describe people and behaviour, have implications for how people understand themselves and for how they behave. For instance, when the term "sexual harassment" was introduced, many women were able to identify disturbing behaviour in the workplace for what it was - wrong! This had consequences for self-confidence. Hacking suggests that social and human kinds have a "looping effect" upon ways of being. The understanding of such terms loops back upon us and affects our existence and behaviour. Hart seems to be suggesting that because terms like "human rights" and "freedom" were not redefined and claimed, they were not able to be motivating in practice and theory in the way that they might have been.

Jorge Luis Arcanda also emphasises the prime ethical importance of redefining. In his view, the tendency in Cuba, for instance, has been either to reject certain concepts - like "civil society"- altogether, and to say that, not being a Marxist concept, it does not apply, or to use the concept but to use it in the same way as in liberal debates, with the same meaning. If the concept is rejected, there is no debate about the issue in question and no way to treat changes as part of a process toward greater democracy or freedom. And if the term is used in the same way, it also works against progress because it just turns out that there isn't any such thing as civil society, democracy or freedom, and so not much hope in pursuing or improving these phenomena. The failure to redefine terms, according to Luis Arcanda, has resulted in the promotion and strengthening of the liberal ideology, and a weakening of resistance to it.

Because of the "essentialist" problem mentioned above, it is often assumed we cannot engage critically with social or human categories. It is recognized that social or human kinds, unlike or at least differently from natural kinds, cannot be defined precisely, and that it is a mistake to look for precise sets of categories. It is also recognized that social or human kinds involve us in the way that Hacking describes. It is then concluded that social or human kinds can be used in whatever way we choose. It is often concluded from such premises that "anything goes". This is a mistake. Sometimes it is suggested that because the term "feminist", say, has no fixed definition, it follows that as long as someone thinks she is a feminist, she is a feminist. Or people say that because "sexual harassment" has no fixed definition, as long as someone thinks she has suffered sexual harassment, she has indeed suffered sexual harassment. But although it is indeed the case that there exists no fixed set of properties defining these phenomena, it is certainly the case that I can say on the basis of reason and evidence that someone is using the term incorrectly. I don't need to think there is a fixed definition for "feminist" in order to judge that, say, it is not the case that being a feminist requires hating men.

We must distinguish between the requirement that social and human kinds be defined permanently and precisely and the expectation that there are good reasons for applying such terms in some cases and not in others. It is true that such terms do not possess fixed definitions, applicable to all situations at all times. It does not follow that there are not non-arbitrary criteria for deciding that a term is being applied incorrectly. It is in fact the case that a person can be mistaken in thinking that a certain behaviour constitutes sexual harassment, even if she believes it very strongly. We do in fact rely upon empirical evidence in arguing that what is believed to be sexual harassment is not in fact sexual harassment. And if this is the case, then there do exist non-arbitrary criteria for applying the term in some cases and not in others even though there is no fixed "essentialist" definition. In short, definitions raise ethical issues because what we do with them constitutes a commitment to a direction. Decisions about defining a term or not are also, in some cases, judgments about importance of the research, and in other cases, judgments about the adequacy of a current theoretical or practical perspective. That is, decisions about redefining a term can express a commitment or not to critical engagement. There are also, as above, issues about responsibility. The argument that "anything goes" is often irresponsible and can be used to

resist the hard, sometimes uncomfortable, work of examining theoretical and empirical grounds for the use of a term.

Susan Babbitt  
Dept. of Philosophy  
Queen's University