

(Dis)locating Gender Within the Universal: Teaching Philosophy Through Narrative

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Philosophy and its Other

This paper is about the opposition between narrative and philosophy, two distinct discursive practices that have historically been defined as being at odds with one another since the inception of Greek philosophy as rational discourse. Within our own narrative of the history of Western philosophy, we trace this opposition back to the pre-Socratic celebration of reason over myth, at which point, according to this account, primitive or naive narrative explanations of phenomena were supplanted by the dialectic of reason. “Man” began to ask the abstract “what is ...” question in lieu of the previous narrative “who is...” question. Socrates became the namesake for this philosophical tradition and banished the epic poets from the Republic because they failed to embrace the ideal of reason. Stories, Plato argued, threatened rational discourse because they were grounded in the mess of the particular, whereas philosophy aspired to generality and universal truths. Narrative was seen as limited by its univocal aspect, its need for a telling and a listening. It was temporally located in the present, with emphasis on distinct personal incidents of the past, and was therefore caught up in unique life histories, all too particular for those needing the certainty of a universal truth. Derrida (1993) argues that philosophy needs to define itself against this other—narrative—so as to affirm its own centrality and necessity. Philosophical discourse, according to Derrida, is dependent on this other dis-

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course precisely because it must exclude the specificity of stories so as to claim for itself knowledge of universals.

The feminist philosopher, Adriana Cavarero (2000) uses Greek tragedy to show that the opposition between narrative and philosophy is always an enactment of gender relations. She claims that the exclusion or suppression of narrative, to which Derrida refers, is implicated in the exclusion of the feminine from the discourse of philosophy:

In other words, the tragedy of the originary scission between the universal man and the uniqueness of the self, between the abstraction of the subject and the concreteness of the uniqueness—in a word, between the discursive order of philosophy and that of narration—is an entirely masculine tragedy...The discourse on the universal, with its love of the abstract and its definitory logic, is always a matter for men only. (pp. 52–53)

The feminine, according to Cavarero, is discursively constituted as the concrete, the particular, the narratable self, that Other which philosophy seeks to redeem through the universal. She is not essentializing the feminine, but rather historicizing it within the tradition of “rational discourse”. Gender and power relations are thus enacted through the continual re-establishment of this discursive opposition between narrative and reason.

This paper attempts to disrupt the binary between these two discursive practices, and to examine the ways in which gender figures in the continued re-construction of the binary, by exploring the lived experience of a female high school philosophy teacher in a same sex school. I have used a narrative format so as to problematize the primacy of philosophical discourse, and as a means of depicting the subtle ways in which gender is inscribed onto/through the structuring of this discursive opposition. The narrative is crafted as a series of fragments which shift the focus back and forth between classroom incidents to journal entries to biographical information. The result is a more polyvocal text that playfully explores different perspectives. Crafting the narrative into a fiction in this way fronts its textuality or fabrication, and in doing so, compounds the problem faced by philosophy when it confronts narrative.

I ask that the reader use this narrative as a literary piece that invites speculation on the intersections between epistemology, gender, and historical context, and as a teacher’s story that aims to generate debate as to how these three discursive frames produce (and are produced by) specific instances of pedagogy. My hope is that this text might be used as a teaching tool in pre-service social science method courses in order to facilitate discussion around teacher identity and the re-contextualizing of knowledge into life history frames, and recursively, the embedding of life history into knowledge frames. The juxtaposition of narrative and philosophical dis-

course is intended to breach the binary that sustains their opposition by locating and documenting the lived experience of that same opposition. The narrative also seeks to expose some of the dissonance experienced by teachers in a post-foundational world of dialogic meaning where pedagogies of discomfort seem to be the best strategy for disrupting the Socratic harnessing of knowledge. Boler and Zembylas (2003) describe the emotional labour involved in a “pedagogy of discomfort” through which both students and educators learn to embrace the vulnerability of ambiguity (p. 129). They point to the assemblage of “vulnerability *and* hope, labor *and* passion, anger *and* self-discovery” (p. 130) that emerge in the critical encounter between teacher and student. The story included here is a testament to that emotional and embodied experience of a teacher struggling to devise a means of sustaining the provisional sense of learning as “becoming” in such a way that she honours the personal and political complexity of the context. In order to model that purpose in the very structure of the narrative, I have used a series of fragments that resist closure, disrupting the reader’s comfort, interrupting any illusion of mastery, so as to play with/ in the limits of telling such stories, and to push the limits of my own intentions.

For those wanting more substantial scaffolding, I offer the following as a set of guiding questions, not to be used as “what is...” questions that aim for generalizable answers, but rather used as catalysts and triggers that might encourage one to perform the suggested act upon the text—to interfere with it in a more structured way. Each of the three categories offers a set of instructions that are intended to help the reader identify the crafted or fabricated nature of the text. I have included them here in order to assist in the use of the narrative as a teaching tool, however, I realize there may be readers who find them too prescriptive, and I encourage these readers to set aside the instructions and pursue the unique particularity of a reading informed by nothing other than a “who is ...” question.

- (1) Epistemology: How does the re-storying of epistemology breach its claim to universality?

Find the references to theories of knowledge and compare these in terms of the binary between philosophical discourse and narrative. Examine the verbs used in relation to reading philosophy. Look for metaphors that suggest bodily encounters between ideas.

- (2) Gender: List the places where gender is enacted and name the way it is positioned with respect to power relations. Scrutinize the depictions of the female students for signs of gender. Note the use of pronouns in the various biographical anecdotes. Why are all the men angry?

- (3) Historical Context: Identify the specific points in the narrative when a philosophical idea is re-contextualized. Describe the ways in which this re-contextualizing alters its meaning. What is lost in these instances? What is gained? To what end?

Who She Was When She Knew

The instructor Holly arrives late, as usual. She feels agitated, restless, moving quickly into the margins of the classroom where her desk is tucked away, almost hidden, and from where she can watch the students without their knowing. She pauses momentarily. She can feel the growing anticipation with each moment, the learned-waiting for a well-delivered lesson. A sense of frustration and regret clouds her thoughts as she realizes that she too must have contributed to their sedate expectancy. She remembers the first few classes when she established her expertise and thereby demoted their active voices.

She walks amongst them and distributes the following quote from Nietzsche (1976):

There are no educators. As a thinker, one should speak only of self-education. The education of youth by others is either an experiment, conducted on one as yet unknown and unknowable, or a leveling on principle, to make the new character, whatever it may be, conform to the habits and customs that prevail: in both cases, therefore, something unworthy of the thinker—the work of parents and teachers, whom an audaciously honest person has called *nos ennemis naturels*. (p. 70)

She wonders whether to anchor the aphorism with a teacher explanation, or risk saying nothing. She hopes that at least one student will make copies and paste the irreverent Nietzsche in all the bathroom stalls. She is encouraged by their look of engagement with the textual fragment. She wants them to make her vulnerable. She wants them to use Nietzsche against her. She needs to use a cult figure like Nietzsche, with a certain mystique amongst high school students, to de-center her own authority. She is unsure as to whether this invitation to radically subvert her authority actually robs the students of their power to dismiss her. She wonders if she has simply repositioned herself in some other safely ensconced epistemic location.

She watches as the students turn the little scrap paper over to see if there is more on the other side.

“That’s a bit juvenile,” suggests one student, crumpling up her forehead and crossing her outstretched legs, “The truth is that I learn more from tv than I do from my parents and my teachers.” She leaves her mouth slightly open and stares at Holly, waiting for the response. Holly’s fantasy of Nietzsche triggering an act of civil disobedience within the all-female and highly obedient student population is suddenly dashed.

Holly never read Nietzsche during adolescence, although her closest male friends did. They all liked his radical rejection of culturally sanctioned truths. Instead she read Plato. Lots of Plato. She found Nietzsche too dismissive, and she worried that his rants appealed all too easily to boys and Nazis. She didn't want to impose her juvenile reading onto his adult anguish. She denied herself Nietzsche, saving him for later. Poor Nietzsche would never have approved of such righteous self-denial, but perhaps he would have endorsed her self-subversion years later as a high school philosophy teacher.

She glances at the clock and decides to begin the lesson. They are studying knowledge. The nature of knowledge. They began with basic analytical questions: How do you know what you know? What is the difference between information and knowledge? Are the emotions always involved in the act of knowing? What do you know best? What is ignorance? The course is structured around ideas and also around the history of philosophy. They have recently traced Western epistemology back to Plato.

"We are currently in the cave," says Holly, in reference to the excerpt from Plato's *Republic*, "shackled and blinded by our ignorance. We perceive only appearances and know nothing about the true essence of reality."

One student yawns. Another demands access to reality (after raising her hand), "the desk is a desk. It's a wooden desk. I know that."

Holly counters, "Perhaps the desk is actually a collection of stumbling atoms and fuzzy electrons," she smiles, "Perhaps our perceptual skills are so weak, our ignorance so deep, that we don't see the true desk, we see only the wooden desk." She walks towards an empty desk at the front of the class and pauses beside it, wondering if the absent student has skipped class.

Another student, with more invested in the classroom and its reality, reacts emotionally to Holly's provocation, "My friendship with Lisa is real. It has to be," she announces. Holly, fascinated by the spontaneous turn from material object to social relation, from neutral observation to normative demand, reflects on the profound webbing of identity in an all female high school. In her journal, she remembers her own youth:

I remember suspecting that my very being was completely accidental and unnecessary. At sixteen, I imagined that my own identity was a series of self-generated portraits, all equally plausible, equally inauthentic; all in conflict. I spoke derisively about naive people who actually thought they possessed a centered constant self that endured through time. (Holly's journal, May, 2001)

She read Plato's *Republic* in her first university philosophy course. The young professor frequently showed his frustration with the apparent lack of rigour during classroom discussion. He appreciated Holly's fine honed analytic

mind and asked her out for drinks. She said no, instinctively, without hesitation. She remembered later in class, when she expressed self-doubt about her understanding of some issue, like human will or freedom, he replied, "Socrates is interested in friendships and relationships. In why we enter into them. Or don't. That is your freedom."

I loved Socrates, despite all his foibles. He was so determined to undermine the pat truisms of his compatriots. He was the consummate teacher, I thought, always earnest and prudent. I imagined him as the embodiment of intellectual commitment. And although I knew better even then, I was nonetheless intrigued by his image of a utopian society where children were taken from their mothers at birth and given an education according to their ability. The entire system aspired to such a perfect ideal of reasoned culture. (Holly's journal, May, 2001)

She assigns *The Last Days of Socrates*. Each group selects one of the four dialogues which recount the incidents leading to the trial and the suicide. She brings in a colour laserprint copy of Jacques Louis-David's *The Death of Socrates*, in which the bearded sage raises the cup of hemlock to his mouth, surrounded by his distraught and loyal pupils. Despite the fact that it is Plato's account that is most famous (although there are other dialogues on the incident recorded by other devout followers), there is some suspicion as to whether Plato was even present at the trial and death of Socrates. Nonetheless, he is present in the painting, his face buried forlornly in his white robe, while the wailing wife and her attendants are seen exiting the scene, having been asked to leave so that Socrates might share his last moments with his thinking male friends.

"Why doesn't he just take the banishment option? He didn't have to take his own life. They gave him a way out." asks a student.

"But was it an option he could take? To be silenced?" Holly asks, perhaps too aggressively. "In taking his own life, he became a martyr. He made reason a martyr, sacrificed by the mob rule of Athenian democracy." She thinks maybe she has said too much. Demos versus reason. Democracy versus geometry. Is she really willing to develop this notion in a school that once dedicated itself to preparing young ladies for service and marriage?

"You mean he's had more impact this way because we read him in school?" asks the same student.

"And more. Think of how we rank analytic and deductive reasoning above story telling and poetry. Think of how logic defines the borders of intelligence. Think of how your future success at university depends on your mimicking his dialectic of question and answer. Think of..." she stalls, unable to bear the burden of a pedagogy that teaches but cannot explain how it teaches. She wants to destabilize the structures of foreclosure, to

cultivate a kind of rigorous disorientation, to practice a pedagogy of discomfort. She distributes a second Nietzsche (1976) quote:

When one finds it necessary to turn *reason* into a tyrant, as Socrates did, the danger cannot be slight that something else will play the tyrant...the fanaticism with which all Greek reflection throws itself upon rationality betrays a desperate situation; there was danger, there was but one choice: either to perish or- to be *absurdly rational*. (p. 478)

Holly's father was devoted to the ideal of rational discourse. He was dogmatic about reason. He believed in its power to emancipate. Her mother, as a means of defining the extremes, played the melancholic artist. They were both drinkers. Disputes often led to plate smashing. They lived the binary between art and science. Holly was trapped in between. Many of her life decisions have been in the wake of this conflict. She wonders about the ways in which she brings that personal history of opposition into her classroom.

Who am I to question their certainty of feelings? Why do I get to play *provocateur*? Who elected me to disrupt the status quo? Suddenly I am their enemy, struggling against their established order, but only as a way of dealing with my own personal resistance. (Holly's journal, June, 2001)

Holly hates the textbook with an irrational passion. It offers students pat formulaic versions of various philosophical positions without ever historicizing its own reading. The author dwells almost maliciously on the irony of Socratic self-denial and ignorance, as though pleased to propagate the notion that the teacher always and ultimately knows better.

"Do you think Socrates is being ironic?" she asks the class. They say nothing, unwilling to impart intention to Socrates. Holly wonders why they are so quiet. "When Socrates says he is ignorant, does he really mean that? Or is he feigning ignorance so that the other discussants will feel free to make proposals?" She waits but the students continue to hold back. "Does he interrogate wise men because he hopes that they will shed light on the nature of reality? Or is he out to disturb the comfort stories of those who are established and wrongly considered wise? Is he just a shit-disturber?"

Holly takes her students to a public philosophy lecture at the university. The hall is almost empty. She scans the meager audience of graduate students and professors. She sits surrounded by her own students, proud that she is a high school philosophy teacher. The speaker is a highly distinguished classics scholar who uses a dense academic vocabulary. Her students listen without understanding. His lecture is about Socratic irony. She begins taking notes, the consummate good student, eager to learn from the expert. He offers a historical re-reading of Socrates, citing Roman commentaries that ridiculed readers who imposed irony as a way of white-washing

what they disagreed with. The lecture ends with a humble request that our interpretations be carefully hermeneutic and self-consciously historical, and that our current reading of Socratic irony, our possible projection of irony, be understood through our own cultural proclivity towards irony. Holly leaves the lecture determined to disrupt the textbook.

Holly's past experiences as a philosophy student had a direct impact on her future teacher identity. When Holly began studying philosophy as a graduate student, she wanted to be in conversation with all of the dead white men who had contributed to the canon. She took up with Kant and Husserl and other system builders, thinking she owed the tradition a careful reading from origin onwards. She enrolled in a seminar course on Wittgenstein in which the class studied, line by line, word by word, the little enigmatic *Tractatus*. The book seemed to demand interpretation. They dissected its every nuance, interpreting the slightest pause as evidence of counter-meanings. She spent hours dwelling on details, reflecting on the imagery within the system. She wrote myopic little papers on the meaning of one sentence or word. It was as though the seriousness of this perfect little book, which was bereft of context and metaphysics, allowed no room for play. She remembers gravely and earnestly inquiring into the intentions of the author. She wanted to locate him, to situate him in a context and understand his story. She was the only woman in the seminar, as would be the case in the seminar on his *Philosophical Investigations*, and she remembered being highly conscious of her singularity and her disruption of sameness. Late in the term she bravely and brazenly asked about Wittgenstein's understanding of historical consciousness. The professor suffered from Parkinson's which caused him to shake and tremble throughout each seminar. He replied gruffly, brushing off the suggestion that Wittgenstein would countenance any such understanding as relevant.

I couldn't help but imagine Wittgenstein's almost allergic reaction to Hegel, his personal fear of eros and touch, his utter frustration as a teacher in a rural schoolhouse teaching logic and chess to a select few, and then lashing the knuckles of those who couldn't or wouldn't learn. I sensed the exhausting idealism in every proposition. So much anger and tragic self-denial. So profound the need to retreat from others. I wonder if a sense of self-care might have eased his burden. For despite the shift in his later philosophy, he never seemed to embrace his own lived experiences. (Holly's journal, July, 2001)

She sits comfortably on the empty student desk and recounts the famous anecdote: "Wittgenstein was at Cambridge when Popper was invited to give a lecture on some famous philosophical problem." She swings her legs under the desk like a pendulum. The students listen for the familiar development of a narrative. "Wittgenstein made dismissive noises throughout

the lecture, and afterward he approached Popper and angrily brandished a fire poker, adamantly shouting, "there are no philosophical problems, only puzzles!" She laughs loudly. The students seem to enjoy her laughter. "This, of course, was well after he had abandoned the regime of the *Tractatus*. He may have even had a lover at the time, although never openly."

As a student, Holly discovered the pleasure of reading philosophers who were critical of the analytic tradition. She gave up on her linear acquisition of all the "forefathers" and their systems, and embraced those who tore down the structures, those who followed in the footsteps of Nietzsche.

I lay on the grass, under a tree, outside the vine-covered university building. My eyes shifted from the page I was reading, out across the manicured lawn and up the mottled stone of academia. *The Archaeology of Knowledge* was challenging and strange and unlike anything I had read before. Foucault seemed intent on undoing discursive authoritative knowledge. I resonated with his desire for disruption. I enjoyed his sustained attempt to defraud our cultural meta-narratives. I knew that my reading him there on the grass outside the ivy-covered building was a catalytic moment carved into my own personal granite. (Holly's journal, June, 2001)

She read everything by Foucault. She immersed herself in his writing style. She became intimate with him in ways that she could never be with Wittgenstein. She admired his rigorous genealogies and his grand sweeping observations. But it was the detailed depictions of particular events, and the commitment to tell the stories of individuals, that she found most engaging. She felt the power of his writing long before she truly realized that he was writing about power.

"Plato seeks to know the eternal changeless forms, not just the appearances, the phantasms, the mere beliefs to which we, in our embodied misconceptions, hold true." Holly revisits Plato's text, testing the limits of her students' commitment to the binary of representation, eager to dismantle the dialectic of absence and presence.

"So when Socrates says he's ignorant, is he referring to his ignorance of the ideal forms?" asks a student.

"Once you've unshackled yourself," begins another student, "and removed yourself from the cave, do you automatically come to know the ideal forms?"

"Let's step back for a moment," suggests Holly, "and ask ourselves why someone might structure our understanding in terms of a two-tiered system of appearances and their objective source. How does it serve Socrates to use this model? Or rather, how does it serve Plato, the author of the text? Don't forget: This is Plato's version of Socrates. Think about how Socrates is able to tease out the assumptions of his opponent, to show how these beliefs are grounded in the particularity of their perspective, and finally to

reveal how these fail to be generalizable or universally true. He uses his dialectic of question and answer to demote the local differences that distinguish one person from another. As a means of establishing hierarchies of meaning and significance, it works beautifully at demoting the details of lived experience. It silences any dissenting voices. It erases the particular and the personal.”

We must think problematically rather than question and answer dialectically. (Foucault, 1977, p. 186)

Holly wants to subvert Platonism. She wants to pervert its purity. She wants to convert her philosophy lesson into a sustained historical analysis of the dirtiness of ideas. Her eyes move searchingly from student to student dispersed across the array of desks. She wonders if they are feeling some discomfort at hearing her suggestions. An all female private school, a privileged elite community. She wonders if she will be offered banishment when the administration discovers that she is trashing Plato.

To convert Platonism (a serious task) is to increase its compassion for reality, for the world, and for time. To subvert Platonism is to begin at the top (the vertical distance of irony) and to grasp its origin. To pervert Platonism is to search out the smallest details, to descend (with the natural gravitation of humour) as far as its crop of hair or the dirt under its fingernails—those things that were never hallowed by an idea; it is to discover its initial decentering in order to recenter itself around the Model, the Identical, and the Same; it is the decentering of oneself with respect to Platonism so as to give rise to the play (as with every perversion) of surfaces at its border. (Foucault, 1977, p. 168)

“I don’t understand,” says the student who demanded access to reality, “there are no ideal forms? no absolute truths? Just strategies for manipulating people? That’s too depressing.”

“Besides,” says Lisa, whose friendship is real, “what does that make of you, as the teacher?”

In the *Meno*, Socrates asks the young slave boy to take a stick and draw the geometric figures in the sand. He interrogates the boy using a series of questions that coerce him into acknowledging his mistaken beliefs. All Socratic dialogues move through this naive certainty into acknowledged ignorance. Then he plays the midwife and facilitates in the boy’s “recollection” of the Pythagorean relation. Squares and lengths are doubled until the generality of the theorem is perceived. The entire scene is witnessed by the slave owner. Socrates argues that he has not taught the boy anything. The interrogation reveals what the boy already knows. The interrogation reveals that teaching is impossible, because knowledge of truths is always already known. Sharon Todd (2003) remarks that, “Socrates is the teacher, who, like the perfect murderer, makes it appear that teaching has not taken

place, who leaves the scene without a trace, and who, moreover, is convinced of his own innocence" (p. 24).

Holly asks her students to apply the same experiment to some small unsuspecting child in their neighborhood. When they return to class, one student recounts the story of her attempt to do so. The story captivates the others because of its unpredictable nature. "I tried it on my little sister, but she cried and cried," says the student, "she kept picking up handfuls of sand and letting it stream through the cracks between her fingers. The lines I had drawn in the sand disappeared into smoothness. She found it very upsetting."

The hallway is quiet, the afternoon light fading to grey. Holly sits alone in the classroom, sipping a cup of Darjeeling tea. She shakes off the hurry of the day, and searches her mind for the sort of peaceful resolve she needs, before she can begin to imagine tomorrow's lesson. She opens the big desk drawer and removes the book she is currently reading. A few quiet moments pass, and she begins to feel at home. Foucault, she is surprised to read, offers a sympathetic account of Socrates. He argues that Socrates dictum was not "know thyself", but rather "care of oneself". Foucault suggests that Socrates words have been massively misunderstood, his message obscured because of the Enlightenment and its obsession with epistemology. She reflects on the arrogant command "know thyself" and the prescriptive maxim, "the unexamined life is not worth living".

Was it, she wonders, more accurately, "the untold life is not worth living?" (Kearney, 2002, p. 156).

Ambiguous Closure

Holly's story locates the opposition between narrative and philosophy within her lived experiences of gender. Her memories of reading "earnest and prudent" Plato in high school trace her own enactment of a gendered obedience, later re-enacted by the "all female and highly obedient student population" where she teaches. Although Nietzsche's misogyny might have been reason enough for her to reject him as a teenager, it was his emotional rants and his angry disruption of the status quo, that were the very things she later drew on in her pedagogy of discomfort.

The public lecture on Socratic irony demonstrates Holly's ongoing ambivalent relation to philosophy. On the one hand, she is moved to trust her intuitions, critique the textbook, and become self-consciously hermeneutic, but on the other hand, she slips into the role of "the consummate good student" and banishes irony (and perhaps also ambiguity) from her reading of Socrates. It is only when we learn more about Holly's past experiences as a philosophy graduate student that we begin to trace the emer-

gence of a critical perspective. Her desire to understand Wittgenstein as a sexual and historical person, while she sits amongst men in an analytic philosophy graduate course, “highly conscious of her singularity and her disruption of sameness” shapes her later pleasure at sharing Wittgenstein anecdotes with her own students. Similarly, her “intimacy” with Foucault is experienced on the grass, under a tree, outside the ivy-covered academic building, grounded in the particularity of her exclusion from philosophy. When her own student recounts the story of the “slave boy” experiment, describing the disappearance of the lines drawn in the sand, and the tears shed by the little girl at the resulting “smoothness”, the reader recognizes the intense risk and emotional labor involved in encountering the universal. As Cavarero (2000) suggests, the philosophical notion of the universal is both disturbed by and disturbing of the particular uniqueness of a personal narrative (p. 53). But it is the telling of this incident in class, the sharing of the emotion, the awareness that a caring relation overruns the quest for knowledge and certainty, and the opening up of a space for resistance that together seems most disruptive and most promising in the tentative closing of Holly’s story.

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