

## ***Feminism, Speaking for Others, and the Role of the Philosopher: AN INTERVIEW WITH LINDA MARTÍN ALCOFF***

**Stance:** *In Visible Identities, you briefly discuss a double vision that can be experienced by mixed persons because of their identity. You suggest that people who recognize their privilege may see from a similar double vision. Do you think that a double vision should be a goal to strive for to create a more equal world or that having populations who have double vision allows for them to understand multiple viewpoints or horizons?*

*Linda Martín Alcoff:* The concept of double consciousness originated with the work of W.E.B. Du Bois, and I think that's what you're referring to by "double vision." What it means is seeing the world or seeing a particular event through more than one perspective. Du Bois talks about oppressed groups seeing the world the way white supremacists or white dominant groups see them, but also knowing that there's another way to see the world. Some people see not only through the eyes of white dominant groups, but through their own community's eyes, which yields a sense of bifurcation between two perspectives.

I don't think we can strive to achieve double vision in the way you ask. I'm not sure that by reading a book, or by a kind of philosophical thought experiment, we can achieve double vision. I think it's something that emerges more organically from our position in society and our lived experience. Many people in the United States today know that there's more than one way to experience the world. When you hear what Donald Trump says, even if you're not Muslim – today we hear Muslim voices in the news, we read Muslim voices in the newspaper – you have a sense that Muslims in the United States probably don't feel just angry at Trump like many other Americans do. They probably also feel scared. We are aware of others' affective reactions because our public domains of discourse have become more multidimensional than they were when I was growing up. There are many more different kinds of voices in our neighborhoods and in our schools and in



our workplaces. More and more people know that their way of seeing things is not the only way. So double vision comes not from an effort or a thought experiment, but just from the kind of reality that we live in today.

Also, the fact that you can know how other people see the world can be used for good or for bad. You could use it to try to control people. Trump or somebody running a corporation could use double vision – that knowledge of how their words will be seen in multiple ways – to control and manage populations for the purposes of maintaining those people’s oppression. So I don’t think having access to multiple perspectives will necessarily lead us to liberation. But there’s a potential there that can be tapped. Du Bois is writing at a time when most white people don’t have to think about how black people saw the United States of America. They may not have realized that Blacks did not have the same relationship of patriotism to the United States as whites had, for example. Today, I think that double vision or double consciousness is more available to whites, and so that’s what I am interested in.

What Du Bois is talking about is how African Americans saw themselves through racist stereotypes and also how white people viewed African Americans through racist stereotypes. The double vision of whites today may be similar structurally, in that there’s more than one perspective, but it may have very different political content because the way white people are viewed by people of color may not be based on a racist stereotype against whites. It may actually be accurate, and may have some factual truth to it that would enhance the understanding of white people about the history of the United States, about the way in which slavery still affects the U.S., and how racism is still an important feature of our society. When Du Bois is talking about it, he’s talking about it mostly in the sense that black people can push back against the white supremacist viewpoint because, while black people see the world in that way and themselves in that way, they also have access to an experience that goes beyond racist stereotypes. This allows black people to push back against that dominant white perspective, but it’s based on an experience whites don’t have.

**Stance: In “Does the Public Intellectual Have Intellectual Integrity?” you talk about how intellectuals**

***in this country are expected to remain out of politics and the public eye. Similarly, in “On Judging Epistemic Credibility,” you talk about how philosophy in America strove to become apolitical to avoid raising suspicions during the Cold War, thus creating a generation of philosophers who held proper philosophy to be void of political motivations. In light of this, what can aspiring philosophers do to reverse these trends, to bring intellectualism and philosophy back into the public eye and use them to leverage positive social change?***

*Alcoff:* We have a unique situation in the United States, and if you’ve been to other countries you’d know it’s pretty uncommon: we don’t listen to philosophers. I was just in Dublin last week and was interviewed by *The Irish Times*, which has a regular column on current philosophers. They interview all sorts of philosophers from the United States who come through Dublin, and the column is pretty widely read. This is also true in Germany, Mexico, Colombia, and most other countries. If you get into any taxi in New York City, the driver, 9 times out of 10, has a view about philosophy, not just current political events, but also the nature of religion, life after death, and the nature of truth. Philosophy is a topic that is of wide interest to a lot of people, even if they don’t pursue it systematically in the way that we do. So it’s a real question: why there isn’t more public philosophy done in the United States. I believe the history of the Cold War is part of the answer of the move to meta, meta, meta level, arcane, technical work. Like, “Is that cow on the side of the road really a cow, or is it painted to look like a cow?” Not too many taxi drivers are interested in that question, but they are interested in questions like “What is propaganda?” or “How do you know who to believe?” or “Can society become more just?”

There’s a combination of reasons why philosophy in the United States has been so cut off from the public. But we can do something to change this. In fact, many philosophers are working at this, by writing in more accessible ways and engaging with the public. *The Stone* is a series of short essays that *The New York Times* has on its website, and a lot of philosophers have written for that, including me. It generates a lot of comments. People are interested. I know there are a number of paper prizes that students can submit to that involve essays on public policy questions, and I think those are really good. You should try your hand at winning one



of those because they give you the practice to address a topic of concern and write in such a way that broad members of the public can follow your reasoning and your argumentation.

**Stance: Do you believe non-philosophers often do what we would call philosophy, but aren't quite aware that they are doing so?**

*Alcoff:* I strongly believe that. Many of the topics that we're interested in—the meaning of life, the nature of truth, the nature of the good, if there is a single category of the good, is it relative or cultural—are of interest. I think sometimes our methodology is different. We try to be a little systematic and organized in the way we answer those questions. We look for what everybody in the history of philosophy says about those questions, but I think there's a wide interest in those questions, especially among young people.

**Stance: In your work "Justifying Feminist Social Science," you speak of the androcentric bias that the sciences hold. Do you feel that some of the problems that bring out androcentrism in these fields are perpetuated by curricula taught by universities, and perhaps even at the high school level?**

*Alcoff:* Yes! Emphatically. There's this great book I recommend by the philosopher of science Elizabeth Lloyd called *The Case of the Female Orgasm*. It's a great read. It's about the science of the female orgasm. This is not about 19th-century science or the science discussions going on in the 1940s. It's about today. It's about post-2000 research on the question of how to explain why the female orgasm evolved given that it plays no role in conception. It doesn't enhance the likelihood that a given act of sexual intercourse will lead to pregnancy or conception. Of course it doesn't diminish the likelihood either. It doesn't play any role whatsoever. So evolutionary biologists can't figure out for the life of them why the female orgasm, certainly a significant feature of human embodiment, evolved.

There's been a tremendous amount of research and debate trying to prove that there is a link between female orgasms and conception, and Lloyd shows that most all of it is incredibly bad science. So Lloyd asks, how has this happened? Why do the high standards of empirical evidence fall so drastically when female orgasm is the topic? And what becomes clear is that the standards fall

because female orgasm is a touchy issue, connected to our forms of family and marriage, sexual relations and heterosexual sexuality, our beliefs about women and pleasure, and old ideas about the women who pursue pleasure as being sort of monstrous and dangerous and chaotic. All of these old Christian ideas and views play into it.

This is just one example of how androcentrism is still embedded in ways that our scientific methods are not identifying, and this is still the standard methodology taught in universities today. More than that, if we think that science is value-free, if we think that science is politically neutral, then we are more likely to make these mistakes because we're more likely to avoid asking questions about how our political, moral, religious, and unconscious views about sexuality and women are affecting our judgment of scientific evidence and which hypotheses have enough plausibility to be supported.

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So our values, politics, morals, and our own personal histories inform the generation of hypotheses, as well as the determination of what kind of evidence would be relevant, of how much evidence is needed to establish a claim, of the interpretation of a claim, and the application of a claim. In other words, every step of scientific practice. As long as we continue to teach our students that science and politics are easily distinguishable, we will disable them as scientists, and also disable the public from being able to assess scientific claims. We're going to confuse ourselves and the public about how politics and values enter into science, especially for certain kinds of issues that are very politically volatile. So yes, unfortunately, we are still teaching—sometimes even in philosophy of science classrooms—that the proper way to do science is in an apolitical way. What Lloyd shows is that that's just not true, because science is practiced in a real world context where political values and other kinds of values inform its judgment, interpretations, and applications.

**Stance: As someone who works in feminist philosophy, why do you think there is an underrepresentation of women in undergraduate philosophy programs?**

*Alcoff:* I don't know entirely. I wish we could get some anthropologists to come study our discipline. We need them to come live in our departments for a year and follow people around and take notes.



There are two basic answers that are being debated about that question right now. One is about the style with which we do philosophy and the other is the content of philosophy. Some people argue that the style of philosophy turns women off because philosophers argue and fight and criticize. We're aggressive sometimes and we cut people off, and women just don't like this kind of adversarial argumentation. I don't think this argument is persuasive because more than half of students in law school in the United States today are female. The legal profession is all about adversarial argumentation, where the stakes are very high. So it's clear that one cannot say women as a whole just aren't into argumentation.

However, I think there might be different styles of argumentation. When I was a student we talked a lot about how trying to slash down somebody's argument as quickly as possible is not necessarily the best route to truth. Sometimes it can be useful not to jump to criticism of somebody's claim. Rather, we could say, "Okay, let's assume that's true. Let's go with it. Let's push it further. Let's think that through." Generosity, receptivity, even passivity, being open to somebody else's argument before you shoot it down—which are normally traits we associate with a certain traditional femininity—might be useful for finding out what's true. In some cases, these approaches might be more useful than the impulse to shoot somebody's argument down as quickly as possible. So, the question of style of argument may be relevant here, because it may be that certain styles of argument that are associated with traditional masculine behaviors are considered the gold standard in philosophy. And when we exhibit traditional feminine behaviors, we're seen as soft and not as intellectually strong, assured, or confident as others. If we're receptive to other people's arguments, we may be judged by our teachers and peers as less smart or confident. So, style is important and relevant to gender.

The other issue is the content. I'm more interested in this idea. What are we teaching? What problems are we teaching? Who are we reading? Whose voices are included? I think also that a lot of students of color are turned off by philosophy because many times people want to address problems in their communities, and they don't see a whole lot of that in our textbooks. The work on racism in philosophy is pretty recent, and there's still not as much of it as you would think in political

philosophy or ethics, which should be domains that talk a lot about racism. But it's often the last week of class when you might read maybe one article. So I think it's the content of what we do, who we're reading, and how narrow our focus is that make some people feel like philosophy isn't for them. As I said before: everybody's interested in the topics we work on, but I think if you talk about theories of democracy and you don't talk about how you actually can build democracy in non-ideal, real-world conditions, post-slavery, post-genocide, post-colonialism, then for a lot of students it just doesn't feel like it's going to go anywhere productive.

**Stance: Do you think there could be a little more outreach to underrepresented groups to show them how they can bring philosophy into their lives and how it can possibly be used to help themselves?**

*"I think outreach is important, and I think it's just as important to realize that as philosophy becomes more inclusive and diverse, philosophy will change. It's not going to stay the same. We bring with us new questions and new points of view."*

*Alcoff:* I think so. There are a few departments that have done a lot of outreach, and have had a lot of success, by going to historically black colleges and universities, Hispanic serving universities, or women's colleges. I think outreach is important, and I think it's just as important to realize that as philosophy becomes more inclusive and diverse, philosophy will change. It's not going to stay the same. We bring with us new questions and new points of view. So it's about outreach and also about being receptive to the new work, the new questions, and the new formulations that emerge from this new group of philosophers.

**Stance: In "The Problem of Speaking for Others," you claim that the desire to speak for others is a desire for mastery and domination. Is there a possibility of speaking with others that does not presuppose these desires?**

*Alcoff:* I don't think the impulse to speak for others is always motivated by a desire for mastery and domination, but sometimes it is. We have to think about that when we try to speak for others. In some ways it's easy to speak for animals, because they can't tell you that you messed up or criticize you. We have to think about our motivations and how speaking for others who cannot speak back can make us feel like the hero and the heroine. Then it's really about us, rather than about what we're trying to accomplish or change. The motivation can be selfish even when we don't realize it. But I don't



think it's always about this sort of motivation. I don't want to overstate the case.

What I tried to say in that article is that you can't entirely avoid speaking for others. Some have argued that there are so many problems with speaking for others that we should just stop doing it. But that's not always possible. There are refugees who don't have access to the media. There are animals who cannot speak directly. There is the environment that cannot speak. We cannot put a complete ban on speaking for others, but it's always preferable to be a conduit that makes it possible for others to speak, and to "speak with" rather than "speak for," to get more voices heard.

The example I used of President Bush the first in Panama, I hoped, was a good example. Consider the structure of the sentence: "The Panamanian people want democracy." If you analyze that sentence, you get identical propositional content from the statement that the Panamanian opposition made. But when President Bush the first is making this claim a week before he launches a unilateral strike against Panama City, it means something different. It resonates in the public domain in a different way. It resonates in the media and the United States in a different way. Different connotations arise in people's minds, connotations about the United States being the vanguard of freedom and democracy in the world, in this hemisphere, and about being able to teach Latin America what freedom and democracy are and what free and fair elections are. Americans don't even know half the time what the struggles of democracy are in Latin America. The United States has destroyed numerous democratic movements in Central America, Chile, different parts of South America, and the Caribbean, so that when President Bush spoke for the Panamanian people, I wanted to argue that he was doing exactly the reverse of what his statement ostensibly said. He was helping to continue to thwart democratic processes by concealing the U.S. role in the region. You can look like you're speaking for other people, when you're really speaking for another agenda.

So, what would have been better? What would have been better would have definitely been speaking with the opposition movement. My father and brother were both involved in the opposition movement that was quite strong within Panama against Noriega. The better



alternative would have been to work in coalition and to help give voice to that opposition movement because the media was getting constrained by the military dictatorship in Panama at that time. Speaking with would have been a very different communicative practice that could have unseated Noriega, disempowered him, and led to real democracy. But what happened after the invasion of Panama in 1989 was that a new president was sworn in by the United States, and he was found to be involved in narcotrafficking, and the challenges to a real democracy continue. So I would argue that speaking with is always preferable when it is possible.

**Stance: Given your view on the appropriate times to speak for others and the view that you demonstrate in “Immanent Truth” on listening to others working especially well in small-scale discussions, how do we determine how small-scale these discussions should be?**

*Alcoff:* I don't think there's a formula for determining how small it can be. I know some anarchists oppose representational democracy and want to have only direct participatory democracy where decision-making is done in small enough groups where everybody can hear each other. This leads to meetings that can be hours and hours long, as we found out at Occupy Wall Street. Sometimes you need representational government that has fewer actual decision-makers sitting in a room together, but through the practices of political representation, these decision-makers are making decisions for larger groups. Decisions don't have to be made in just face-to-face encounters. With crowdsourcing that involves political debate and social media, people are finding ways to participate even globally. Sometimes this can become a very bad process, where social media becomes a mechanism of community stoning. But I'm very interested in the democratic potential of methods that can put a check on the mainstream corporate media by providing alternative venues that more people can participate in without credentials or without owning a newspaper.

Representational methods can be productive sometimes, and very large groupings can work sometimes too. At a recent large public event in South Africa, where Jacob Zuma, the current president, has lost a lot of his popular support, he was loudly booed by a great number of the crowd. This expressed a political will and indicated that



Zuma has lost a lot of popular support. He's lost the imagination of the people, as some have put it. This is just one example of the way in which true democratic expression can occur even in a large-scale situation.

**Stance: When it is difficult for us to have these “small-scale” discussions directly with people who are under-represented, how much should we depend on statistical analysis to find out what people really believe?**

*Alcoff:* I use Pew research all the time, Quinnipiac. They're very useful, but you have to be very careful about how you interpret them because you can get very skewed results. We all have to become more sophisticated in our understanding of how opinion surveys and social science instruments are used. The media seems to be in love with numbers and graphs. They think if you've got a graph, you've got knowledge, and you see that a lot on the newspaper opinion pages. We have to remember that quantitative measures are subject to interpretation and can be skewed to produce certain results. So we have to become more sophisticated and smarter about the gathering of statistics, the instruments of empirical work that the social sciences use, to be able to judge what we're really seeing and raise questions about it.

Trump recently put up a big sign that gave the percentage of black people killed by police, the percentage of white people killed by police, the percentage of black people killed by other black people, and the percentage of white people killed by black people. He wanted to prove that so-called black-on-black crime is the principle problem, not the police. It turns out that his statistics came from a fictitious agency, a fact that was itself not widely reported. There's a great YouTube video where this guy goes through that graph very carefully, explaining what's faulty about the reasoning. But just the numbers themselves, the percentages, the graph, make some people think that we have some knowledge here, that this isn't just anecdotal or individual experience. Trump's fictitious numbers are then considered more real than the information we're getting from the Black Lives Matter campaigns about individual cases.

But I don't think that becoming more critical and sophisticated about statistical reasoning, and the preference for quantitative over qualitative data, means that we throw it all out. Quantitative data is one part of what builds our knowledge. It is never sufficient

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unto itself because the practice of formulating the questions and deciding what questions to ask involves non-quantitative reasoning. Hence philosophy and hermeneutics are always involved in the production of empirical data and statistics. There’s no philosophy-free gathering of statistics. We need to think critically and philosophically about how the question was formulated: who had the ability to participate in the formulation of the questions? Who got asked? How the data was generated involves a lot of political questions, a lot of ethical questions, questions of moral epistemology, and questions of philosophy of science. So quantitative data collection can be a part of how we improve our knowledge, but it can’t be a substitute for the knowledge that’s generated in the humanities. The STEM disciplines need to work with the humanities, and humanities needs to be informed by the STEM disciplines.

**Stance: We often see that when a tragic event happens to a group of people, those outside of this group will try to show their solidarity by wearing signifying colors or announcing their support over social media. Do you see a connection between these types of solidarity and speaking for others?**

*Alcoff:* I was mostly thinking of the Black Lives Matter movement, but it could be in regard to other movements. I know there’s been some real discussion and debate about the role of white people in relationship to those struggles. There’s talk about who has got skin in the game and who doesn’t have skin in the game in regard to various kinds of struggles: who is directly affected and who can only be allies. Some expressions of solidarity are open to criticism on the grounds that they are fairly easy. What do they call it?

**Stance: Slacktivism?**

*Alcoff:* Yes, exactly—people who only do Facebook and tweets from the safety of their own home—that kind of activism. It is a legitimate charge. Although, I like that kind of activism. I think it is important too. But I think it’s true that you shouldn’t feel too good about yourself if that’s all you do. It doesn’t really cost you anything. Also, I don’t think you’re going to learn a lot. Social movements are really important to get involved in because you learn so much from them about so many things, not only issues but ways of acting in concert and



negotiating differences and learning the scope of what you do not know. So I think there are many grounds for concern about solidarity that's too easy, that's too safe. But I also think solidarity across community lines is incredibly important. I have many examples from my own experience.

Once, we had a strike of the campus workers at a university where I was teaching. It was a strike of the janitors, the people who worked in the food service, and the people who cleaned the rooms. They were really being jerked around by the administration and had to take action. The administration thought the faculty would simply step over the picket lines and go about our business and teach our classes as usual. If we had, the strike may not have had any success because the university could replace the campus workers in the type of economic climate we were in. They could have just replaced all those six hundred and fifty people with other people who were desperate for work and paid them less, subcontracted out their jobs, gotten rid of the union, and it would have been fine. But the faculty did not just step over the picket lines, and the students got involved too. We refused to teach on campus, and we joined the marches, the pickets, and the rallies. The strike was won in one week. They only had to strike for one week, but it was because we had solidarity across groups.

You could say that the faculty didn't have skin in the game. Those of us with tenure had it easy. We had job security, at least. But it's just lousy to teach at a university where the administration sucks and where people are being mistreated. It's demoralizing to everyone. And this is the work force that we the faculty depend on to make it possible to do our teaching—we cannot do what we do if they don't do what they do. Bad employer treatment creates a high turnover of employees and that isn't good for the quality of the work. Plus, a lot of those folks had kids in my classes because they had tuition benefits. I knew them. So we supported the strike for many different reasons, and we got in trouble for it. The administration wanted to garnish our wages, and they used their influence on the media to criticize us up one hill and down the other. We did take some risks to support the strike, and that's what made the strike work. I'll give you one other example. In Miami, Florida, more than twenty years ago, there was a rebellion in an African American section of the city called Liberty City.

It was one of a series of urban rebellions in the 1980s in which there were barricades and fires, businesses were burned down, et cetera. The city responded by blocking off Liberty City, so that people were not allowed to travel freely into that area of Miami. Liberty City was also cut off from the media by the police department so that people outside couldn't find out what was going on there. That's a very dangerous situation, when you have black people cordoned off and there's no media around. But some of the folks in Liberty City who were politically involved had allies in other parts of the city. They had allies in some of the Cuban areas, some of the other Latino areas, and white areas as well. They reached out to the ministers and community leaders and the media in other parts of the city so that the word got out about what was happening in Liberty City, what the police were doing there, and that's what saved the situation from becoming much more violent and harmful for the people who were living in that area of town. They were just too small of a community to win against the Miami police force. They needed allies to win, and people stepped up. They came in with cameras. They documented what was happening. They organized demonstrations in other parts of Miami, and the situation cooled down. So I think solidarity—with people who aren't affected in the same way or directly—is vital, absolutely vital, to win. But that doesn't mean that every expression of solidarity is a good one. You have to negotiate and do a speaking-with to find out what kind of solidarity would be useful, welcomed, and lead to the outcomes that the people in struggle are trying to get to. I don't think we should underestimate the importance of solidarity even if we criticize some of the more shallow forms of its expression.

**Stance: Do you ever feel that shows of solidarity could undermine the oppressed group's efforts? I'm thinking of cases where someone may actually distort what the group is truly trying to go for.**

*Alcoff:* In the 1960s there was a moment in civil rights when there was kind of a push back against white leadership or even white participation in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committees [SNCC] that had been the main organizations in the south struggling for voting rights. SNCC had been integrated in the beginning. Bob Zellner, who was a friend of my husband, just wrote a fascinating book. He was a white



kid from southern Alabama who got hired by SNCC to be their first field organizer out of Atlanta. He was beaten and arrested many times. I think he was arrested twenty-eight times in the first three months on the job, sometimes put in solitary with 100 degrees of heat for weeks at a time. He suffered a lot.

By 1965 the Civil Rights Movement had undergone a lot of political debate, and they were concerned about having a lot of white leadership. They wanted to show that black people could lead, speak in public, strategize, fundraise, and that they didn't have to be dependent on others. It was an understandable move on their part because the racism in the United States was so strong that it was portraying black people as incapable of leading a movement and having the strategic savvy to really succeed. Oftentimes, what would happen is that you'd have various kinds of black struggle in different parts of the south, and the politicians would say, "It's Yankee Jewish communists coming down here leading people astray," because they couldn't imagine African Americans leading this kind of struggle, writing the op-eds that were so brilliant and rhetorically effective, or figuring out how to organize. So they blamed "Yankee Jewish communists," or sometimes just Yankees, sometimes just communists, or sometimes just Jews. It is understandable in those conditions that people wanted to show that black people could do it themselves. Similar things sometimes happened with feminist groups, because you'd have mixed male and female groups struggling for gender equality, and the guys would usually be better at public speaking or making an appeal to student government for funds. So they would do most of the public speaking, and the only way to get the women used to public speaking and skilled at public speaking was to kick the guys out. You then had to find a woman in the group to do the publicity, speak on TV, or speak to the press. That's what I think is behind this concern about the adverse effects that allies can have on movements.

Bob Zellner, though he was no longer a field organizer for SNCC after 1965 because of their decision to be black-led, stayed involved in the movement his whole life. He's still involved. He went on and did union organizing cross-racially among the Gulf Coast Pulpwood Cutters in Mississippi. He did all kinds of anti-racist struggles throughout the south. He was a brilliant leader, so his

talents weren't wasted even though he stepped back in that moment from the leadership role he had in SNCC. His book is great. It's called *The Wrong Side of Murder Creek*. He's a lower-middle-class southern white boy, a total redneck, and truly amazing. And he played an incredibly important role. Everybody was getting beat up and arrested, and black people were suffering, a lot of torture, being shot at, and some, of course, were killed during the movement. The only difference for Zellner is that when he was at a demonstration, he was easier to spot because he was the white person. He was the white guy in the front lines, so the police always went after him. They went after everybody, but they always made sure to beat him to the ground because they were worried about the example that he set for other white people who crossed lines of solidarity. It's not that he got it worse than other people, but he always got it.

**Stance: *Is it fair to say that most philosophers don't approach the profession the way you do? Could you say why you study what you do, and why you study it the way you do?***

*Alcoff:* After I got tenure, I felt like I could pursue some questions that I was very interested in that weren't being widely written about, such as the topic of mixed race. That was one of the first things I worked on. I started working on questions of mixed race identity, which is a really thorny and rich metaphysical issue. I was always interested in metaphysics, but it hadn't been applied to the issue of mixed race or mixed ethnic identities. Nietzsche said that all philosophy is a little bit of autobiography. He was a little reductive in this, but he was onto something. A lot more of philosophy refers back to individuals than we may realize. He thought that Kant's orientation toward prudence and caution led to his ethics. He thought Bentham had certain predilections that led to his utilitarian calculus, his idea that you could solve ethical problems through a quantitative formula. You can see a person's personality, life experience, and idiosyncratic history in a lot of philosophical ideas. With Frege and the development of logic we often think, "Well, that's pure." But actually, it wasn't. If you go back and read the development in the late 1800s, early 1900s, Frege and other logicians writing at the time really thought that logic would stem the tide of the irrational forces going on in Europe—which later would become the emerging Fascism—of ethnic hatreds, war, and militarism. They had a political motivation for

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the development of logical positivism, which tried to separate out logic from the realm they thought would lead to political debacle.

My work, too, is totally connected. I thought I could make a contribution by addressing topics that hadn't been addressed so much. I didn't think we needed yet another book on Plato, although maybe we do. But I knew we need work on Latin American philosophy that receives so little attention in North America. I thought I could make a contribution in arenas that were relatively neglected. For example, right now I'm working on a book about sexual violence, another neglected topic. Race and identity have not been well represented until fairly recently. I have had an interest in these topics and believe that they need more philosophical work than they have been getting. So that's what motivated me to go into those areas.

I also have to say that I'm a typical philosopher in that I just get excited. I still laugh sometimes when I'm reading philosophy books. I just get excited by crazy, arcane, esoteric debates that my husband has no interest in whatsoever (he's not an academic). Some of it is just interesting and fun and sort of addicting. Once you get it, man, it's like heroin. You can't get it out of your system. I have mostly applied that interest to general topics that I think have not gotten the attention they deserve, topics I might be able to make some contribution toward or have some particular interest in because of my own lived experience and history.

***Stance: What do you see as the significant differences in studying philosophy when you were pursuing your degrees versus today, and how do you see the field changing in the future?***

*Alcoff:* The field has changed a lot since 1973 when I took my first philosophy courses in college. There was one article on racism that was published by Irving Thalberg Jr. You might recognize his name because his father was a famous Hollywood director who won Oscars in the 1930s. His son became a philosopher. He taught at the University of Illinois at Chicago and wrote a paper that was called "Visceral Racism," published in 1972 [*The Monist* 56(1): 43-63]. That was pretty much it for a long time. Feminist philosophy and critical race philosophy were just beginning to emerge. We weren't doing any Latin American philosophy except in a few



places. One thing that was better back then than it is now—because it hasn't all gotten better, some of it has gotten worse—is that Chinese philosophy and Indian philosophy were more regularly taught. Those fields are much worse off today than they used to be. It used to be that any major department of philosophy felt like it had to have somebody who could cover it, because there's so much incredible ancient Chinese philosophy and ancient Indian philosophy. Nowadays it's very rarely covered because the history of philosophy has kind of lost its market share in the field.

I guess it is natural or inevitable that any discipline is going to change what it chooses to focus on. If you look at sociology or political science, you'll see similar changes over forty years in terms of what people are interested in. But there are some definite patterns. We didn't pay attention to these questions before, and the philosophy profession was a lot less diverse back then than it is now. What's changed is that although numbers are small, way smaller than they should be, there's now a critical mass of women and people of color. There are enough numbers that you can get a lively critical discussion going on where nobody agrees. We're all philosophers, so we don't agree with each other. There's a critical mass of feminist philosophy journals. There are multiple journals now, multiple debates and disagreements, and various problems are being pursued. The same is true of critical race philosophy and even in Latin American philosophy. LGBTQ philosophy is another field that is emerging. If you're interested in those areas today, you can actually pursue study in a systematic way.

I was self-taught in these areas. I'm from the generation where if we were interested in certain topics, we just had our own study groups. There were no classes you could take. There was no journal you could read. There was very little publication. Now, there's enough of a critical mass that you can join an online community just like you can if you're into modal logic or neopragmatist, Gricean philosophy of language, or whatever else it is that you're interested in. In philosophy, you join a particular group, go to their small conferences, and follow their work. You can do that now with these other fields, and that's good. We can be a little bit more systematic in our study and get criticism of our views from people who actually know something about the field and can criticize us more effectively when we are wrong and not thinking



through our argumentation. For a long time I received criticism when I gave talks from people who were thinking off the top of their heads and knew absolutely nothing about the fields of feminist philosophy, critical race philosophy, or Latin American philosophy.

Having a critical mass of experts, even if it is small, means the work is getting better. It means that there is an avenue for people who are interested in various kinds of topics. I am very hopeful about the field. I think it is going to open up and become a discipline that engages more with issues of larger public concern and provides avenues for multiple problematics to be pursued within ethics, political philosophy, and metaphysics. Consider the metaphysics of gender. How complicated is that these days, right? Is the body relevant to gender? These are really big, thorny metaphysical questions. There are more and more people interested in using our metaphysical tools of analysis, and the history of metaphysics, to think about the problem of the one and the many in relationship to gender, or the problem of the ship of Theseus in relationship to transgender. So that's what's changed.

I think these topics are becoming more widely of interest. It's not just women doing feminist philosophy. All women, of course, don't do feminist philosophy. Now, there are loads of men contributing to feminist philosophy. Your identity doesn't predetermine your areas of philosophical interest or your ability to contribute to the field. That's changing and opening up, too. It's good to see that. There are lots of people involved in the debate about the biology of race and racial categories in the philosophy of science. The topic areas have changed. The content has changed. Change has been sparked by the changes in the philosophy faculty. We're only about 17% female in tenured and tenure-track faculty. The numbers go up if you include adjuncts and instructors and other kinds of non-tenure-track positions. The gender inclusivity is pretty low still, but it is better than it used to be. Philosophers of color are also increasing a little bit. In some ways I think LGBTQ people are the worst off. There are so few out LGBTQ people in philosophy, but that's slowly slowly changing as well. I'm looking forward to seeing what the new debates are going to be.

**Stance: So you're happy that there are now men getting involved in feminism, for example, that this shows that a person's identity doesn't predetermine what they're going to be interested in. This ties back to speaking for others. You've said we need to be careful when speaking for others. Do you think that men should let women take the lead in feminism?**

*Alcoff:* If you think about feminist philosophy and the issues that are covered in feminist philosophy, some are such that men don't have direct experience. But others are such that men do have direct experience, such as the nature of gender binaries and gender categories. In fact, men have more direct experience of masculine gendering than women would. So men could speak, perhaps, in a richer way about the phenomenology of masculinity than women. A part of feminist philosophy is masculinity studies and thinking about masculinity in reference to the gender binary, and women have contributed a great deal because we see normative masculinity's effect in our lives, but we cannot give the whole analysis. If you think about something like sexual violence, which is something I'm working on right now, lots and lots of men and boys are subject to sexual violence. The percentages aren't as high as for women and girls, but there's a lot out there we're just finding out about. Prisons in the United States have finally been gathering statistics and developing policies against it. It used to be the topic of jokes, but now we're beginning to think about it, notice it, and come up with policies around rape in prison, as well as other institutions like the Catholic Church where boys were targeted quite often.

So what does that mean? Does that mean that sexual violence is something general to all of us? I don't think so. I think it takes different forms for males and females and others as well. Certainly the silencing of victims works differently for both males and females. When the victims are male, the silencing often works through homophobia, because the perpetrators are usually male and the victim is male, and there's a specter of homosexuality that's raised. If you read certain male memoirs that involve bodily experiences, you may be able to relate to those better if you share male embodiment than a woman does. You may know how masculinity is working in today's society and what kind of pressures boys and men are put under to achieve a certain norm of heteromasculinity in sexuality and other matters. So I think in



this domain we can enact a speaking-with. We can speak with each other about what liberation would really look like. I always have male students in my feminism class who read all this stuff I make them read and then begin to see sexism everywhere. They're afraid of perpetrating more sexism. They ask me how to do it, how to be a guy, an anti-sexist, anti-heterosexist guy, and I can't really answer that question as well as some male folks can. There are a lot of things men can contribute. But with all of these issues there needs to be some speaking with each other and not just exclusivity.

## About *Linda Martín Alcoff*



Linda Martín Alcoff received a Ph. D. in philosophy from Brown University in 1987. Before becoming a distinguished Professor of Philosophy at Hunter College and the CUNY Graduate Center, she held positions at Syracuse University, SUNY Stony Brook, and Kalamazoo College. She writes prolifically on eclectic topics, including social identity and race, epistemology and politics, sexual violence, Foucault, Dussel, and Latino/a issues in philosophy. In 2005 she was named Distinguished Woman in Philosophy by the Society for Women in Philosophy. Alcoff has authored a combined total of 51 books and articles, notable among these *Visible Identities*, which won the Frantz Fanon Award in 2009. She is currently working on two book projects: *Rape After Foucault* and *Decolonial Epistemology*. For more information visit <http://www.alcoff.com/>.