Fall 2022

On the Uses and Misuses of Interpretive Charity in Philosophy

Claire Abbott Lockard

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss

Part of the Philosophy Commons

Recommended Citation
https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss/3975

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses and Dissertations at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.
Copyright © 2022 Claire Abbott Lockard
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing a dissertation, I have learned, requires the support, feedback, insight, curiosity, energy, and (dare I say) generosity of so many colleagues, mentors, friends, and family members.

Jackie Scott, I thank you for your unwavering support, insightful feedback, endorsement of the “shitty first draft” approach to dissertating, and asking of the So What question—my writing is clearer and my arguments are more nuanced as a result of your guidance. This project would not have come together, and my time in graduate school would have been far less livable, without you. I am also grateful to the members of my doctoral committee: José Medina, your comments on my Midwest Race Theory Workshop presentation and your feedback on my second chapter were immensely helpful for me as I framed my project and placed it into conversation with work on epistemic injustice. It has been a joy to work with you and to learn from you. Jennifer Parks, I thank you for serving as a member of both my dissertation proposal committee and on the final defense committee, and for inviting me to share my work with your feminist philosophy class: your questions and feedback remind me to anticipate and respond to objections and disagreements, and your support has provided a model for how feminist philosophers can support one another’s work. Eyo Ewara, thank you for reading a very rough draft of my discussion of Foucauldian genealogy prior to becoming an official committee member: I had the sense that my early draft missed the mark, but your feedback helped me understand what I missed and how to address it (and I take full responsibility for remaining
mistakes!). Hanne Jacobs, thank you for serving on my dissertation proposal committee and for being the first to identify my project’s relationship to question of canonicity in philosophy. Thank you also for your work as graduate program director: your support and advocacy were transformational for me and for this department. And thank you to Andrew Cutrofello for serving on my proposal committee: you titled this dissertation and you identified that the project exists in two parts (something I did not come to fully understand until just before finishing!).

I am grateful to the Loyola University Chicago philosophy department for the opportunity to study a wide array of thinkers and topics, to participate in a rigorous intellectual community, to be mentored by faculty members committed to my success, and to grow into the philosopher I am today. I am especially thankful for the camaraderie among graduate students: I have never felt alone during my time here.

To my mentors at Elon University—Ann J. Cahill, Stephen Bloch-Schulman, and Anthony Weston—I thank you for teaching me, from my very first experience of academic philosophy, that I have something to add to the conversation. My thinking, writing, and pedagogy continue to be shaped by my time in the department and by the work we still do together. I am particularly grateful to Stephen Bloch-Schulman for the conversation that resulted in the term “the charitability gap” and to Ann J. Cahill for being the first to explain the principle of charity to me in a class on philosophical methods.

I have been fortunate to share parts of this work with several audiences. I am grateful to the Loyola Philosophy Department and to the Loyola Graduate Workers’ Union for making travel as financially feasible as possible. I also thank the union for its tireless advocacy for graduate workers’ right to a seat at the bargaining table. Thanks to the organizers and audience members at the 2017 Loyola Graduate Conference, the 2018 APA Central Division Meeting, the
2019 Midwest Race Theory Workshop, the 2019 Villanova Graduate Conference, the 2019 Collegium Phenomenologicum, the 2019 Feminist Ethics and Social Theory conference, and the 2020 APA Central Division Meeting. I am especially grateful to Kristie Dotson and Nora Berenstain for the questions they asked me at FEAST. I am also grateful to the editors and reviewers for *Hypatia* for their comments on a forthcoming paper that also comprises most of chapter 2.

Carlo Tarantino, you were the first person I talked to about my sense that something was amiss with charitability, and you have been a friend and resource ever since. I am particularly grateful for your help with translating Greek words, for your emails and margin comments about hermeneutics and Gadamer, and for coffee-fueled conversations about Gadamerian openness, reading suspiciously, and student-centered pedagogy. Theodra Bane, your framing of my dissertation as “Ahmed-heavy,” your feedback on my summary of *Queer Phenomenology*, your presence as a co-worker on Zoom, and your reminders of my project’s significance kept me going as I wrote through the pandemic. More than that, your friendship has been one of my great joys these past two years. Abram Capone, where to begin? (just kidding, I know where to begin!). You made home a place where I didn’t have to talk about charity or about philosophy if I didn’t feel like it, asked really annoying questions that ended up making my work better, and read convoluted sections of my writing in order to help make it clearer and more concise—I will die on the hill of the emdash though. Thanks, buddy! Thanks to Rachel Silverbloom for Zoom work sessions, feedback on my summary of and engagement with Cavarero, and showing me cute pictures of Noah when I am anxious. Trudging through out dissertations and job market materials together has made the process a bit more bearable. Rebecca Scott, thank you for your feedback on the relationship between pedagogy and charitability. Chapter three owes a lot to
your insights about how suspicion can sometimes motivate students to read carefully. Thanks also for encouraging me to attend graduate school at Loyola! Magnus Ferguson, thank you for being available to talk charity, read together, and bond over being the two Collegium attendees interested in epistemic injustice literature! I am grateful for your friendship and for your sending of relevant material my way (chapter 1 owes a lot to your sharing of Petru Bejan’s essay). Thanks also to Mariam Matar for sharing your own work on charitability with me.

I thank María Salvador for suggesting *Cultural Politics of Emotion* as a resource for my work—this was key for my opening chapter and formative throughout my writing. I am grateful to members of the dissertation support group—Rebecca Valeriano-Flores, Katherine Brichacek, Robert Budron, and Alec Stubbs—for commiseration and for collaboration. I am also grateful to Rebecca for weekly meals throughout our coursework. I thank Avery Smith for attending my Central APA presentation and asking an excellent question, then following up with me about connections between my dissertation and Ricoeur’s hermeneutics. I look forward to engaging with Ricoeur’s work in the future! Thanks to Robby Duncan for additional help translating and historicizing Greek words, to Nicoletta Ruane Montaner for organizing the accountability group text that structured my proposal writing, to maggie castor and Sean Wilson for being my thinking friends at Elon and beyond, and to Jean Clifford for being one of the people who helped me get oriented as a new graduate student. Thanks to Jean and Gina Lebkuecher for our holiday-themed evenings away from philosophy. These became more and more important as the dissertation loomed larger and larger! I am also grateful to the physical spaces the enabled my writing: Ellipsis coffee shop, Cunneen’s bar, and my own writing desk (I think again of Ahmed’s analysis of desks and tables as orientation devices!).
Finally, thank you to friends and family members whose love has made me: I love you all and I want to make particular mention of my parents: Carol Abbott Scott, Martin Lockard, and Gigi Lockard, thank you for insisting that I can do this, and for providing refuge when I doubted myself.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS iii

LIST OF FIGURES ix

INTRODUCTION: THE CHARITABILITY GAP 1

CHAPTER ONE: CHARITY, HISTORY, AND METHODOLOGY: FOLLOWING CHARITY AROUND 14

CHAPTER TWO: MISUSES OF CHARITY: EXPLORING EPISTEMIC AND AFFECTIVE HARMs OF CALLS FOR CHARITABILITY 63

CHAPTER THREE: PURE CHARITY AND CHARITABLE Purity: Purism as a Background Condition for Charity’s Ubiquity 103

CHAPTER FOUR: TURNING AWAY FROM CHARITABILITY: CRITICAL LOVE, EPISTEMIC AND HERMENEUTIC VIRTUES, AND INTERPRETING OTHERWISE 154

CHAPTER FIVE: TURNING BACK TOWARD CHARITY: A REFLECTION ON MY POSITION TOWARD CHARITY 202

BIBLIOGRAPHY 230

VITA 241
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Discussion Moves for Philosophical Conversation 199
INTRODUCTION

THE CHARITABILITY GAP

I care about this because I believe that philosophers and philosophy ought (and therefore can!) do more than reproduce a moribund, irrelevant, systematically racist discipline (Alexis Shotwell 2017, 119).

“Don’t you think you could read this person more charitably?”

I begin this dissertation with the question that prompted its writing. I have long ago given up attempting to keep track of the instances when philosophers call for charitable interpretation, hermeneutic generosity, applying the principle of charity, or offering a text or author the benefit of the doubt. Charitability seems to ground academic philosophy, interpretation, and pedagogy: if we have not read generously or charitably, we are thought to be poorly positioned to say much of anything at all about a text.

As I began to notice the call for charity show up over and over, I grew suspicious of the call for and practice of charitability in academic philosophy, and curious about my own reticence to “being charitable.” What does it mean to be charitable or to interpret charitably, and how can we know if we have done it well? Does every text deserve my charity, and if not, how can I know when to withhold it? Why is it that we so often ask for charity when faced with instances of racism and sexism in our canonical texts? How does charitability circulate differently depending on who requests or receives it? As a philosopher, do I have a special obligation to offer generosity or charitability to all philosophical texts, lest I risk misreading them? And why
was I so unsettled by a methodological tool that seems so basic, sensible, and useful for ensuring
that I am reading properly?

In this dissertation, I follow my sense of unsettledness; that is, I follow my suspicion that
these questions have answers that are important for our discipline and that challenge our sense
that charity is an unproblematic and foundational philosophical skill or method. In this
dissertation I explore some of the problems with charity as an interpretive orientation in
philosophy. I am interested in the methodological and political commitments that often seem to
underlie calls for interpretive charity or hermeneutic generosity. Which disciplinary structures
and norms are upheld with this commitment to charity and generosity, and which paths of
engagement and interpretation are foreclosed? Which affective orientations encourage
philosophers to hold on to charity?¹ How are already-marginalized philosophers harmed by being
asked to interpret charitably?

The Charitability Gap

My interest in questions of charitability emerges from my suspicion that there exists in
academic philosophy what I have come to call a charitability gap, such that marginalized
philosophers receive insufficient levels of charity while also being disproportionately expected to
offer it.² On the one hand, I suspect that philosophers are willing to grant a disproportionately
high amount of charity to already-dominant philosophy or philosophers as compared to the

¹ I borrow the language of “holding on” from Jennifer Nash’s analysis of Black feminism’s relationship to
intersectionality (Nash 2019, 3). Although the reasons for Black feminism’s holding on to intersectionality are
different from academic philosophy’s holding on to charity, I see resonances between the affective commitments to
remaining faithful both to originary texts of intersectionality theory and to those of canonical philosophy (see Nash’s
second chapter of Black Feminism Reimagined, “The Politics of Reading” for further elaboration on textual fidelity
and orignalism).

² This term emerged in a conversation with Stephen Bloch-Schulman.
amount of charity we give marginalized philosophy or philosophers. On the other hand, I suspect it is likely that those philosophizing from the margins will be labeled as unable or unwilling to read charitably, and will have our work’s legitimacy questioned as a result of the assumption that we cannot or will not be charitable. This gap, both in who we grant charity to and who we expect charity from, reinforces the disciplinary status quo and (re)produces epistemic and affective oppression, which helps preserve philosophy’s status as a discipline that is, to use Charles Mills’ language, conceptually and demographically dominated by whiteness and maleness (Mills 1998, 2).

I am particularly interested in calls for charity made in response to critiques of racist or sexist authors/texts: in these cases, charity is revealed as a selectively enforced methodological imperative and orientation device; it creates conditions for epistemic and affective harm; and it further-sediments academic philosophy’s commitment to a logic and politics of purity. While charitability is risky—and charity is disproportionately demanded from already-marginalized philosophers even as it is withheld from them—I am hesitant to abandon charity entirely. The outright rejection of charitable orientations toward texts or others commits philosophers to a purity politics that, following Alexis Shotwell, I suggest we resist (Shotwell 2017). Instead, I develop an account of impure charity and charitability alongside my analysis of contexts in which charity may be hermeneutically, epistemically, and politically useful.

**Some Preliminary Notes on Vocabulary and Method**

I offer much more detail about what I mean by *charity* and *charitability* in my first chapter, but a few initial comments here will, I hope, help orient the reader. Most generally, I approach charity as a methodological tool in academic philosophy. Or, to be more precise: charity is a set of practices that comprise a central (but, as we will see throughout this
dissertation, inconsistently and selectively used) methodological tool in philosophy. At times my characterization of charity may appear imprecise or broad; I have found that even my best attempts at clarity and consistency are thwarted in my attempts to reflect and critique a set of practices that is itself quite muddled and inconsistent.

As I explain further in chapter one, most philosophers (though we rarely make this explicit) seem to define “charitable interpretation” as the attempt to understand a text as making the strongest argument that can reasonably be found there. In his essay, “Some Third Thing: Nietzsche’s Words and the Principle of Charity,” Tom Stern explains charity as generally suggesting that “when faced with two rival interpretations of what someone is saying, we should not interpret her as meaning the one that leaves her in the worse light” (Stern 2016, 288). A charitable interpretation offers the author the benefit of the doubt—rather than immediately assuming that an author is incorrect, inconsistent, or incoherent, the reader should assume that she has not yet discovered the sensible meaning.

Practices of charitability are not, on my view, reducible only to requests or interpretations that explicitly evoke the language of charitability. I explore the importance of the term charity in chapters one and four, but in my view, charity is a broad set of interpretative practices, attitudes, and affects. Charity as method extends beyond the explicit call for charity, for generosity, or for offering a text or author the benefit of the doubt. Charity involves the pervasive assumption that one must always offer the benefit of the doubt, understand a text prior to being critical of it, comport themselves with a particular form of uncritical openness and love, and bracket affects

---

3 I use “charity” and “charitability” roughly interchangeably throughout this work. I describe practices of offering or refusing to offer charity (where “charity” is a principle or value in philosophy that we can give or withhold). I also describe broader attitudes and practices of charitability and uncharitability (where “charitability” is a quality or position toward a text or interlocutor).
and emotions that run in tension with a certain spirit of generosity. Charitability practices, or “moves” often aim to de-center questions about a text’s connection to structural racism or sexism, or to explore them only insofar as they reveal themselves to be accidental to the “real” philosophical work the text accomplishes. I understand “charitability practices” to include both the interpretative act and the call for others to perform it.

Practices of charitability can appear in many forms (some of which I explore further throughout this work). They might look fairly straightforward: an explicit call for charitable reading or critique, a call for offering the benefit of the doubt, or a call for offering a generous reading. They might also appear as a directive to remain focused on or return to already-dominant or canonical text (Sara Ahmed describes this insistence in further detail in Living a Feminist Life [Ahmed 2017, 15-16]). A charity move might involve appealing to tradition or canon as a way of resisting the diversification of syllabi, course offerings, or citational practices. In comments like, “he was a product of his time,” I also see an underlying commitment to (among other things) charitability. Academic panics about cancel culture are often imbued, as I suggest in chapter three, with charity moves. And charity is sometimes, at Yitzak Melamed explains, offered as part of a broader claim that a historical text is contemporarily relevant (Melamed 2013). These examples are not reducible to calls for or enactments of charitability, but I list them here in order to suggest that charity operates in ways we may not initially notice.

Charity is not, in my view, a sound methodological principle that we sometimes misuse or apply incorrectly. Instead, it is a pervasive set of philosophic practices that need to be revealed not only as politically motivated, but as produced by and frequently reproducing harmful disciplinary conditions.
This project has been somewhat methodologically tricky: although charity is ubiquitous in academic philosophy, there is no one body of literature on charity to which my project responds. Instead, I have drawn from feminist philosophy, critical philosophy of race, epistemic injustice literature, queer theory, and from the few existing critiques of charitable interpretation in philosophy. Charity’s ubiquity has provided me with a sometimes-disorienting amount of openness and scholarly possibility: there are many paths to follow and forge in order to develop a critical analysis of charity in philosophy. The method and thinking that has had perhaps the largest influence on my work comes from Sara Ahmed. My project is, as a friend and colleague put it, “an Ahmed-heavy dissertation.” I did not set out to write a dissertation in which, in each chapter, I turn toward a methodological approach, an idea, or an example from Ahmed’s work. I found my way to her over and over along the queer path I took while writing: I followed a word around (as Ahmed does in three of her monographs), explored methods as oriented and orienting (as Ahmed does in *What’s the Use?* and *Queer Phenomenology*), considered ways in which students are framed as problems (as Ahmed does in “Against Students”), and offered Ahmed’s blunt citational policy (from *Living a Feminist Life*) as one way of de-centering charity.

I was not surprised, then, to find resources in Ahmed’s body of work for framing the overarching methodological orientation of my project: I titled my dissertation “On the Uses and Misuses of Charity in Philosophy,” and soon after, Ahmed’s 2019 *What’s the Use?* was published. In this book, Ahmed “follows” the word *use* around, as she has done with *happiness*, *will*, and *diversity*. She is interested in the various uses(!) and effects of this incredibly common word, particularly as it comes up in pedagogical contexts and particularly as it relates to

---

4 I thank Theodra Bane for offering this characterization!
utilitarianism. Reflecting on her methodological practices throughout her work on happiness, will, diversity, and use, Ahmed explains that “thinking about the use of words is to ask about where they go, how they acquire associations, and in what or whom they are found” (Ahmed 2019, 3; emphases in original). Ahmed does not “follow” use around everywhere is goes—she is most interested in how the notion of use is deployed in evolutionary biology, eugenic thinking, disciplinary power, utilitarianism, and universities. Ahmed also explores the effects of use, emphasizing the increasingly-sedimented effects of repeated use—the more a path is used, the more that path is likely to be used in the future, even as that path is also worn out or worn away by this overuse—and in the horizons that are brought into view by repeated use of objects, terms, spaces concepts, and texts.

I am interested, in my project, in exploring the paths that form and erode through the use of philosophic charitability (as a word, but also as a practice). I am not, as my project’s title might suggest, arguing that there are correct or proper uses of charity that we can contrast with incorrect or improper misuses of charity. Tempting as this is, to say that charity can be used “properly” or “appropriately” seems to imply that these uses would be entirely unproblematic or somehow pure. What I want to suggest instead is that charity can be used generatively even as it always risks reproducing harmful disciplinary norms and practices.

A Dissertation in Two Parts

In chapters one, two, and three, my aim is to challenge the assumption that charity is a neutral and foundational philosophical method and to uncover some of the ways in which calling for and practicing charitability in philosophy can be harmful. In chapter one, “Charity, History, and Methodology,” I trace charity’s usages across various philosophical traditions and characterize the role that calls for and practices of charitability play in contemporary academic
philosophy. Ultimately, I characterize charity as a selectively enforced methodological imperative. I argue that charity’s usefulness is not, as we tend to assume, in its ability to produce good arguments or generative interpretations; instead, charitability is used and evoked in service of maintaining disciplinary borders/boundaries.

In chapter two, “Misuses of Charity: Exploring Epistemic and Affective Harms of Calls for Charitability,” I offer an articulation of some ways in which calling for charity can be harmful. I bring Sara Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology* into conversation with work on epistemic and affective injustice. I characterize interpretative charity as an orientation device in philosophy that, when used as a tool for responding to critiques of racist or sexist authors/texts, creates conditions for testimonial smothering (Dotson 2011) and affective injustice (Whitney 2018; Bailey 2018) and that requires philosophers to remain in oppressive worlds (Pohlhaus 2011; Lugones 2003).

While chapter two was largely concerned with what happens in moments when charity is requested or demanded, chapter three explores the disciplinary structures and commitments that underlie the call for and the practice of charitable interpretation. I suggest that ethicopolitical purism, as described by Alexis Shotwell in *Against Purity*, and ontological purity, as described by María Lugones in “Purity, Impurity, and Separation” provide the backdrop that allows charity to appear useful as an interpretative tool for engaging with texts. I identify three effects of this purism on our textual interpretations, our responses to what we perceive as uncharitable, and our initial impulses to address the charitability gap.

In chapters four and five, I move away from identifying philosophers’ assumptions about charitability, exploring some of the harms that result from calls for charity, and understanding the mechanisms underlying charity’s status as methodological imperative. I shift toward
reimagining charitability and toward reflecting on whether and how charity practices might be retained in service of revisioning academic philosophy. I do not offer strategies for closing the charitability gap (that is, I do not suggest that problems with charity and charitability can be solved by giving every author, text, or interlocutor an equal amount of charity). Instead, I explore strategies for reimagining and/or moving away from charity altogether.

In chapter four, “Turning Away from Charitability,” I ask: if charitability is not particularly helpful (and is often harmful) for engaging with problematic texts, what are some interpretative values and principles that are worth pursuing? I suggest that by complicating our thinking about what it means to offer a charitable interpretation, learning from existing examples of textual engagement that are generative but not particularly charitable, and utilizing José Medina’s framework of epistemic and hermeneutic vices and virtues, philosophers can begin to transform our charitability practices.

Finally, in chapter five, I examine the effect of my own suspicion toward charitability. I ask two questions: What might be grown or generated, not only in spite of, but also because of, charity’s existence as an interpretative orientation? And what has my not-so-charitable approach to interpretive charity occluded? I suggest that my project’s paranoid/suspicious orientation misses two generative aspects of charitability: first, charity has important strategic uses that might aid in closing or navigating the charitability gap; and second, because charity is never “pure” (that is, rarely is an interpretative methodology or orientation entirely or solely charitable), practicing or advocating for charitability can often open space for or already include non-charitable practices.

The central thesis of this dissertation, then, is: charity is not a politically neutral interpretative or argumentative tool in academic philosophy. Instead, it is a selectively enforced
methodological imperative that is used in service of maintaining disciplinary boundaries and practices; that creates conditions for epistemic and affective harms that disproportionately affect already-marginalized people in philosophy; and that both relies on and is reinforced by a disciplinary commitment to purity. Contemporary charitability practices have resulted in a charitability gap, such that those who are least likely to be interpreted charitability are disproportionately asked to offer it. And texts written by philosophers on the margins of the discipline are approached with considerably less charitability than are texts written by philosophers who are more dominantly positioned. Interpretative charity, however, need not be abandoned altogether; instead, philosophers can reimagine and transform charitability practices by de-centering charity, complicating our thinking about what it means to offer a charitable interpretation, and utilizing an impure form of charitability in our work and our pedagogies.

To conclude my introduction, I want to offer a reflection on a question that Jackie Scott has encouraged me to bear in mind throughout this project: so what? This question can be meant in many different ways, but I take her to be asking something like: “so what? Why is your project important? Why ought people engage with and understand your argument?” In a way, Jackie is perhaps asking a rather Ahmedian question: what’s the use? To what ends can my critique of charity be put? Why are those uses useful or crucial for the discipline?

My work offers three contributions within and beyond my field. First, I bring social and political concerns to discussions of philosophic charitability. Philosophical analyses of charity, with the exception of an essay by Lorna Finlayson, have tended to focus on the interpretive effects of a charitable approach. They have, however, largely missed the opportunity to engage with work in feminist philosophy and in critical philosophy of race and on the whole, they do not consider the impacts that the call for charity has on not only textual interpretations or argument
analyses, but also upon philosophic communities. Conversation about the role of the interpreter’s marginalized social identities, about the role of gendered and racialized norms of discourse that underlie our understanding of and commitment to charity, and about the power dynamics always at play within philosophic dialogue, are largely missing from the metaphilosophical literature on interpretative charity.

Second, I offer a new approach to understanding and addressing philosophy’s persistent demographic and conceptual homogeneity. Many philosophers have identified pedagogical and disciplinary practices that make philosophy hostile to women, people of color, people with disabilities, and/or LGBTQ people. According to an APA blog post by Eric Schwitzgebel:

In its 2018 membership data, the American Philosophical Association reports 26% women among members responding to a demographic survey, 74% men, and 0.2% “something else”. Similarly, in 2017, Schwitzgebel and Jennings found that 25% of faculty in U.S. departments rated in the Philosophical Gourmet Report were women and that 29% of philosophy PhD recipients placed in academic jobs were women. Data from the Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED) shows that women have earned approximately 29% of philosophy PhDs since the early 2000s. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) shows that women have received approximately 32% of philosophy Bachelor’s degrees since the 1980s.

Additionally, “in its membership data from 2018, the APA finds 80% of respondents identifying as White/Caucasian, compared to 60% in the general U.S. population. Also in 2018, White students received 84% of PhDs in philosophy, compared to 70% of PhDs overall (excluding temporary visa holders).” There has been some growth among Latinx and Asian philosophy students at all levels, but currently, Blacks or African Americans constitute 13% of the general population, 10% of Bachelor’s degree recipients overall, 5% of Philosophy Bachelor’s degree recipients, 3% of Philosophy PhD recipients (only 10 total recorded by the Survey of Earned Doctorates in 2018) and also only 3% of respondents to the APA’s demographic survey. American Indians/Alaska Natives are also underrepresented, constituting about 1.3% of the U.S. population, 0.4% of Bachelor’s degree recipients, 0.3% of Bachelor’s recipients in
Philosophy, and 1.1% of APA members who reported their race. In 2018, the SED recorded no American Indian or Alaska Native philosophy PhD recipients.

These numbers are not fully representative of the state of the field (they refer only to APA members who responded to a survey), but they do point to a persistent lack of gender and racial diversity in academic philosophy. Additionally, “in 2013, 9% of the [surveyed Pacific Division APA] program participants [in 2013] identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered [sic]. In both years, approximately 4% of the conference participants responded that they identify as “a person with a disability” (Tremain 2013, 4). To efforts to understand and transform our discipline, I bring an analysis of charitable interpretation as contributing to exclusions that many philosophers wish to address. My project’s innovations are at once diagnostic and ameliorative/reparative: I identify problems with contemporary charitability practices in addition to offering a framework for approaching charity anew. Both elements are important, in my view, for gaining a fuller understanding of charity’s problems and for understanding how and when to retain it.

I have become convinced that there are many problems with academic philosophy’s charitability practices. Even when we do not wish to enact or repeat exclusion or marginalization, when we use charity as a tool for judging whether an interpretation or critique is properly philosophical, or when we use it to navigate racism or sexism in the texts we read, our charity practices are likely to have unintended and harmful consequences. If we care about having a more diverse field than we do, then we would do well to critically examine our everyday philosophic practices in order to identify ways in which they risk alienating the very

---

5 The Philosophy Exception Project provides an extensive list of published data about philosophy’s demographics: https://philosophyexception.squarespace.com/documentation/#data
students we wish to recruit and retain. But beyond my project’s contributions to its field, or to ongoing conversations about demographics, if we care about developing knowledge dialogically, then we should be concerned that in many cases, the call for charity does not actually promote dialogue, nor does it facilitate the development of generative or just epistemic communities. If we care about not merely diversifying our discipline, but about transforming how we engage with texts and with one another, then we ought to linger with the interpretive and methodological practices that are rooted in hierarchy and disguised as neutral when they, in fact, serve to reinforce a colonial, heteropatriarchal, racist, and ableist disciplinary status quo. And if we care about textual interpretation, we should care that what appears as a kind of hermeneutic refuge can, in fact, be a way to distance ourselves from difficult but philosophically vital interpretive work.

And so, to the question with which I began this introduction, I answer: perhaps I could have read the author more charitably, but I probably will not. In the forthcoming chapters, I hope to explain, contextualize, and complicate this refusal.
CHAPTER ONE

CHARITY, HISTORY, AND METHODOLOGY: FOLLOWING CHARITY AROUND

Maybe methods are not simply tools, or if they are tools, maybe they do different things depending on who uses them, with this who being understood as not simply an individual but someone shaped by many histories—intellectual, social, other (Sara Ahmed 2019, 19).

Following Charity’s Disciplinary Uses

In this chapter, I explore charity’s status as a central interpretive method in philosophy, despite its differing and overlapping histories across the discipline. No matter where we follow charity, we end up, I contend, with a set of interpretive and argumentative commitments that ought to be problematized.¹ My aims in this chapter are threefold: first, to offer an overview of charity’s usages within various philosophical traditions; second, to characterize the role that charity plays in contemporary academic philosophy; and third (and more briefly), to connect critiques of interpretive charity to broader concerns about philosophical methodologies’ reproduction of oppressive and exclusionary power structures. Ultimately, I characterize charity as a selectively enforced methodological imperative. I argue that charity’s usefulness is not, as we tend to assume, in its ability to produce good arguments or generative interpretations; instead, charitability is used and evoked in service of maintaining disciplinary borders/boundaries. There are, in other words, two features of philosophic charitability that interact to produce social, political, and interpretive problems: first, the presumption that charity is an ahistorical, neutral,

¹ For more on following concepts around, see my discussion of Ahmed’s account of happiness in “On Resisting a Definition” below.
and necessary for interpretation and second, the selective enforcement of this method in service of excluding already-marginalized texts, thinkers, and methods from philosophical legitimacy.²

I make my argument in two parts. In Part 1, “Situating Charity Historically,” I offer a brief history of interpretive charity in philosophy and hermeneutics, noting differences but also highlighting continuities in charity’s uses and underlying philosophical commitments. Across time and across various philosophical traditions, charity is framed not merely as a virtue, but as a requirement for interpretation and argumentation. In Part 1 I also identify what falls away from contemporary explorations and uses of charity as a philosophical method when philosophers disregard the method’s historical uses. In Part 2, “What’s the Use of Charity? Charity and Method in Contemporary Philosophy,” I engage Sara Ahmed’s account of use and usefulness (Ahmed 2019), along with Alexis Shotwell and Elena Ruíz’s critiques of dominant philosophical methodologies (Shotwell 2010; Ruíz 2014) in order to identify the role that interpretative charity plays in drawing and maintaining philosophy’s disciplinary boundaries.

**Part 1: Situating Charity Historically**

I begin by following charity around philosophy and hermeneutics. There is much to be said about charity’s etymology, about the term’s non-philosophical uses, and about its colonial, classist, and ableist resonances. I explore some of these topics in Chapter 4, but in this chapter, I foreground charity’s status as an interpretive methodology in philosophy.

---

² Inclusion in the discipline of philosophy (or “counting” as “real” philosophy) is a complex political issue, and there are many reasons why one might have no interest in pursuing or accepting this inclusion. What I aim to suggest here is not that more texts or thinkers ought to be subsumed under a master category of “real philosophy.” Instead, I am interested in moments when marginalized thinkers, texts, and methods are prevented, via the call for charity, from even entering philosophical conversations.
On Resisting a Definition

My concern with charity is not a definitional one; that is, I am not aiming to uncover or identify essential features of charitability, interpretive or otherwise. Instead, I use Sara Ahmed’s approach in *The Promise of Happiness*, along with her discussion of orientation devices in *Queer Phenomenology*, as models for rethinking and resisting definitional projects. Ahmed begins *The Promise of Happiness* with the clarification that “the question that guides this book is not so much ‘what is happiness?’ but rather ‘what does happiness do?’” (Ahmed 2010, 2). She aims to trace the ways that happiness is “spoken, lived, practiced” (15)—for her, happiness functions performatively; that is, in its invocation, happiness forms and organizes our worlds. Ahmed explains that her aim is to “describe what kind of world takes shape when happiness provides a horizon” (14). She is interested in happiness’ performing of a certain orienting function for us—how does striving toward something come to structure the choices we make along the way toward it? In line with this theoretical and methodological commitment to everyday conceptions and experiences of, and with, happiness, Ahmed resists developing a new concept of happiness (14), or providing and then critiquing a list of happiness’ features. She explains that “in order to consider how happiness makes things good, I track the word *happiness*, asking what histories are evoked by the mobility of this word. I follow the word *happiness* around. I notice what is it up to, where it goes, who or what it gets associated with” (14; emphasis in original). Like Ahmed, I am not so interested in developing a notion of what charity “really is”—as though there is some essence that I can discover in order to rescue it from its own histories or difficulties. Rather, I am interested in the varied, and sometimes contradictory, ways that charity has been used and invoked. In *What’s The Use*, Ahmed explains that “to follow a word is to ask not only how it acquires the status of a concept in philosophy but how that word is exercised, rather like a
muscle, in everyday life” (Ahmed 2019, 3). My focus is a bit different from Ahmed’s, in that I am asking how charity both acquired its status of a concept or (as I frame it in this chapter) a methodology and asking how the word is exercised in philosophers’ everyday disciplinary lives.

My claim in this chapter is not that I offer a complete genealogy or a history of charity; rather, my claim is that attending to at least some of the ways in which charitable reading and interpretation have been understood in the past reveals important questions for our contemporary practices and habits around charitability. For example, in her critique of contemporary calls for charitable interpretation, Lorna Finlayson characterizes charity as a rule for criticism (69).³ Indeed, in Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking, Daniel Dennett characterizes Rapoport’s Rules for successful critical commentary as a set of steps that arguers can take in order to ensure that they have been sufficiently charitable to their “opponent” (Dennett 2013, 32-33); that is, one must reconstruct an argument in a charitable way in order to properly criticize it. But charitability was a sacred reading practice long before it was a rule for criticism—could this, perhaps, start to explain philosophy’s attachment to it? What does it mean for philosophers today that charity emerged as a way of performing interpretations of biblical and other sacred religious texts?

Despite my lack of commitment to a concrete definition of charity (or rather, my lack of commitment to offering my own definitional intervention), I have followed charity back through some of its varied histories (and in chapter 4, its etymological roots) in order to diagnose some of the problems with charity’s invocation and dominance in contemporary philosophic discourse. I borrow this focus on the problematic from Ahmed. For the purposes of her work, Ahmed

³ See the “Charity as Methodological Imperative” section of this chapter for more on Finlayson’s description of charity as a rule and on her critique of charity.
suspends the belief that happiness is a good thing (13). I am making a similar move here—I want
to suspend the belief that we should, by default or habit, engage charitably. I am, to put it
differently, suspending the belief that readers can or should always extend charity to texts or to
one another. Where do we go if we cannot go to charity? What paths emerge? What paths can we
begin to forge?

Ahmed recognizes that she risks “overemphasizing the problems with happiness by
presenting happiness as a problem” (20). She sets herself up to provide a partial (and unhappy!) account of happiness. 4 But this is a risk that Ahmed is willing to take. She explains that “if this book kills joy, then it does what it says we should do. To kill joy, as many of the texts I cite in the following pages teach us, is to open a life, to make room for life, to make room for possibility, for chance. My aim in this book is to make room” (20). My aim in this dissertation is to make room for disciplinary orientations that serve us well when we confront thinkers and texts that underserve us. Even if we ultimately want to retain a charitable path, a suspension of charity’s value might be required in order to adequately theorize other ways of approaching texts and one another. Or to make room for the other ways that already exist.

Taking a Partially Genealogical Approach to Charity

Although I resist offering a definition of what charity “really” is or should be, I am
interested in how various accounts of charity have operated throughout the history of philosophy
and hermeneutics. In this section of my chapter, I follow charity through these two intellectual
traditions. My approach draws from and is related to Foucauldian genealogical methods, but

---

4 Happiness, for Ahmed, is often used to reinforce neoliberal, heteronormative, and white supremacist notions of human flourishing and to condemn affects, emotions, and actions that disrupt these structures (because they are framed instead as disrupting happiness).
ultimately I am more interested in highlighting the *sameness* of charity’s function over time, rather than highlighting its differences, as a traditional genealogy would likely do.\(^5\)

I find several key methodological commitments in Foucauldian genealogies to be instructive for my work. For instance, genealogists are committed to challenging the notion that a concept’s history—and the meaning of this history—are sedimented or unchangeable.\(^6\) In “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” Foucault contrasts genealogy and history, suggesting that while history seeks unifying origin stories for concepts or particular events, the genealogist refuses linearity and unification (Foucault 2001, 341-342; McWhorter 2009, 52). Traditional history frames itself as concerned with what “really” happened in the past. It becomes consumed by the desire to gain mastery or control of the past (Foucault 2001, 354), even if this requires overlooking “abnormalities” or unusual events in service of offering a coherent narrative. Instead of seeking this mastery and understanding, or tracing the evolution of a concept through time, the genealogist isolates “different senses where they [the concepts] engaged in different roles” (341). For the genealogist, there is no underlying, pre-discursive essence of a concept that can be uncovered by digging through an archive or telling an objective story.\(^7\) In my account of charity throughout this dissertation, I aim to work against the notion that charity “really is” some particular thing, or that there is only one history or origin of the concept toward which philosophers can and should appeal.

---

\(^5\) A “proper” genealogy (or history) would require much more, and more detailed, analyses of primary source material. Because I have limited my genealogical and historical analysis, for the most part, to this chapter, I have had to limit my investigation further than I would like.

\(^6\) I am grateful to Eyo Ewara and to the members of the Spring 2020 Critical Philosophy of Race graduate seminar at Loyola University Chicago for helping shape my thinking about this chapter’s relationship to Foucauldian genealogies.

\(^7\) See Feder 2007, 19 for more on this point.
In his reading of Nietzsche’s uses of genealogy, Foucault emphasizes that genealogy’s “duty is not to demonstrate that the past actively exists in the present, having imposed a predetermined form on all its vicissitudes” (346). For Foucault, a genealogy does not (and should not) locate the past in the present, because this would treat historical events or concepts as concrete and unchanging, rather than attending to the ways in which concepts and the meanings of past events change over time and are put to different uses. In my case, a genealogy of charity would not claim that charity’s invocations and meanings are exerting some kind of predetermined force upon us—and our academic discipline—today. Although I do contend that charity tends to be used in similar ways across different historical contexts, I leave open the possibility that charity may function differently in the future.

I also find a genealogical methodological orientation to be useful because genealogical accounts are committed to interrupting the feeling of givenness with which some concepts or events have become imbued. In *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times*, Ann Laura Stoler examines concepts often used in decolonial scholarship to evaluate how well they are working to make sense of colonialism’s history and ongoing presence. She wonders what kind of rethinking or retooling decolonial theorists might need to do if they want to understand colonialism’s “durable presence” (Stoler 2016, 9). Stoler, drawing from Foucault’s corpus, contends that “we may profit from taking seriously what goes into their [concepts’] ‘ready-made’ quality and the attributes that make them ‘obvious’” (21). She is interested, in other words, in what has happened to make some concepts emerge as useful tools while others fade into the theoretical background, or are never developed at all. Stoler is interested in the concepts we use to make
sense of colonialism—in a similar methodological vein, I ask: what “goes into” charity’s seeming utility? ⁸

In her critique of philosophic charitability, Lorna Finlayson identifies charity’s feeling of ready-madness:

Since these judgements [about the importance and allocation of charitability] are generally made in the course of talking about something else—or perhaps just because the matter is thought to be obvious or uninteresting—there has been little attention given to the question of what the value of philosophical charity actually is, why we should prize it, and how we might detect its presence, absence, or violation. (Finlayson 2015, 66; emphasis in original)

Charity’s importance for philosophy and criticism is taken to be obvious. I, like Finlayson, am interested in whether charity is as philosophically useful as we tend to assume. I am also interested in why we seem to rely on a notion of charity even when we could be better-served pedagogically by approaching a text, author, and/or interlocutor in a different way.

To put it another way: I share several general methodological commitments of Foucauldian genealogy. My account of charity’s history and my analysis of charity throughout this dissertation (1) rejects the notion of an origin of the concept; (2) is critical of what appears given; (3) highlights historical shifts; (4) is committed to there being a plurality of reasons for charity coming to be what way it is; (5) is interested in how charity forms (even as it is also formed by) philosophic discourse; (6) acknowledges that the concepts we inherit are

---

⁸ Ladelle McWhorter offers a Foucauldian genealogy in *Racism and Sexual Oppression in North America*. She, too, finds value in Foucault’s genealogical method because it can “compromise those [normalizing and disciplining] regimes’ hold over our daily lives and afford possibilities for creative disruptions” (McWhorter 2009, 51). These regimes can be undone, or done differently, but only if we recognize the ways that they construct our lives and ourselves. A genealogical approach works because “showing how particular norms have emerged historically, shifted, and even sometimes disappeared entirely robs them of the basis for the claim to be natural, simply ‘given,’ or universal” (51). A genealogical understanding of charity, for instance, assumes that charity is not a philosophical given—or at least, those who claim that it is must be recognized as offering only one socially and historically particular account of charity and, indeed, of philosophy.
multiplicitious and incoherent; and, most importantly, (7) takes a concept’s *function* as key for understanding how it may be rendered otherwise.

Although I borrow from genealogical approaches to conceptual history, I am also departing from strictly genealogical methodological commitments in two important ways. First, my focus is far narrower than would be found in a more standard genealogy (though to what extent we can speak about a “standard” genealogy is itself an interesting genealogical question!). In *Society Must Be Defended*, Foucault reflects on his own genealogical method, saying, “if you like, we can give the name ‘genealogy’ to this coupling together of scholarly erudition and local memories, which allows us to constitute a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of that knowledge in contemporary tactics” (Foucault 2003/1997, 8). My historical analysis is, in contrast to Foucault’s characterization of genealogy here, mostly concerned with “scholarly erudition” regarding interpretative charity (though I turn to the term’s everyday uses in chapter 2). I do discuss the implications of the scholarly orientation toward charity for those first encountering the academic discipline of philosophy, but among the varied strategic or tactical uses to which charity is put, I am interested in one: the tendency toward using charity as a litmus test for discerning what is and is not philosophy.

The second way in which my project is not a straightforwardly genealogical one is that I *am* suggesting some degree of continuity across historical periods rather than highlighting or identifying historical differences. I claim that charity in philosophy is doing the same thing—or the same kind of thing—in various philosophical traditions and across many historical periods,

---

9 Foucault goes on to claim that “genealogy is the tactic which, once it has described these local discursivities, brings into play the desubjugated knowledges that have been released from them” (Foucault 1997, 10-11) In her discussion of genealogy as tactic, Ellen Feder explains that Foucault “is interested, as he put it in an interview the year before, in ‘the possibility of a discourse which would be both true and strategically effective, the possibility of a historical truth which could have a political effect’” (19).
even when it appears in vastly different sub-disciplines. Even though there is not, in my view, one origin point or essence of the concept and even though there is not one coherent story to tell about why charity functions in the ways it does, charity does seem to keep playing the same role over and over.

Although I do not offer a purely historical/genealogical analysis of charity, the term’s past uses are part of what we need to understand in order to explore charity’s contemporary invocations and harms. Although charity is often, as I suggest above, put to similar methodological uses, calls for charity are rooted in many different interpretive traditions. It is beyond the scope of my project to adjudicate rival traditions and their uses of charity, but my overview of charity’s past uses illuminates the ways in which contemporary philosophers often seem to be “talking past” one another when we use the word *charity*. I am interested not in tidying the “mess” of charity’s history; rather, my aim is to explore what this mess is doing as calls for and practices of charity circulate in the discipline today.

In “Trust as a Hermeneutic Principle,” Petru Bejan offers a history of charitable interpretation, tracing an attitude (if not a language) of charitability from as far back as Plato’s *Republic* to 20th-century philosophy of language. In his view, there have been many ways of framing calls for and practices of interpretive charity, but all advocate for a trustful orientation of the interpreter toward the text or to one’s conversation partner(s) (Bejan 2010, 41). Bejan begins by claiming that the idea of charity “is prefigured in the allegoric interpretation of myths, meant to ‘save’ them from a ‘profane’ meaning, as requested by, for example, Plato in his *Republic*” (41). I also see charity prefigured in Plato’s exchange with Thrasymachus in the first book of *The

\[10\] I am grateful to Magnus Ferguson for bringing Bejan’s essay to my attention.
Republic: Socrates asks that Thrasymachus be understanding of his mistakes since they are exploring difficult questions about definitions of justice. Thrasymachus accuses Socrates of spouting nonsense rather than offering a real answer to the question of what justice is. In response, Socrates pleads, “don’t be too hard on us, Thrasymachus, for if Polemarchus and I made an error in our investigation, you should know that we did so unwillingly…. It’s surely far more appropriate for us to be pitied by you clever people than to be given rough treatment” (336e2). The language of charity is not yet in use—the term eleos (”Ελεος”) translates to “pity,” but already there is a call for a kind of trust or faith in service of learning more from a text or a conversation than one might if they approached it with a more suspicious attitude.

Moving from Ancient Greek philosophy to the New Testament, Bejan claims that “the exigency of charity (caritas) has been invoked first by Paul (1 Corinthians, 13)” (Bejan 2010, 41). And later, for Augustine, caritas eliminates errors in interpretation and helps avoid hubristic or self-centered interpretation (42). To study and interpret scripture, for Augustine, requires approaching that scripture with a loving/charitable spirit (see book 1, chapter 41 of On Christian Doctrine). In the first book of On Christian Doctrine (De Doctrina Cristiana), Augustine explains that charity is “the motion of the soul toward the enjoyment of God for His own sake, and the enjoyment of one’s self and of one’s neighbor for the sake of God” (On Christian Doctrine, 3.10.16). In Understanding and Rationality, Oliver Scholtz explains that for Augustine, “the positive interpretive rule of building up Caritas, love for God and neighbor, plays a key role for the entire study of Scripture” (Scholtz 1999, 31; translation my own). The presence of caritas in interpretation “becomes the criterion for whether the Scripture has been understood [Augustine says]: ‘So whoever believes to have understood the whole scripture or at
least some of it, but does not build up that double love for God and for others through this understanding, did not understand them”” (31; translation my own).11

D.W. Robinson Jr. explains that “to Christian thinkers of late antiquity, charity was the gift of the Holy Spirit sent by Christ” (Robinson Jr. 1958, x). For Augustine, “although the Scriptures are the work of a variety of human authors, they have a single divine inspiration and may hence be considered as a work of unified intention” (xi-xii). Charity, then, works because God intends12 all correct interpretations of scripture. Augustine is what we might call a hermeneutic objectivist; he believes that interpreter of scripture must, by necessity, practice charity in order to correctly interpret scripture. Any understanding of Scripture requires that the interpreter perform this love of God and neighbor for God’s sake and not for their own pleasure—one must be motivated by this love and must search for this love in the text.13

My brief treatment of Augustine’s account of caritas is only one small part of a long tradition of charitable interpretation in Christian theology and hermeneutics. In these contexts, charity is framed not merely as a “best practice” of interpretation, but a sacred practice—one of love.14 Indeed, according to Augustine, “whoever finds a lesson there [in Scripture] useful to the building of charity, even though he has not said what the author may be shown to have intended in that place, has not been deceived, nor is he lying in any way. (On Christian Doctrine, I, 36, 40).”

---

11 Augustine’s remarks were translated by D.W. Robinson, Jr. as “whoever, therefore, thinks that he understands the divine Scriptures or any part of them so that it does not build the double love of God and of our neighbor does not understand it at all” (Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, I, 36, 40).

12 Intend, in this case, is being used in the broadest possible terms to indicate concepts like intention, permission, and allowing for.

13 I thank Carlo Tarantino for assistance in identifying this passage of Scholtz’s book as relevant to my discussion of Augustine. I am grateful to Abram Capone for helping me better-understand the theological motivations and implications of Augustine’s caritas.

14 I return to this notion of charity as love in chapter 4.
40). Authorial intent and textual ambiguity are not, for Augustine, the result of interpretative mistakes, so long as the interpreter practiced charity. On Augustine’s view, charity is not a tool to be used in order to arrive at a correct interpretation, or to evaluate an argument; rather, any interpretation arrived at via charity is necessarily correct, because it is divinely inspired and God does not make mistakes.\textsuperscript{15}

By the 1600s, according to Bejan, a lack of sufficient charitability was often framed as central causes of interpretative mistakes; that is, “the sources of misunderstandings are not, therefore, objective only; they hold to the competencies, intentions, and dispositions of the interpreter” (Bejan 2010, 42). Without the proper interpretive attitude or orientation, readers will misinterpret texts. According to Bejan, in 1652, theologian Johannes Clauberg explained that “in case of doubt, one must choose the most benevolent interpretation, consider all the arguments, accept a multitude of equally plausible meanings, must not damn without a valid reason, must not correct a slight error through a too brutal rejection” (42). This interpretive benevolence requires an interpreter to assume that the author is intelligent, knows what he is talking about, and wants to express himself clearly (42).

Bejan points out that while some thinkers of the modern period (like Christian Wolff and Georg Friedrich Meier) frame good interpretation as requiring agreement with the author (42), for others like Friedrich Schlegel and Friedrich Schleiermacher, this agreement is hermeneutically misguided because the interpreter understands the author better than the author.

\textsuperscript{15} Note that Augustine’s discussion of \textit{caritas} is limited to religious texts rather than secular ones. On an Augustinian model, it would be profoundly strange to require charitable readings of authors who were not inspired by God.
understands themselves (42); We might also recall Kant’s discussion of Plato in the *First Critique*:

when we compare the thoughts that an author expresses about a subject, in ordinary speech as well as in writings, it is not at all unusual to find that we understand him [*sic*] even better than he understood himself, since he may not have determined his concept sufficiently and hence sometimes spoke, or even thought, contrary to his own intention (A314/B370).

For Kant, our concepts (and the language we have for them) seem to escape us—the author is not the ultimate authority over their text and in fact, their work might undermine or contradict their stated aims. Later, Hans-Georg Gadamer offers a similar view; he claims that, “not just occasionally but always, the meaning of a text goes beyond its author” (Gadamer 1991, 2006; quoted in Alcoff 2003, 246).\(^{16}\)

Charity in Philosophy of Language

As conversations and disagreements about interpretive trust versus suspicion circulated in continental philosophy and hermeneutics,\(^{17}\) analytic philosophers developed a quite different notion of charity. It was here that the oft-cited “principle of charity” emerged. In 1959, Neil Wilson published “Substances Without Substrata” in *Review of Metaphysics*, which brought the principle of charity into Anglo-American philosophy (Bejan 2010, 43). Wilson frames charity as a maximization of truth. Given a list of propositions and asked to determine what they refer to, he contends that we should choose the referent that renders the largest number of the propositions true (Wilson 1959, 532). Interestingly, Wilson does not provide an explanation of why he uses the language of charity, nor does he cite work from hermeneutics on interpretive

---

\(^{16}\) I engage Gadamer’s work further in the “Gadamerian Charity?” section below.

\(^{17}\) See Ricoeur 1970 for an articulation of suspicious reading. See also Felski 2015 for an explication of how suspicious reading has been taken up (and how it has departed from Ricoeur’s hermeneutics) in contemporary critical theory. I return to practices of suspicious reading in chapter 5).
generosity, trust, openness, or benevolence. A year later, W.V.O. Quine adapted Wilson’s
principle of charity in his account of radical translation (Bejan 2010, 43). Bejan explains that
“Quine invites us to imagine the situation of an ethnologist making contact with a foreign
civilization for the first time, of whose language, forms of life, and culture he had been ignorant”
(43). In situations like these, the interpreter must “translate” words and gestures “in a vocabulary
that is compatible with the common communicative intentions” (44). This charitable translation
will, in Quine’s view, help the interpreter not make presumptions about primitivity. We should,
of course, note that here Quine already positions himself (or the interpreter) as authoritative,
taking and changing what he is presented with so that it matches his own conceptual and
linguistic resources. What is framed as a way to communicate across difference seems, in fact, to
erase difference and to repeat colonial modes of knowing and communicating.

This problem continues, in my view, with Donald Davidson’s notion of radical
interpretation (Davidson 1973/2001, 137; Bejan 2010, 44). Davidson contends that there are no
incommensurable conceptual differences among different cultural or linguistic communities
(Davidson 1973, 183). In “Radical Interpretation,” Davidson explains that in order to assign
meaning to language that is unfamiliar, one must begin by “assigning truth conditions to alien
sentences that make native speakers right when plausibly possible, according, of course, to our
own view of what is right” (Davidson 1984, 137). The interpreter ought to assume not only that
this “other” is saying something correct, but that this “correct” statement is correct in the sense
that it conforms (or can be made to conform) to one’s own language and interpretive framework.
Bejan points out that this process of bridging conceptual (and communicative) difference
requires listeners to
bet on the fact that the speaker ‘knows’ what he states, believes that it is true what he states and that most of what he states is true. This triple bet sums up the principle of ‘charity.’ There is no interpretation and comprehension unless the interpreter presumes that there is coherence and diminishment of irrationality. (Bejan 2010, 44)

When interpreting an interlocutor, in other words, I must first assume that this person knows what they are saying to me (even if I do not understand what this is). Second, I must assume that the speaker believes they are saying something true, and third, I must assume that most of what the speaker says is, in fact, true. These assumptions are not ethical imperatives—they are necessary for understanding one’s conversation partner (44). As Bejan puts it, both Quine and Davidson presume that to understand some “other,” an interpreter must “presume they appeal to the same ‘logic.’” But instead of telling us what we must do in order to understand (Gadamer), Davidson rather helps us to understand what it is that we are doing when we understand” (45). 18 Davidson does not take the historical approach that Gadamer does—we will see that for Gadamer, history provides the horizon against which we interpret (Gadamer 1989, 301-306). We will also see that while Davidson presumes a foundational sameness among interlocutors, Gadamer asserts that understanding only emerges when interlocutors recognize and take seriously their differences (see Alcoff 238-239 for more on this point).

While Bejan describes Quine’s use of the ethnologist encountering the “foreign civilization,” he does not explore the underlying colonial logic of the example or problematize the presumption that the interpreter has the authority to determine his interlocutor’s logical framework (rather than positing a collaborative co-construction of meaning). Linda Martín Alcoff points out that

18 I engage more deeply with Gadamerian hermeneutics in the following section.
Davidson’s view might easily be read as a form of imperialist anthropology in which ‘we’ take ourselves to be the civilized, enlightened culture whose own belief system has been exhaustively put to the test of reason and is thus entirely rational, and who will therefore accept only those beliefs of other cultures that fundamentally conform to our own. (Alcoff 2003, 238)

José Medina offers a related critique published that same year, explaining that Davidson’s principle of charity (which uses and expands upon Quine’s ethnologist example) demands “that we interpret the speech of others in a way that maximizes agreement” (Medina 2003, 472). Performed properly, a charitable interpretation can, for Davidson, almost always offer a settling of difference and/or disagreement among frameworks that may initially seem radically incommensurable. If it turned out that, when we charitably encountered what Davidson calls a “logical alien” who did not share our concepts and normative principles, “we would have no reason whatsoever to ascribe thought or language to her because the sounds or marks produced by her would be uninterpretable” (464). This “logical alien,” in Davidson’s view, is not possible because we can settle differences—even if we cannot erase them—by performing a charitable interpretation. 19

For Medina, the problems with this kind of charitable approach—and with Davidson’s assumption that we cannot make sense of radical and incommensurable conceptual differences existing between languages (471)—are twofold. First, Medina contends that we could, in fact, encounter others “whose behavior exhibits radical deviations from our own concepts and normative principles” (470) and who we would not be able to understand. But we can still treat

---

19 See Finlayson 2016 for an account of the differences between Davidson’s principle of charity and what she calls “the informal norm” (Finlayson 2015, 68) of charity in philosophy. One key difference: the informal norm of charity applies not only to language, but to “theories, schools of thought, statements, and so on” (69). In Finlayson’s view, the informal norm of charity’s uses are broader, and its rationale is not as much about meaning-making as it is about building an argument strong enough to “take down” one’s interlocutor. I engage Finlayson’s account of charitability in the “Charity as Methodological Imperative” section of this chapter.
these “aliens” as potential interlocutors without needing to assume that they do or can agree on beliefs. Second, Medina is critical of the way that Davidson’s account privileges the observer’s stance (474): “in the process of interpretation there is only one subjectivity at work; the voice of the other becomes a set of interpreted noises that only the interpreter can turn into meaningful signs” (474). This approach makes alien concepts invisible unless they are translated through an interpreter’s perspective. Basically, when we adopt Davidson’s principle of charity, we already exclude the possibility that “others may enrich our horizon of understanding” (475) because we assume instead that our interpretation will be the only one that makes others’ horizons intelligible. On the whole, in Medina’s view, “aliens are better off without Davidson’s charity” (464).

**Gadamerian Charity?**

Although he does not use the language of charity, Hans-Georg Gadamer’s account of openness and dialogue as crucial for hermeneutics (Gadamer 1989, 271) has been characterized by some scholars as a call for charitable interpretation. For example, Joel Weinsheimer expands upon Gadamer’s discussion of openness to suggest that there is no interpretation at all (and thus no meaning-making or communication) without charity (Weinsheimer 2000, 421). Charity, then, is not an interpretative attitude that we consciously take up after weighing its merits against those of other interpretative tools or methods; instead, charity grounds any other method we choose. Curtis Holtzen and Matthew Hill claim that “in contrast to modernist hermeneutics, which often champion suspicion, distrust, and methodological doubt, Gadamer’s hermeneutic of trust utilizes a principle of charity, or as Gadamer calls it, ‘good will’” (Holtzen and Hill 2016, 87). In his

---

20 I return to Weinsheimer’s claim in “Charity as a Methodological Imperative.”
“encounter” with Jacques Derrida in which the two disagree about the meaning and role of language, dialogue, and interpretation, Gadamer explains what he means by “good will”:

One does not go about identifying the weaknesses of what another person says in order to prove that one is always right, but one seeks instead as far as possible to strengthen the other’s viewpoint so that what the other person has to say becomes illuminating. Such an attitude seems essential to me for any understanding at all to come about. (Gadamer 1989, 55)

Gadamer maintains that without an attitude of good will, language never comes to make sense or facilitate communication.

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer contends that this attitude of trust and openness is one that recognizes the subject as always being situated within a tradition—he explains that “to be situated within a tradition does not limit the freedom of knowledge but makes it possible” (Gadamer 1989, 354). One must be ready to allow this tradition to speak to them in order to achieve generative interaction or interpretation. Gadamer explains that “in human relations the important thing is, as we have seen, to experience the Thou truly as a Thou—i.e. not to overlook his claim but to let him really say something to us” (354). If we do not approach “the Thou” as having something to tell us, then we cannot enter into an interpretive interaction at all.

Gadamer contends that interpretation also requires an “anticipation of perfection” of a text or interlocutor. Also translated as “anticipation of completeness” and “fore-conception of completeness”21 this refers again to the conditions of possibility for understanding: “when we read a text we always assume its completeness, and only when this assumption proves mistaken—i.e., the text is not intelligible—do we begin to suspect the text and try to discover how it can be remedied” (Gadamer 1989, 294). To reiterate: this hermeneutic trust (or good will,

---

21 The German phrase is *der Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit*. 
as it is sometimes translated) is not an ethical imperative for Gadamer—it is an ontological one.\footnote{There is some scholarly conversation about whether there is on some level also an ethical imperative driving Gadamer’s hermeneutics. Alcoff contends that “For Gadamer, the necessity of assuming the truth of a tradition has an ethical dimension as well as an epistemological one, for it involves an attitude of openness and receptivity to what the Other—in the sense of a partner in dialogue, a text, or a contrasting tradition—has to say (Alcoff 2003, 238-239). It is important to note that truth and meaning, for Gadamer are not uncovered or discovered; they are arrived at in conversation among interlocutors and evaluated against contextually variable standards.}

For Gadamer, we do not choose to grant or withhold hermeneutic trust. It is only through this good will and this assumption of completeness that we are able to interpret or communicate at all (Holtzen and Hill 2016, 89-90; Gadamer 1989, 55; 294;). This attitude of good will has “nothing at all to do with ethics. Even immoral beings try to understand one another…. Whoever opens his mouth wants to be understood; otherwise, one would neither speak nor write” (55).\footnote{In her essay “On Complex Communication,” María Lugones complicates the notion that all language seeks to be understood. Often, members of marginalized groups seek, with their communicative acts, to remain unintelligible or illegible to dominant groups (Lugones 2006, 75).} To put it another way, if we take good will, openness, and/or the fore-conception of completeness to be forms of charitability, then charitability is a condition for the possibility of interpreting at all. It is not something that we can do without, because to describe and critique charity already requires charitability.

Although Gadamer leaves the social and political implications of this hermeneutic trust unexplored, others have since taken them up.\footnote{Linda Martín Alcoff, for example, places Gadamer’s work in conversation with phenomenology, poststructuralism, feminist theory, and critical philosophy of race in Visible Identities. For some explorations of Gadamer’s relevance for feminist projects, see Feminist Interpretations of Hans-Georg Gadamer. In her introduction to the volume, Lorraine Code offers one explanation of what is missing in Gadamer’s work: the sheer force of tradition for Gadamer, in its breadth and depth and in the difficulty of discerning its “outside”; and Gadamer’s failure to address the uneven distributions of power and privilege in human societies, in consequence of which some groups of people are more ineluctably subject to the authority of tradition than others—these factors, for many feminists, outweigh even the conceptual innovations, themes, and ideas that are markedly consonant with feminist projects. (Code 2003, 10) Jürgen Habermas offers an even stronger critique: that Gadamer’s philosophy cannot address questions of power and privilege because there is no way, in Gadamer’s hermeneutics, to objectively evaluate or critique the traditions.}

For example, in her contribution to Feminist
Interpretations of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Linda Martín Alcoff identifies features of Gadamer’s hermeneutics that are useful for feminism broadly and that resonate with feminist epistemologies in particular (Alcoff 2003, 255). Alcoff compares Gadamer’s notion of openness with Davidson’s radical interpretation. She quotes Gadamer as reminding his reader that:

> a person trying to understand a text is prepared for it to tell him something. That is why a hermeneutically trained consciousness must be, from the start, sensitive to the text’s alterity. But this kind of sensitivity involves neither ‘neutrality’ with respect to content nor the extinction of one’s self, but the foregrounding and appropriation of one’s own foremeanings and prejudices. (Gadamer quoted in Alcoff 2003, 236).

Alcoff, like Medina, is critical of Davidson’s disregard of any cultural, social, or historical horizon from which the hypothetical anthropologist theorizes. As Alcoff puts it, Davidson’s “statement of the Principle of Charity includes no reflective acknowledgment concerning one’s own prejudgements or the effects of one’s own ‘social conditioning,’ even in regard to judgements about our cultural Others” (237). Gadamer, by contrast, acknowledges that these prejudgements are necessarily formed by our own particular and limited cultural and social location. Alcoff contends that compared to Davidson’s charity, Gadamer’s account of understanding is “not only more politically palatable, but also more plausible as an account of what actually happens in interpretative encounters where, if interpretation is successful, the self is changed in the process” (238).

Later in Visible Identities, Alcoff makes use of Gadamer’s hermeneutics in her analysis of race, gender, and their role in constructing the self (Alcoff 2006). She explains that for Gadamer, “understanding occurs when one places oneself within the tradition of which the text is of which we are a part and because these traditions often include ideological mechanisms that mask injustice (Habermas 1986, 264-270; Warnke 1987, 116). Gadamer’s deferral to tradition, furthermore, leaves many oppressive structures unchallenged and even tacitly endorses their existence (Warnke 1987, 136-137).
a part, thus opening oneself up to what the text has to say” (Alcoff 2006, 101). It is not that we should—or that we even could—transport ourselves into the historical tradition that shaped the text with which we engage. But without being open to the text’s tradition and its otherness, and without considering the text’s social location along with our own, we cannot understand or transform the text, ourselves, or our social worlds.25

Gadamer’s dialogical approach to understanding and interpretation offers an importantly different account of charitability (if we even wish to retain the language of charitability) than the accounts I have described thus far. For Gadamer, “openness to the other, then, involves recognizing that I myself must accept some things that are against me, even though no one else forces me to do so” (Gadamer 1989, 355). Davidson, by contrast, assumes that meaning emerges from a space of fundamental stability, in which any language has to be translated into one’s own (Alcoff 2003, 239). Gadamer contends that openness to disagreement and difference is necessary in order to interact with another (be they another subject or a text). Gadamer’s openness refers to the acceptance that sometimes people are going to advance claims that are “against me” and that in order to understand and respond to those claims, I need to be open to those receiving them as something that stands against me.26 There is room in Gadamer for difference and disagreement to stand alongside a form of charity, but whether charity is worth retaining as a methodological tool in philosophy is not, in my view, a question to which Gadamerian hermeneutics can adequately respond.

25 For more on the tension between tradition and situatedness in Gadamer’s work, see Alcoff 2003; Freundenberger 2003.

26 I am grateful to Giancarlo Tarantino for highlighting this aspect of Gadamerian openness and for offering feedback on my discussion of Gadamer’s hermeneutics.
Historical Continuities

To summarize: In Plato, we see a call for pity functioning similarly to contemporary calls for charity: one is to be understanding that philosophy is difficult, and so we should treat our fellow philosophers well and not become angry with them when they make mistakes or fail to be as clear as we would like them to be. Much later, in Christian theological hermeneutics, charity (or the Latin *caritas*) is an affective and theological attitude toward the text—performing *caritas* is a sacred practice, a way to see God in a text. In Gadamerian hermeneutics, trust and openness are framed as conditions for the possibility of interpretation. Without this trust (or good faith), there is nothing about which interpreters can disagree. And even as conversations about faith and suspicion emerged in hermeneutics, analytic philosophers developed their own notion of charity, which seems to ignore affectivity and historical awareness in favor of framing charity as a set of assumptions about truth conditions and language that erase conceptual differences. Today, I see charity evoked in an even more general way—it is often defined quickly (or assumed to already be understood) without being examined or problematized. The concept is not historically grounded or examined in detail, but it *is*, we seem to think, required for good philosophy.

Philosophers tend not to specify how we are understanding charity when we call for it or when we claim to practice it ourselves. In a way this is unsurprising—offering a detailed historical account of a methodological principle every time we use it is impractical, particularly since we are typically using charity to get somewhere *else* in a text. Charity (and various charitability practices that go by different names) does many different things: to call for charity is to appeal on some level to a particular set of sacred practices (though this religious grammar is far from universal and it not often referenced in contemporary academic philosophy); to assert the dominance of the interpreter rather than frame interpretation as a collaborative project (as in
Davidson’s principle of charity); and/or to frame openness as a prerequisite for understanding. Although our contemporary uses of charity are not always doing all of these same things, to call for charity is to evoke or echo at least one—and likely more—of these valences.

The above summary glosses over discussions of interpretation that are found within each of the eras and schools of thought to which I refer. My goal in summarizing these quite different notions of what it might mean to be charitable is not, as I explain in this chapter’s introduction, to offer a comprehensive account of charitability. Instead, I highlight a few of charity’s uses in order to suggest that we linger over our own calls for interpretive charity. Despite these differences in conceptions of charity (or hermeneutic generosity, or good will, or caritas, or the principle of charity), when we call for charity in philosophy we tend to disregard or flatten these differences in order to make charity perform the orienting work we want it to do. This disciplinary silence around our inheritance of charity ultimately elides the historical contexts that make charity’s interpretive and dialogic commitments more obvious. To put it another way: I suspect that one reason people are sometimes surprised to hear critiques of charity, or have never questioned charity’s value/importance, is because charity is so rarely historicized. This method did not emerge ex nihilo but its history is backgrounded. Treating charity as an ahistorical method is one way of avoiding the problems that a charitable orientation toward a text can create or perpetuate. Failing to historicize the method of charitability allows philosophers to avoid confronting its embeddedness in social and political inequality.

---

27 We may want to maintain, in line with both Gadamer and Davidson, that for dialogue to occur at all, we must assume that our interlocutor has something to say to us. But this is so rarely what we seem to mean when we call for charity in philosophy that for the remainder of my dissertation, I will bracket this highly general conception of charity.
As I said in the “Genealogy” section above, in attending to some of the historical differences in charity’s uses, I have actually noticed moments of sameness: charity, whether a principle for adjudicating conceptual differences or a hermeneutic orientation, is positioned as necessary for understanding and communication. I am not assuming here an underlying concept of charity that makes jumps across historical eras, continents, and subdisciplines, but I do want to highlight the similarities in how charity is framed and used, more than I want to highlight the differences. In my view, something important is revealed in this attending to the ways in which, despite charity’s different histories and uses, one particular function seems consistent: charity, however we understand its definition, is required for good philosophy. To put it another way, charity is a methodological imperative.

**What’s the Use of Charity? Charity and Method in Contemporary Philosophy**

In her 2019 book, *What’s the Use?*, Ahmed “follows” the word *use* around, as she has done with *happiness*, *will*, and *diversity* in her earlier work (see Ahmed 2010; 2014; and 2012, respectively). She is interested, as I explain in my introduction, in the worldmaking and world-orienting effects of this ubiquitous term. *What’s the Use?* is, as Jack Halberstam describes in the book’s blurb, a critical phenomenology of *use*. Ahmed does not follow *use* around everywhere it goes—she is most interested in how the notion of use deployed in service of evolutionary biology, eugenic thinking, disciplinary power, utilitarian logics, and universities. Ahmed also explores the effects of use, emphasizing the increasingly-sedimented effects of repeated use—the more a path is used, the more that path is likely to be used in the future, even as that path is also worn out or worn away by this overuse. Particular horizons, in Ahmed’s view, are brought into view by the repeated use of objects, terms, spaces, concepts, and texts. What worldmaking
power, she asks, does a *queer use* offer to those who wish to deviate from established patterns and practices?

The second part of this chapter is concerned with a very particular use: charity’s use as a philosophical methodology. The disregard for charity’s history as an interpretive method can produce decontextualized calls for and practices of charitability that, in my view, are of limited use today. We bring charity’s histories with us when we deploy charity as philosophical method and in this section, I follow some of these contemporary uses. More specifically, I explore charity’s construction as a methodological imperative that is, in practice, ambiguously defined, only selectively enforced, and imbued with hidden content. Charity’s ambiguity, in other words, allows it to function as a tool for selectively enforcing disciplinary boundaries. To say that charity is ambiguous is not to make an original claim—I summarize Lorna Finlayson and Tom Stern’s analyses of interpretative charity’s ambiguity below. In my view, however, it is important that we understand charity’s ambiguity as part of how it functions as a tool for exclusion and marginalization.

**Charity as Methodological Imperative**

Bejan ends his historical account of interpretive charity with a description of Davidson’s radical interpretation, but the call for charity can also be found in several contemporary pedagogical materials. In his widely-used “How to Read Philosophy” handout for first-time philosophy students, Dave Concepción suggests that “fair-minded readers will practice the principle of charity. According to the *principle of charity*, one should give one’s opponents the

28 See “Charity as a Method with Hidden Content” below for a discussion of the phrase “hidden content.”
benefit of the doubt; one should respond to the best thing that someone who disagrees with you could say even if they didn’t notice it (Concepción 2004, 365; emphasis in original).

Students are to assume the argument’s strength in order to accurately understand the material they read. And in their book *The Philosopher’s Toolkit: A Compendium of Philosophical Concepts and Methods*, Julian Baggini and Peter Fosl explain that “the ‘Principle of Charity’ states that interpreters should seek to maximize the soundness of others’ arguments and truth of their claims by rendering them in the strongest way reasonable” (Baggini and Fosl 2010, 115).

In her 2015 book chapter on Rawlsian political philosophy, Lorna Finlayson identifies charity as political, or politically motivated. In “Foul Play: The Norm of Philosophical Charity,” Finlayson offers a critique of what she calls “the informal norm of philosophic charity” (Finlayson 2016, 69). Although she recognizes the long history of practicing and advocating for charitable or generous interpretation in hermeneutics and an account of “the principle of charity” in analytic philosophy of language (see my discussion of Wilson, Davidson, and Medina above), for Finlayson, the informal norm of charity is not straightforwardly connected to either of these particular traditions (69). In her view, the informal norm of charity, rather than being (as Gadamer suggests) the grounds upon which understanding of language or discourse is built, is “a rule of conduct for criticism” (69; emphasis in original). We are assumed, she explains, to be better arguers if we are responding to the strongest version of an argument. The call for

---

29 During my involvement with the American Association for Philosophy Teachers (AAPT), I have repeatedly heard several instructors identify teaching students intellectual humility and charity as two of their central teaching goals. Charity is not merely useful for reading philosophy; it is a way of thinking and being that philosophy instructors often seek to instill in our students. I have also just recently seen a “How To Teach Intellectual Charity” workshop advertised to philosophy teachers (run by the chair of Harvard’s philosophy department and Thinker Analytix): https://thinkeranalytix.org/harvard-argument-mapping-intellectual-charity/?fbclid=IwAR2jSAIra2GL9FWRqKo3j2y-y5vG2HmdZSIYVP7U5sTJrF-T6IRzFlwGqO
philosophic charity, then, is “the demand that when we criticize others, we do so on the basis of an interpretation of those others which makes their positions as defensible as possible” (68; emphasis in original).

I have problematized the move to separate invocations of charity today from charitable practices throughout the history of philosophy, but it is striking to me that Finlayson’s distinction between the informal norm and the narrower, more technical uses of the term mirrors the distinction that philosophers often make implicitly when we ask for or practice charitability without historicizing or contextualizing our own understanding of the term. Without offering this context, we use charity in ways that appear universal or somehow “tradition-neutral,” which serves to further-entrench us in our own philosophical traditions and discourages us from reflecting upon our own philosophical commitments.30 I suggested in Part 1 that charitability is not typically framed as one among various equally viable modes of philosophic interpretation or engagement. Finlayson calls it a norm and a virtue but I want to make a stronger claim here: charitability is a selectively enforced imperative.

My contention that charity is an imperative may appear to resonate with the claim in philosophical hermeneutics that charity, or something like it, is not a virtue but a condition for the possibility of interpreting at all (see, for example, Weinsheimer 2000, 409). In this project, however, I am not particularly interested in a Gadamerian discussion of conditions for interpretation (and the concomitant discussions of prejudice or openness). I am interested, however in the way in which, even though calls for charity in contemporary philosophy are not necessarily referring to an ontological a priori for all textual interpretation, they are framed as a

30 I have borrowed the phrase “tradition-neutral” from Carlo Tarantino.
requirement or precondition for doing good philosophy—or indeed, for doing philosophy at all. Although Finlayson does not use the language of imperative (she instead characterizes charity as a methodological virtue), several of her remarks are suggestive of an imperative. Finlayson claims that “in the analytic tradition, at least, to describe something as ‘uncharitable’ is to refuse it recognition as a serious philosophical criticism” (Finlayson 2015, 66). Without meeting some (ambiguous) standard of charitability, a claim, a text, an argument, or an interlocutor can be quickly dismissed. To receive any uptake—even disagreement or critique—one must demonstrate a willingness and ability to be charitable. For Finlayson, charity itself is not the problem; instead, the problem lies in philosophers’ lack of acknowledgement that standards and criteria for charitability are contextually dependent and political, rather than universal or neutral.

To put this imperative another way: philosophers often seem to take for granted that reading charitably is a basic philosophical skill that our students must learn in order to succeed at reading, engaging with, and discussing the texts we assign. It is the ground upon which they can build their own critiques. Interpreting charitably is also a skill that many assume we ought to practice ourselves in almost every context. Our critiques must occur after we have demonstrated a good-faith engagement with the text and to accuse someone of being uncharitable is typically a way to bring engagement with their view to a halt—whatever “charity” is, the going understanding seems to be that a failure to demonstrate the right kind of interpretative charity is a failure to really engage with a text or author in a productive or generative way.

In his critique of philosophers’ reliance on charitability to interpret historical figures, Yitzak Melamed suggests that charitability cuts across philosophy’s methodological camps. He contends that “the phenomenon [of offering charitable interpretation] is ubiquitous and is not at all restricted to a particular philosophical strand or ideology” (Melamed 2013, 259). In my own
experience, the call for charity is common in both analytic and continental philosophy, though
continental philosophy it is sometimes framed as a call for hermeneutic generosity. The
assumption that a critique must meet some standard of charitability is one of few methodological
commitments that seems to cut across the continental/analytic divide in academic philosophy.

Importantly, the call for charity can be found even when the specific language of charity
or generosity are absent—it has become an ambient background condition for much of the
discipline. Melamed points out that “charitable interpretation of past philosophers is used much
more frequently than in the few cases in which it is stated honestly and transparently…. It often
appears in the form of the claim that a past philosopher is relevant to the extent that his claims
are vindicated by contemporary philosophy or science (263; emphasis in original). Melamed uses
Spinoza scholarship as a case study, claiming that in their quest to argue for Spinoza’s
contemporary relevance, scholars often (mis)read him as having views more in line with
contemporary social and political attitudes than are reasonable given the textual evidence (260-
270).33

31 I wonder, though I do not explore it further in my dissertation, whether figure-based approaches to philosophy (in
all methodological camps of the discipline) generate a particularly strong commitment to reading charitably or
generously.

32 See my discussion of charitability practices in the dissertation introduction.

33 Melamed’s identification of charity as a ubiquitous methodological move in scholarship on the history of
philosophy is helpful for understanding the various contexts in which charity is practiced today. Melamed’s essay,
however, relies on a view of charity that is itself in need of historicization and further contextualization. It seems to
me that all reading is to some degree a misreading, or at least an incomplete reading. Whether Spinoza’s views are
or are not relevant is not a question that we can answer by looking only at Spinoza’s work. To put it another way,
reading well requires more criteria that examining textual evidence, because that textual evidence itself is precisely
what is up for interpretation. Whether interpretations of Spinoza are inappropriately charitable will depend on the
uses to which we are putting his writings, the communities in which we are reading him, and our own (to use
Gadamerian language) interpretive horizons. I take Melamed to be offering a set of concerns about philosophers’
reliance on charity to justify our scholarly projects, but I also understand these justificatory efforts as occurring
against a background of intense suspicion at the humanities’ usefulness for and connection to non-academic/non-
scholarly life projects.
Melamed is concerned about the ways in which the voices and views of people from radically different times, places, and contexts are rendered intelligible and palatable under the guise of charitability. As he puts it, “the charitable interpreter will do his [sic] best to reinterpret these bizarre voices in a manner that is most familiar to him. But doing so, he compromises the recognition of the other person’s subjectivity and deprives himself of knowledge and appreciation of human diversity” (263). Charity, far from being a tool for understanding a historical text accurately or completely, is often a distancing strategy—we do not have to confront problematic content in the text if we render it instead as progressive or liberatory.

I have suggested that there are two problems with charity: it is a methodical imperative with histories that practitioners typically do not acknowledge, and it is an imperative that is selectively enforced. By “selectively enforced,” I mean that the often-shifting standards of charitability are disproportionately applied to philosophers and philosophies that exist on the discipline’s edges/margins. Those whose projects, politics, and/or bodies are out of line with the discipline’s status quo are disproportionately interpreted and characterized as uncharitable, and are put in positions of justifying their/our work against whatever accusations of uncharitability are lobbed our way.⁴⁴,⁴⁵

Finlayson acknowledges this selective enforcement, explaining that one of her aims in criticizing charity is to “correct any illusion that this norm [of charitable interpretation] is a neutral referee, regulating political-philosophical debate according to a methodological principle

---

⁴⁴ I use the rather awkward “their/our” construction to convey my position as someone who holds both marginalized and privileged identities.

⁴⁵ This selective enforcement is related, as Mariam Matar suggests in a 2020 conference paper, to what Kristie Dotson calls the discipline’s culture of justification (Dotson 2012, 5) and to the methodological whiteness that Alexis Shotwell identifies in “Appropriate Subjects.” I discuss this further in “Charity as a Method with Hidden Content” below.
acceptable to all—an illusion which tends to work to exclude certain kinds of dissent against the status quo from the circle of sanctioned disagreement (67). I share Finlayson’s conviction that interpretive charity is not the neutral methodological or interpretive principle that we might first assume. Indeed, when charitability dominates philosophic discourse, our conversations can reproduce many of the harms that we might assume our charitable mode of engagement mitigates.

Charity’s Ambiguity

The term charity, as I have explained in Part One of this chapter, has a long history in both hermeneutics (modern and contemporary) and in analytic philosophy of language. Its philosophic uses are different from its everyday uses—Finlayson points out that donating to charities is understood as a supererogatory practice, while in philosophy it is a basic rule for argumentation (65-66)—but the call for (the informal norm of) charity in philosophy also, in Finlayson’s view and in my own, fails to challenge existing power relations. Just as emphasizing charitable donation over the transformation of social, political, and economic systems elides the ways in which these systems themselves give rise to the very problems charity seeks to address (Ahmed 2004, 20-23), the call for interpretive charity in philosophy is one that undermines disciplinary transformation. The call for (the informal norm of) charity in philosophy covers over existing power relations by refusing to connect the call for charity with any particular philosophic or interpretive tradition or history, or indeed with the term’s circulation beyond the realm of interpretation, philosophy, or argumentation. In Finlayson’s view, the informal use of charity masks the concept’s interpretive, social, and political commitments beneath a kind of

36 See chapter four for further discussion of charitable giving and love.
ambiguity. For Finlayson, “‘Charity’ is deeply ambiguous (or rather, incomplete), so that the way in which we construe and apply it must ultimately be informed by our politics…the tendency to overlook this results in the disproportionate penalization of dissent against the political-philosophical status quo (Finlayson 2015, 66). Charity is not an objective interpretive or sensemaking method, and Finlayson’s concern is that when philosophers treat it as though it is, we apply charitable readings in inequitable ways.

Tom Stern, following Finlayson, agrees that charity is a “multiply ambiguous” concept (Stern 2016, 287). In his essay, “Nietzsche’s Words and the Principle of Charity,” Stern argues that when reading the history of philosophy, sometimes a charitable approach can actually produce a less generative analysis than other interpretive approaches. He explains that charity is ambiguous in multiple ways, so we cannot assume that a generally charitable reading will help us either discover the meaning of a text or offer “better” philosophy. In his view, philosophers generally frame charity in the following way: “when faced with two rival interpretations of what someone is saying, we should not interpret her as meaning the one that leaves her in the worse light” (Stern 2016, 288). But for Stern, we must deploy charity differently depending on who we are reading—in fact, some figures are particularly ill-suited to many of the charitability moves we tend to make. Stern identifies Nietzsche as one such figure, arguing that when we are charitable to Nietzsche’s arguments, we erase their ambiguity and smuggle our own hermeneutic interests into his work. Although every reader brings their own interests and situatedness to every text (as Alcoff and Freundenberger, following feminist epistemologies and Gadamerian hermeneutics, remind us [Alcoff 2003; Freundenberger 2003]), Stern is concerned that charitable reading allows these interests to be disguised, or that charity is practiced unreflexively.
Stern echoes Finlayson’s claim that charity is ambiguous—he articulates three specific ambiguities: First, when we talk about charity, we might be talking about charity’s unit. The unit refers to cases when 1) an author’s phrase could mean two different things and we use charity to determine which one he means or 2) an author unambiguously says two opposing things and we use charity to choose which he is really committed to (289). Second is charity’s mode—with regard to what are we being charitable? Are we going to charitably assume coherency, consistency, truth, agreement with what we already take to be reasonable, soundness of argument, or level of uniqueness? Often these conflict—the most coherent reading might produce an interpretation that shows the author held a false belief (290). And third, we have charity’s strength—how high is our level of charity, and how have we decided this (290)? For Stern, the principle of charity does not demand just one thing. Treating charity as a universal principle “risk[s] disguising the sorts of commitments, justified or unjustified, that—I think most would agree—it is part of philosophical discourse to bring out, clarify, or challenge” (292).

Sometimes reading charitably produces less accurate textual interpretations or deflates a complexity/ambiguity that is important for the work.37

In “Against Charity in the History of Philosophy,” Eric Schwitzgebel adds that to charitably assume a text “makes sense” already imports a socially, historically, and culturally specific notion of what makes sense (Schwitzgebel 2019). Melamed offers a similar view, explaining that, “the implausibility of a belief is usually measured by its agreement with our so-

37 For that matter, if we are interested in charity’s usefulness as a pedagogical tool, we would do well to remember charity’s ambiguity. Once after I facilitated a workshop session on calls for charity, a participant realized that she never offered a thorough explanation of charity to her students when she encouraged them to be charitable. She wasn’t sure they understood what that meant. I do not say this to suggest that she was an irresponsible pedagogue; rather, I am interested in the ways in which charity’s ambiguity can undermine its usefulness as a pedagogical tool.
called commonsense intuitions. Such intuitions might be, more or less, common, but they are rarely held by everyone” (Melamed 2013, 262). Even from my brief and incomplete tracing of charity in the history of philosophy and in my summaries of the few contemporary critiques of interpretive charity, we see quite different accounts of what it means to be charitable. What, I ask, are the stakes of these ambiguities, particularly given they too-often function in similar and exclusionary ways?

In this chapter, I have run through various iterations of interpretive charity in philosophy (though importantly, I have only scratched the surface—at each point I discuss, there is an opportunity for much deeper historical analysis). What, then, should we notice about the movement of interpretive charity across Western philosophy? I trace this history partially to pluralize the kind of charity I am concerned with—this is not a dissertation about Davidson’s principle of charity, or about Gadamer’s hermeneutic trust, or about caritas. This is an exploration of charity’s status as a central interpretive method, despite differing and overlapping histories and meanings of the term across the discipline’s history. But even the most general and, to use Finlayson’s language, informal understanding of charity masks the concept’s interpretive, social, and political commitments beneath a kind of ambiguity.

Thinking about charity as a selectively enforced methodological imperative allows us to think differently about charity’s use/usefulness. Finlayson contends that philosophers use charity as a rule for conduct in argumentation that, in practice, quashes dissent and fails to recognize its own political commitments (Finlayson 2015, 66). For Melamed, the call for charity is a hermeneutically sloppy (or to use his term, reckless [Melamed 2013, 272]) tool for defending a historical text’s contemporary relevance. Stern agrees with Melamed that charity is used as a vehicle for smuggling in our own philosophical commitments and presuppositions, and that its
ambiguity is what allows this smuggling (Stern 2016, 293). And in philosophy pedagogy
literature, charity is framed as a crucial tool for helping students become careful readers and
arguers.

Charity’s usefulness becomes murkier the closer we look: Finlayson describes the ways in which the accusation of uncharitability is often, in fact, the actual instance of uncharitability; that is, oftentimes to call something uncharitable is itself uncharitable. She explains that “even the most apparently obvious example of an uncharitable criticism may be turned on its head, so that we see the failure of charity as lying instead with the initial assumption that the first criticism is uncharitable” (Finlayson 2016, 76). It can be uncharitable to dismiss someone else’s claim as uncharitable!

But very quickly, Finlayson explains, this cycle of uncharitability-related accusations turns rather absurd:

The point I want to develop here is a general one about the structure of ‘charity’ as a methodological norm. We can already see, from the imaginary back-and-forth I’ve begun to construct above, that the progression of accusations and counter-accusations could go on forever: to complain that a criticism is ‘uncharitable’ is itself to make a criticism, based on a particular interpretation; as such, the second criticism is also open to a further (third) criticism to the effect that it interprets the first criticism ‘uncharitably’; and this third criticism, and the interpretation it rests on, can also be criticized—and so on ad infinitum. (78)

Charity, it seems, is limited in its usefulness as a rule for argumentation because although we could develop contextually-specific standards of charitability, we often don’t, and we are subsequently trapped in an endless cycle of “no you’re being uncharitable.”

---

38 Finlayson does not offer a complete answer to this problem, though resolving it is not her goal: “I haven’t said that we should stop using these notions [of charitability and constructivism], only that we should acknowledge their essentially political nature in order to avoid illusions of neutrality” (78). Finlayson suggests that local versus universal notions of neutrality can stop the back-and-forth accusations of uncharitability; that is, she does not think that any accusation of uncharitability is as good as another (79). I have not explored Finlayson’s suggestions in detail because my concern in this chapter is not how charity ought to work, but in how it does work.
limited in its usefulness as interpretative orientation because, as Stern points out, it is unclear toward what elements of a text we ought to be charitable, particularly when various forms of charity are at odds with one another (Stern 2016, 287). And as long as philosophers fail to recognize or attend to the ways in which we bring our own interests into our claims about what is or is not a sufficiently charitable treatment of a text or an argument, we are likely to get stuck in the feedback loop that Finlayson identifies.39,40

Of course, no methodological tool is useful for every project, and a method’s use will always be limited, or appropriate for some contexts and not others. But charity is often treated as though it is not limited in this way. Furthermore, there is another use of charity and charitability that existing explorations of philosophic charity do not explore: because of charity’s status as both ambiguous and (selectively) imperative, it is a useful tool for drawing and enforcing disciplinary borders. In calling for charity only sometimes (while defending charitability as a universally applicable methodological principle [“I’d ask the same of anyone; you’re just the one failing to be charitable right now”]), we get to make an implicit but very clear challenge to a work or a thinker’s philosophical legitimacy. If charity is required for philosophy and if a philosopher has failed to offer a satisfactory level or type of charity, then are they really a philosopher at all? Without having to think particularly carefully about a work, we get to call it

39 The claim that readers’ interests and situatedness influence our textual interpretations is, of course, an uncontroversial one in philosophical hermeneutics and feminist standpoint theory, but it is one whose stakes have not yet been fully explored in relation to questions of charity.

40 Gadamer might offer a way out of this problem. Silja Freundenberger explains that Gadamerian openness to the other does have an end: "Lack of openness toward [for example] a sexist position is a direct consequence or function of its original lack of openness and lack of readiness to concede to others the right to be right, therefore a second order lack of openness may, in this conception, be justified" (Freundenberger 2003, 280).
uncharitable and move on. I explore this boundary-drawing-and-maintenance function of charitability in the following section.

Charity as a Method with Hidden Content

There is, as Finlayson points out, very little work in academic philosophy about the informal norm of charity (Finlayson 2015, 66). As I summarize above, Finlayson offers an account of some political difficulties of charity, particularly as they relate to the kind of dissent that demands for charity both allow for and foreclose (66). Stern explores the conflicting hermeneutic commitments that make it unclear what it means to properly perform a charitable reading (Stern 2016, 289-291). And Melamed explores the anachronistic misreadings that emerge from offering charitable interpretations of texts in the history of philosophy as an attempt to argue for their contemporary relevance (Melamed 2013, 259).

Aside from Finlayson’s critique of charity as blocking resistance to the political and philosophical status quo, philosophical analyses of charity have tended to focus on the role that charity plays in our understanding of texts. They have largely missed the opportunity to consider the effects that the call for charity has on not only textual interpretations or argument analyses, but also upon philosophic communities. I want to linger with some of the harms done in the name of, as Finlayson puts it, penalizing dissent and maintaining the political-philosophical status quo. What are the specific harms of penalizing dissent using the calls for charity, and how might these reverberate throughout the discipline? And what is it like to be persistently called on to perform a charitable interpretation?

---

41 There is a difference between calling for charity and practicing charitable interpretation, but I do not understand these practices as neatly extricable from one another—we risk misunderstanding a text when we take charitability as a foundation of interpretation (and this misunderstanding has social and political implications). We also risk perpetuating these misunderstandings when we use the call for charity in the ways I explore here.
Charity both mirrors already existing exclusionary practices and performs new forms of exclusion. On the one hand, charity, as I will discuss throughout this dissertation, mirrors exclusion in various ways: philosophy is already a discipline that privileges certain forms of textual engagement over others in ways that silence and sideline non-dominant modes of interpretation and sense making. Charity is one mechanism by which these exclusionary practices are enforced. But the concept of charity now also performs new forms of exclusion, often in response to criticisms of the philosophical canon, or of philosophy’s persistent whiteness. Although charity has certainly not always been weaponized against those who would challenge the discipline’s status quo, it seems to be functioning in this way now. I am thinking, for instance, of cases when philosophers dismiss or hold at a distance criticisms of canonical thinkers on ground of charitability.

One might wonder whether there is another use of charity that I have neglected to acknowledge in my (perhaps uncharitable!) characterization of charity. We might hold the view that charity is flawed or can be applied incorrectly/unjustly, but that it is also necessary for helping us uncover the structure of an argument free from an author’s personal attitudes or historically contingent biases. This may be what allows us to recognize that by their own standards, a thinker has made a mistake. In her analysis of the connection between philosophy’s whiteness and its methodologies, Alexis Shotwell explains that “many forms of philosophy aim to state things clearly, determine the logical connections among terms in arguments, and frame arguments such that their truth might suggest reasons for belief” (Shotwell 2010, 126-127). In

---

42 I am grateful to Eyo Ewara for characterizing my project in this way.

43 I explore this topic in much more detail in chapter 3.
these forms of philosophy (non-exhaustive of the discipline’s methodology) charity appears to be what allows us to “get to the essence” of an argument.\textsuperscript{44}

However, I take it that the work of discerning what is and is not essential to an argument, work supposedly performed by charitable reading alone, is itself an interpretive project.\textsuperscript{45} Further, when charity is framed as a tool for uncovering an argument’s underlying structure (purportedly separate from its content) it becomes a \textit{self-concealing} interpretive project. Interpretation always makes assumptions about what will and will not be essential for discovering and analyzing an argument’s structure. When we invoke charity this interpretive work is concealed as such, making charity an especially pernicious interpretive principle insofar as it conceals its own operation.

Missing from existing examinations of contemporary interpretive charity is an account of the social, political, and epistemic stakes of relying on charity, aside from (or perhaps more accurately, in addition to) the misreadings it can produce. This is one of my foci in this dissertation: attending to some additional stakes of (mis)using charity. I will use Ahmed’s queer phenomenology to explore some of these stakes and I will use literature on epistemic and affective injustice to explore the epistemic violence of calls for charity. But an important feature of charity that I identify in this chapter is that as a selectively enforced methodological

\textsuperscript{44} I thank an anonymous reviewer for this particular phrase and for suggesting that I explore charity’s role in identifying an argument’s structure. I also thank Abram Capone for offering feedback on these three paragraphs.

\textsuperscript{45} It seems that there exist a number of interpretive methodologies that would allow us to ascertain an argument’s structure, some of which would not make the mistake that charitable approaches do: i.e. bracketing out supposedly contingent aspects of an argument’s structure. The very claim that some aspects of an argument are contingent (or that \textit{this} or \textit{that} part of an argument is merely historically contingent) is an example of interpretive work performed even before charitable reading is invoked as a desirable hermeneutic tool. Furthermore, the suggestion that the structure of the argument itself is not historically rooted would need to be defended prior to the invocation of charity.
imperative, charity plays a key, and concerning, role in drawing and (re)enforcing disciplinary boundaries/borders. To put it another way: if the demand for charity is, as Finlayson describes, met with the insistence that the accusation of insufficient charity was *itself uncharitable*, then where are we? How useful is the call for and practice of charity and how useful is an accusation of uncharitability? And if charity’s use is not in its ability to regulate the terms of argumentation or interpretation, then what is it useful for? Sara Ahmed, Alexis Shotwell, and Elena Ruíz give us an answer: disciplinary gatekeeping.

We do not, compared to other academic disciplines, talk very much about method in philosophy. Disciplinary methods are formed and utilized within particular social, historical, and institutional contexts. There is much to be said about how we do philosophy, what (if anything) unifies our discipline, and how to explain our methodologies to our students, to one another, and to those outside of the discipline. It is striking to me that in academic philosophy, talk of methodology tends to take one of three forms: It is absent altogether; it takes the form of arguing about analytic versus continental approaches, or it is deployed in service of telling someone that their project does not “count” as philosophy because it is not utilizing the methods we are all presumed to have agreed upon (although it is unclear at what point this education on philosophical methodologies and this consent to utilize them would have occurred).

---

46 I completed my undergraduate degree at one of only a handful of universities in the United States that offers an undergraduate course in philosophical methodologies (Elon University). In my conversations with colleagues and mentors over the past several years, I have found only one other methods course at the undergraduate level (Villanova University). A quick internet search also turned up the University of North Florida as offering a methods course, and Renée Smith describes a course that she developed on metaphilosophy, which seems to include a fairly detailed study of philosophical methods (Coastal Carolina University). Discussion of methods can, of course, occur in absence of a specific methods class, but it is worth noting that in philosophy, we do not appear to teach our undergraduates about different philosophical methods in a focused or systematized way.

47 See Kristie Dotson’s “How Is This Paper Philosophy?” (2012) for further discussion of philosophers’ assumptions that the discipline has, or ought to have, univocal, universally relevant methods. I thank Mariam Matar for sharing
As I discussed above, I treat charitability as a selectively enforced methodological imperative in academic philosophy. Charitability, in other words, is expected of philosophers across sub-disciplines, although when and how one is called to charity is both variable and connected to the content of one’s work and/or to the sites of difference one represents (or appears to represent). Analytic and continental philosophers alike are expected to offer charitable interpretations of texts, arguments, and one another. Whether one is working in ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, social and political philosophy, phenomenology, or critical theory (just to name a few ways in which we categorize ourselves or are categorized by others), one must demonstrate both a willingness and an ability to offer interpretive charity.

My framing of charity as a selectively enforced methodological imperative is connected to broader critiques of philosophical methods. I engage two such critiques here in order to connect charitability practices to other tendencies in academic philosophy that have problematic and exclusionary histories and contemporary functions. In her exploration of the ways in which academic philosophy’s resistance to interdisciplinarity connects to the discipline’s whiteness, Alexis Shotwell criticizes philosophers’ assumptions that our methods are apolitical, race-neutral, and universalizable. For Shotwell, “to the extent that philosophical methods tend toward analytical skills that give priority to conceptual purity, clearly defined categories, fungibility, and universalizability, we ought to worry about whether these methods have more content than they purport (Shotwell 2010, 126). Shotwell maintains that how we do philosophy (and what is intelligible to us as philosophy) is already marked by commitments to whiteness, purity, and a narrow vision of what philosophy is and does. To put it another way, the methods we use in

_____________________
her analysis of philosophic charitability with me, in which she engages Dotson’s 2012 essay in greater depth (personal correspondence).
philosophy are imbued with assumptions, values, histories, and demands that go unnoticed but that covertly (or sometimes not-so-covertly) draw disciplinary borders.

What might it mean for a method to have “more content than it purports”? All disciplinary methods have histories, contextually appropriate uses, and intradisciplinary differences in views about various methods’ implications and continued relevance. This, on its face, does not seem problematic (or if it is, then it is an inevitable problem of academic inquiry and disciplinary structures). A disciplinary method, in other words, could contain hidden content that is fairly innocuous or that does not contribute to conceptual or demographic whiteness. But for Shotwell, philosophy is a discipline with racially exclusionary methodological content. The stakes of philosophical methods’ hidden content are tied to structural racism and sexism in the discipline.

Shotwell explains, as I summarize above, that many forms of philosophy seek to clarify concepts, make logical connections among claims, and evaluate whether an argument’s truth indicates that one should believe it (126). These methods, she argues, are not exhaustive of what it means (or can mean) to do philosophy. By committing ourselves to a too-narrow view of what philosophy is, what philosophy can do, where philosophy has developed throughout history, and what kinds of intellectual approaches ought to “count” as philosophy, we “end up with a depressingly flat, homogenous, limited field of study dominated by white men and those who—somehow—win enough recognition to survive” (119).

This matters for Shotwell because philosophy’s methods are deeply related to philosophy’s whiteness. Although being clear, drawing logical connections, and/or exploring

---

48 See Lewis Gordon’s *Disciplinary Decadence* (Gordon 2006) for a problematization of contemporary academic disciplines (including, but not limited to, philosophy).
truth values and beliefs are not unique to “western” thought and are not necessarily problematic, they are intellectual practices that have been used historically to develop conceptions of whiteness and racial purity (121); that is, “since there is real resonance between the methods defining much ‘proper’ philosophy and the methods through which whiteness is discerned and defined, we ought specifically worry about the degree to which the method of philosophy in effect produces whiteness as method (127). Shotwell explores one way in which a philosophical methodological norm has what we might call “white content”: “philosophy’s refusal of certain forms of interdisciplinary pollination” (119). The skepticism within philosophy of projects that cross disciplinary borders, in Shotwell’s view, limits who is seen as a properly philosophical subject and limits the kinds of activities and projects that are deemed philosophical (118-119).

Shotwell grants that “only some forms of interdisciplinarity are refused or disciplined out of the discipline” (119; emphasis in original). Philosophical projects that utilize “hard” sciences are, she notes, generally met with less skepticism than philosophical projects that utilize, for example, literary theory or historiography (119). In his critique of contemporary academic disciplines’ decay or, as he calls it, their “disciplinary decadence,” Lewis Gordon contends that “a familiar feature of our times is the tendency of practitioners of disciplines to reject ideas from other disciplines on the basis of those ideas not being their own” (Gordon 2019, 26). Disciplines often develop “solipsistic subjectivities” in which the only knowledge, methods, and questions that come to matter are those that already matter to and can be answered within a given discipline. In Gordon’s view, disciplinary solipsism is rooted, in part, in the neoliberal

49 For a helpful genealogical account of race and racism in the U.S., see McWhorter 2009, especially her discussion in chapter 3 of classificatory practices in natural history and biology.

50 There is much more to be said about interdisciplinarity and whiteness, but I am most interested in Shotwell’s broader claims about philosophical methods rather than in the details of her analysis of interdisciplinary.
university’s obsession with “usefulness,” and he notes that although historically, great philosophers have been trained in many disciplines in addition to philosophy, contemporary academic philosophy does not typically reflect this pluralism. Shotwell and Gordon each connect this resistance to interdisciplinarity with the development of academic disciplines, the allocation of resources within universities, and the expectation that each discipline offer a unique contribution to processes of knowledge production and to universities’ reputations.

In “Spectral Phenomenologies: Dwelling Poetically in Professional Philosophy,” Elena Ruíz calls attention to the ways in which philosophy’s methods are selectively articulated and enforced, such that some practitioners and topics are defined out of the discipline. Just as Shotwell critiques philosophers’ inability to define philosophy even as they “seem to be able to identify quite clearly what it is not when they see it” (Shotwell 2010, 117), Ruíz highlights the opportunities for gaslighting, exclusion, and marginalization that emerge when we presume to “know philosophy when seen” (Ruíz 2014, 199). Professional philosophy, Ruíz explains, “sleepwalks; its somnambulatory practices stroll silently, policing checkpoints without the burden of consciousness of its actions and practices” (198; emphasis in original). Often (though not always) without malicious intent or conscious effort on the part of individual philosophers, philosophy is understood to require particular ways of knowing, speaking, and being. Philosophy is a discipline whose methods often go unarticulated, only to then serve as tools for keeping out those methods and practitioners who fail to conform with these methods (which were never

---

51 See Ahmed’s chapter, “Use and the University” for further discussion on the historical connections among usefulness, utility, and the university (Ahmed 2019).
explicitly stated but assumed to always already be understood and accepted). And this process is not always one that individual philosophers undertake consciously or reflexively.\textsuperscript{52}

Ruíz puts philosophy’s methodological peculiarity this way:

The problem is that all too often it is clean, tight, objective theories undergirded by the justificatory discourses of scientific neutrality that are held up as the grammatical baseline of philosophical discourse. This is a problem that has no name, a mystification ritual that passes for the learned discourse of legitimated, specialized jargon in philosophy. (200)

For Ruíz, these disciplinary methodological norms and standards are a problem both in themselves (that is, notions of objectivity and scientific neutrality are themselves socially and historically formed and situated) \textit{and} because of how they are put to use. Philosophy’s “alleged methodological purity” (198) is evoked in order to police the borders of the discipline (199).\textsuperscript{53}

There is nothing about philosophy that requires the grammatical baseline that Ruíz describes, but the discipline is nonetheless organized and oriented around this grammar, often to the detriment of women and people of color (200). Again, this use of methodological assumptions to draw philosophical borders often occurs without individual philosophers noticing it or intending our exclusionary practices. But it happens persistently and harmfully, in ways that, Ruíz points out, are often noticed (and sometimes reproduced) by women of color and other “diverse practitioners” (196).

I want to consider the role that interpretive charity plays in this drawing and policing of philosophical borders. Ruíz’s notion of somnanbulatory practices/sleepwalking and Shotwell’s claim about methods having more content than they purport are related: methods in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{52} In chapter 2 I problematize the idea that recognition or reflection would be sufficient for transforming or otherwise addressing the problems with interpretative charitability.
\item \textsuperscript{53} For more on philosophy, charitability, and purity, see chapter 3.
\end{itemize}
contemporary academic philosophy (within the United States and Canada) are intimately tied to the discipline’s structural racism and sexism. Methods that many in the discipline take for granted as essential for practicing philosophy are rooted in exclusionary ways of thinking and result in a hostile, abusive climate for diverse practitioners.\textsuperscript{54} Although uncovering this hidden content, or pointing out this disciplinary sleepwalking, is not sufficient for transforming these practices, Shotwell and Ruíz each maintain that these identificatory projects are crucial in order for practitioners of marginalized philosophical methods to understand that they/we are not unfit for philosophy; rather, the discipline is in many ways unfit for us (Ruíz 2014, 203-204;).

Charity is framed as a philosophical method that is useful/used for interpretation, argumentation, defending a text’s contemporary relevance, and quashing dissent. As Ahmed suggests in her introduction to What’s the Use?, “maybe methods are not simply tools, or if they are tools, maybe they do different things depending on who uses them, with this who being understood as not simply an individual but someone shaped by many histories—intellectual, social, other” (Ahmed 2019, 19; emphasis in original). If Ahmed is right that methods can be considered tools for doing different things depending on who uses them (where the who is likely to affect the how), then we ought to think about how else charity gets used. For Ahmed, past uses are not wholly determinative of present or future use (24), but it is important to understand how a thing has been shaped by what it is used for. How is charity as philosophical method shaped by what it is used for? How could it be shaped differently?

Charity, in my view, can be understood as one form of philosophical “sleepwalking,” or one method with hidden content. Rather than being used to produce strong arguments or accurate

\textsuperscript{54} See Ruíz’s discussion of ambient abuse and gaslighting on pages 200-204 of “Spectral Phenomenologies.”
interpretations, charitability is used and evoked in service of maintaining disciplinary borders/boundaries. Charity’s users tend to be unreflective about the broader implications of our requests, and vague about the benefits of a charitable interpretation. Charity, as Finlayson asserts, is used as a litmus test for discerning whether something is “real” philosophy. But as long as we fail to interrogate the assumptions that our calls for charity often carry, the contexts in which charitability has historically been practiced, or the current socio-political contexts in which we demand this charitability, we are likely to weaponize charitability in service of maintaining already-accepted methods and modes of engagement.

**Conclusion: From Imperative to Orientation**

In this chapter, I have provided an account of how charity has been characterized in the past and how it is characterized in philosophy today. I have also connected contemporary charitability practices to exclusionary methodological practices and assumptions in the discipline more broadly. I will continue to highlight these connections throughout my dissertation. The historical account I have offered is partial, but my aim has been to illustrate the ways in which charity is not only playing a similar methodological role in various subdisciplinary traditions, but that in playing the same role over and over again, charity is *also doing something new*. Over and over again, we see charity presented as a methodological imperative of some kind. This status as imperative has different effects depending on the historical, social, and political situation. The ongoing privileging of charity ensures that we “do philosophy” in the way it is presumed to have always been done. This privileging of charity (this doing of philosophy in the way it has apparently always been done) now also draws disciplinary borders that attempt to keep criticisms of the discipline at a distance by casting them as not properly philosophical. The concept of charity mirrors exclusionary practices in the discipline by demanding particular argumentative
styles, affects, and citational practices. Furthermore, charity is now being used to perform new forms of exclusion (though charity is not functioning on its own to produce these effects). More specifically, the call for charity is now often used to dismiss criticisms of authors, texts, and methods whose complicity with (and often, outright endorsement of) oppression have come under increasingly visible scrutiny.

Charity, as I will explore in subsequent chapters, can operate differently than it currently does. My project attends to the ways in which charity’s status as methodological imperative (re)produces forms of exclusion but I am not willing to claim that charity is forever-trapped by its past and current uses. I bring Ahmed’s account of queer use to questions of charitability in chapter 5, in hopes of developing an orientation toward charity that interrupts its status as methodological imperative. For now, I will continue to identify charity’s effects rather than imagining alternatives. I have begun, in the second part of this chapter, to explore one thing that charity does: draw and enforce disciplinary boundaries. In the following chapter, I move from boundaries to pathways; more specifically, I use Sara Ahmed’s work in *Queer Phenomenology* to explore how charity orients us as interpreters. Charity, as I have argued in this chapter, is (among other things) a methodological tool in academic philosophy. Following Ahmed, I understand methodological tools as orientation devices. Charity, then, is an orientation device in academic philosophy. I turn to the effects of being oriented by charitability, asking how charity orients philosophy/philosophers and how it might orient us otherwise.
CHAPTER TWO
MISUSES OF CHARITY: EXPLORING EPISTEMIC AND AFFECTIVE HARMs OF CALLS FOR CHARITABILITY

If anger pricks our skin, if it makes us shudder, sweat and tremble, then it might just shudder us into new ways of being; it might just enable us to inhabit a different kind of skin, even if that skin remains marked or scarred by that which we are against (Sara Ahmed 2004, 175).

A Not-So-Hypothetical Thought Experiment

I ask the reader to imagine the following scenario, which may, for some, feel more like a remembering than an imagining:

An undergraduate student in an introductory level philosophy class is struggling with reading about Aristotle on friendship. Aristotle says in book 8 of the Nicomachean Ethics that men and women/husband and wife can be friends, but because they are unequal, the woman owes the man more affection so that they reach the proper level of reciprocity and can be the right kinds of friends (NE1158b13-25). During class discussion, the student says, angrily, “I don’t understand why we’re taking what Aristotle says about friendship seriously if he says that women somehow owe men extra friendliness and affection. That’s really misogynistic and problematic and it’s weird to me that people still think he’s so right about friendship and ethics. Why are we even reading this?”

In response, her instructor tells her, “he might seem sexist, but actually it’s more complicated than that. It’s important that you be charitable when you read Aristotle, rather than questioning his merit just because of this sexist statement.”

* * *

My goal in this chapter is to understand some of the charitability gap’s harms by exploring how the gap’s instantiation can impact philosophic communities and marginalized
philosophers.¹ I suggest that these harms become visible—and the charitability gap is reinforced and widened—when we call for interpretative charity in response to critiques of canonical philosophers’ racist or sexist claims. In these moments, the call for charity functions as a disciplining move that brings “unruly” philosophers back into line with particular (and problematic) disciplinary norms. More specifically, in this chapter, I explore the epistemic and affective harms of some calls for charity.² There exists, as I suggested in the introduction of this dissertation, a charitability gap, both between who we tend to read charitably and who we tend to expect charitability from. This gap shores up the disciplinary status quo and (re)produces epistemic oppression, which helps preserve philosophy’s status as a discipline that is, to use Charles Mills’ language, conceptually and demographically dominated by whiteness and maleness (Mills 1998, 2). I am particularly interested in calls for charity made in response to critiques of racist or sexist authors/texts. I suggest that in these cases, interpretive charity perpetuates epistemic violence by creating conditions for testimonial smothering (Dotson 2011); that this smothering is affective as well as epistemic (Bailey 2018; Whitney 2018); and that it requires philosophers to remain in oppressive worlds (Pohlhaus 2011; Lugones 2003).

I begin by placing Kristie Dotson’s account of testimonial smothering into conversation with Sara Ahmed’s account of orientation devices. I characterize (some) calls for charitable interpretations as epistemically violent orientation devices. Next, I turn to two feminist accounts of anger and affect—more specifically, to Alison Bailey’s account of affective smothering,

¹ My focus in this chapter is on epistemic harms and affective harms (fairly broadly construed) as they relate to charitability. I explore the limitations of charitability as a hermeneutic tool in the following chapters.

² I follow Shiloh Whitney in understanding the harm of affective injustice as a “failure to afford the weight of intentionality to the emotions of members of a social group” (Whitney 2018, 489). I explain Whitney’s account of affective injustice and Alison Bailey’s account of affective smothering in part 2 of this chapter.
Shiloh Whitney’s analysis of affective oppression—to articulate the ways that the epistemic harms of calls for charity are inextricable from their affective harms. Third, I characterize (some) refusals to be charitable as examples of justified refusals to participate in oppressive worlds (Pohlhaus Jr. 2011). I suggest, following Pohlhaus Jr.’s use of María Lugones’ accounts of worlds and world-traveling, that the call for charity can be a call to remain in an unjust world of sense, while the refusal to practice charitability can provide the opportunity to transform or exit this world.

There are two general remarks, and two remarks about my opening example, that I think are important to emphasize before moving forward. First, I use “interpretation” fairly broadly in this chapter to refer to, as Linda Martín Alcoff puts it in Visible Identities, “discernments of meaning” (Alcoff 2006, 94) that emerge from particular social and historical horizons. Interpretation, on Alcoff’s account, occurs when we engage with texts but also when we engage with one another. Alcoff’s work grounds my view that our perceptions and interpretations—themselves inextricably intertwined—inform our calls for charity. Second, my analysis of charity’s harms is motivated by a commitment to remaining accountable to the experiences of oppressed and marginalized groups. In the rest of this dissertation, I return frequently to the example of the philosophy student reading Aristotle in order to keep the social and political stakes of charitability in focus.

Third, I want to clarify what exactly, about the example I offer above, is uncharitable; that is, the student might appear to be offering an uncharitable critique rather than an

---

3 This commitment is central to feminist philosophy broadly, and, more specifically, connected to Dotson’s project in “Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing,” where she provides “an on-the-ground account of the different ways members of oppressed groups are silenced” (Dotson 2011, 236-237).
uncharitable interpretation (though as I discuss in the previous chapter, what it means to be “uncharitable” tends to shift). Although she is not citing a particular passage from the reading, it seems to me that her interpretative work and her critical work are intertwined (assuming, as I do here, that she completed the reading assignment). My impression is that the calls for charity, even those made in response to a critique rather than an interpretation of a particular passage, are trying to say that someone has offered a poor interpretation per se, not just that the critique was wrong or misplaced. Charity calls are claiming that someone has gone awry in their understanding of something as a result of not being “charitable” when interpreting. Charitable or uncharitable critiques, then, are not cleanly separable from charitable or uncharitable interpretations; the uncharitable critic is assumed to be uncharitable because of some prior uncharitable interpretation. To put it another way: it seems that the call for charity is always going to be about interpretation—either explicit interpretation of a particular textual passage, or an implicitly guiding hermeneutic assumption about a text or another object of interpretation. The student in my example has offered, in one comment, both an interpretation and a critique; that is, when it comes to questions of (un)charitability, a critique is itself an interpretation.⁴

Fourth, it could be that the instructor is concerned because he does not want his students to dismiss texts outright. This concern is legitimate: in chapters 3 and 5, I explore the ways in which commitments to purism of various kinds can produce problematic dismissals of texts and dissuade readers from lingering with their complexities and problems in search of a (non-existent) unproblematic text. But even if this comment is a dismissal (and as I detail throughout

---

⁴ I am grateful to José Medina for encouraging me to clarify what, about the student’s comments, is uncharitable and I am grateful to Carlo Tarantino for talking with me about the relationship between critique and interpretation as it relates to questions of charitability.
this chapter), responding to a dismissal with a call for charity—one that tells the student both how to read the text and how to respond to it affectively—is a missed opportunity to explore questions about imperfect texts, reading against the grain, and working with the emotions that we experience as readers.

**Part 1: Some Epistemic Harms of Calling for Charity**

The call for charity, in my view, can be a tool for bringing philosophers back into line with dominant ways of thinking, engaging with texts, and interacting with one another. In Chapter 1, I explored Lorna Finlayson’s claim that charity’s ambiguity allows it to function as a tool for privileging certain forms of engagements and for punishing others. In this chapter, I am interested in moments of uncharitability: how can they be characterized and understood? And what are the epistemic, hermeneutic, and sociopolitical effects of punishing uncharitability?

In this section I connect Kristie Dotson’s account of testimonial smothering to Sara Ahmed’s account of orientation devices in order to explore the role of epistemic violence in the act of calling for charity. In the moment when charity is unjustly demanded or sought, it is made visible as an orientation device in academic philosophy that contributes to the creation of epistemically violent conditions within our discipline. Specifically, in its enforcement of a particular way of engaging texts, the call for charity encourages testimonial smothering. By understanding charitability as one methodological principle toward which many philosophers are oriented, we can also examine the effects of charity on ourselves and our disciplinary practices. Thinking about orientation devices and testimonial smothering together allows us to recognize

---

5 I offer a bit more detail below, but for now: I follow Dotson in characterizing testimonial smothering as an epistemic violence rather than, for example, an epistemic injustice or an epistemic oppression. Throughout the rest of my dissertation, I use the terms “epistemic violence,” “epistemic harms,” and “epistemic oppressions” roughly synonymously.
that charity structures our thinking and our discipline; that in seeking to be charitable we set aside various other interpretive goals and methods; and that our desire for charitability has stakes and risks that we might not otherwise notice. In order to show how calls for charity constitute epistemically violent practices, it will be important for me to first offer a brief summary of Kristie Dotson’s account of testimonial smothering and to reiterate some key features of Sara Ahmed’s account of orientation devices. I offer these summaries below, then place them in conversation in order to shed light on some of charity’s harms.

Dotson’s Testimonial Smothering

In her essay “Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing,” Dotson aims to “distinguish the different ways members of oppressed groups are silenced with respect to testimony” (Dotson 2011, 236). I focus here on her explanation of one particular form of silencing: testimonial smothering. Dotson defines testimonial smothering as a form of “coerced self-silencing” (244) that occurs because a speaker perceives an audience’s unwillingness or inability to understand or engage appropriately with their testimony (244). Testimonial smothering is “the truncating of one’s own testimony in order to ensure that the testimony contains only content for which one’s audience demonstrates testimonial competence” (244).

Dotson identifies three circumstances that routinely combine to produce testimonial smothering. First, the testimony is risky in the given context (244)—it is easily misinterpreted by an audience in ways that reinforce harmful stereotypes about marginalized groups. Second, in exchanges that induce testimonial smothering, the audience has demonstrated what Dotson calls “testimonial incompetence” (245)—they have somehow indicated to the speaker that they are
unlikely to understand her testimony or to reliably detect their own misunderstanding.\textsuperscript{6} And third, the audience’s testimonial incompetence follows from pernicious ignorance (Dotson 2011, 244). Pernicious ignorance, for Dotson, is “any reliable ignorance that, in a given context, harms another person (or set of persons)” (238). Many kinds and instances of ignorance can be pernicious, but in cases of testimonial smothering, the pernicious ignorance emerges as a result of a hearer’s position(s) of power or as a result of their reliance on structurally unjust or oppressive epistemic frameworks. When these three factors—risky testimony, testimonial incompetence, and pernicious ignorance—interact, a speaker might feel forced to smother her own testimony to protect herself or her community. Or she may decide that since her interlocutor will likely not hear her testimony as she intends it or that her interlocutor will not respond to this testimony appropriately, she will not waste her time offering it.

Testimonial smothering is, in Dotson’s view, an epistemically violent phenomenon. Dotson explains epistemic violence as “a refusal, intentional or unintentional, of an audience to communicatively reciprocate in a linguistic exchange owing to pernicious ignorance” (Dotson 2011, 238). She grounds her characterization of silencing as epistemic violence using Gayatri Spivak’s description of epistemic violence of colonialism in “Can the Subaltern Speak” (236): epistemic violence is a violence that “attempts to eliminate knowledge possessed by marginal subjects” by, among other strategies, damaging “a given group’s ability to speak and be heard” (236). Epistemically violent practices like testimonial smothering contribute not only to the exclusion of particular subjects from participation in epistemic communities, but also to the disappearing of entire sets of marginalized or subjugated knowledges.

\textsuperscript{6} For more on testimonial competence and incompetence, see Dotson 2011, 245-246.
The harms of epistemic violence almost always extend beyond “purely” epistemic matters (239). Epistemic oppression/injustice (including epistemic violence) is intimately tied to the social, political, and ethical realms. To put it another way: it is not only that epistemic injustice and oppression do harm to already-vulnerable communities (though they certainly do); they also make every member of a social or political community worse at accurately judging credibility, judging our own abilities to tell whether we are judging credibility fairly, placing trust in one another, and communicating effectively with one another.

Testimonial smothering, as an epistemically violent phenomenon, can produce or contribute to many different harms. For example, speakers are prevented from contributing to conversations in which they may have wanted to participate and about which they may have had something important and unique to offer. This prevention can be profoundly alienating because not only does it wrong the speaker in her capacity as a knower (as Miranda Fricker frames the harms of epistemic injustice [Fricker 2007, 1]); it also suggests to the speaker that the world of

---

7 In this chapter, I have limited my discussion of epistemic violence to the one Dotson offers in her paper, but there is much more to be said about epistemic violence. In future work I would like to explore how additional conceptions of epistemic violence interact with the politics of interpretative charity. For some additional scholarly perspectives on epistemic and hermeneutical violence, see Ruíz 2020 (see especially note 1, where Ruíz cites accounts of epistemic violence that emerge from women of color feminisms and those that emerge from epistemic injustice literatures); Spivak 1988; Pohlhaus Jr., 2017; Tuana 2017; Pitts 2017; and Berenstain 2020. For my purposes in this chapter, I have generally used the language of epistemic violence that Dotson uses in her essay. Testimonial smothering could also be described as an instance of oppression or as an injustice (in some of her other work, Dotson uses language of epistemic oppression [Dotson 2012]). In “Decolonial Praxis and Epistemic Injustice,” Andrea Pitts points out that “the concern with just and ethical knowing, as well as resistance to colonial epistemic violence predates the contemporary literature on epistemic injustice within academic Anglophone philosophy” [Pitts 2017, 151]). Dotson ties her own account of smothering to these earlier accounts of epistemic violence.

8 As José Medina explains in The Epistemology of Resistance, unjust social conditions are inseparable from unjust epistemic conditions, and in unjust epistemic structures, our relations to ourselves are harmed as well as our relations to one another (27). Because of the relationship between unjust social conditions and unjust epistemic conditions, Medina suggests that “we cannot properly address the epistemic independently of the ethical” (86), but that we also cannot address the epistemic (or the ethical) independently of the political (86).
sense in which the conversation takes place does not find their testimony, or even the conceptual framework, background, and position from which they offer it, to be intelligible. Additionally, people must often spend time and energy “‘rebounding’ from such instances” (Dotson 2011, 250), seeking support from similarly-marginalized knowers, or developing strategies for resisting them in the future. And when calls for charity result in testimonial smothering, this moment of silencing contributes to the foreclosure of new methods, interpretive moves, and questions. I offer further analysis of testimonial smothering’s harms throughout this chapter.

Ahmed’s Orientation Devices

Dotson’s notion of testimonial smothering can be put into generative dialogue with Sara Ahmed’s account of orientation devices. In *Queer Phenomenology: Objects, Orientations, Others*, Ahmed explores the ways that objects situate our stance in and toward the world—things that are nearer to us take on relevance and make their way into our habits and ways of thinking. In Ahmed’s view, what is near to us (and what is relegated to the background), is not neutral or coincidental. Instead, the objects that orient us (and the ones that make us feel disoriented) are historically and socially situated; they both shape and reflect our values and our communities (Ahmed 2006, 85).

The objects that are near us (or that we bring and hold close to ourselves) orient us. These objects become what Ahmed calls “orientation devices” that set us down some pathways and not others, or that suggest we have already followed some pathways and not others. Sometimes orientation devices are physical objects. Ahmed describes the writing table as an orientation device, reminding her reader “that the writing table appears, and not another kind of table, might reveal something about the ‘orientation’ of phenomenology, or even of philosophy itself” (3). In Ahmed’s view, it matters to classical phenomenology that “the table” becomes an example to
which Husserl returns again and again. What and who, Ahmed asks, are bracketed from consideration when the writing table (a table historically occupied by white men who are thinking and working in imagined solitude) emerges as a phenomenologically important object?

Broadening her focus from material objects, Ahmed identifies heterosexuality as an orientation device. One is presumed and encouraged to be straight, and this straightness sets forth a prescribed life trajectory, or path: marriage, children, expected gender roles, a reverence for past generations, and a concern for the continuation of the patriarchal, heterosexual order (85). Navigating and resisting this path in order to find or forge others—performing a disruption and a reorientation—is part of what it means to be queer.

In *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed also characterizes happiness as an orientation device. She contends that, “happiness might play a crucial role in shaping our near sphere, the world that takes shape around us, a world of familiar things” (Ahmed 2010, 24). Happiness (and its pursuit) organizes our subjectivities and our worlds. In pursuing happiness, in characterizing certain objects and goals as contributing to our happiness, and in working toward achieving and maintaining happiness, we change our ways of being in the world, our relationships, and our physical surroundings. In short, orientation devices situate us in the world, direct us toward some goals and objects and away from others, and dictate particular paths to follow in order to reach them.

**The Epistemic Violence of Being Oriented by and toward Charitability**

I find that by thinking Dotson and Ahmed together, I am better able to articulate what

---

9 I thank Theodra Bane for offering feedback about my characterization of orientation devices.
sometimes feels “off” about calls for charitable interpretation, particularly when they are deployed in service of working with and through authors’ racism, sexism, or broader investment in hegemonic power structures. Calls for charity can, in the very moment they produce epistemically violent conditions, also repeat and reinforce broader exclusionary disciplinary practices. Consider my opening example of the student whose angry critique of Aristotle is met with a demand for charity. Here, the call for charity directs the student’s reaction (both its content and style of expression) to fall in line with the discipline: she is asked to remain focused on the assigned text and to set aside her anger in service of first understanding the text (the idea that anger can aid in interpretation does not come up). She is also asked to leave questions of gender unexplored (as has too-often been the case in academic philosophy). When we deviate from standard methodological moves or interpretive orientations—when we do not offer charity in the right way and toward the right texts and authors—we are often, as Ahmed might put it, brought “back into line” (Ahmed 2006, 79) with disciplinary norms and traditions via the call for charity. This process of being brought back into line by the call for charity can be an epistemically violent or oppressive one—specifically, it creates the conditions for testimonial smothering within philosophic communities.

Recall that for Dotson, risky testimony, testimonial incompetence, and pernicious ignorance combine to induce testimonial smothering. Each of these factors is at work in the call for charity with which I began. First, the student in my example has taken a risk by turning the class discussion toward questions of Aristotle’s sexism. Second, by failing to demonstrate that he finds her concerns to be “accurately intelligible,” (Dotson 2011, 245) the instructor demonstrates testimonial incompetence. And third, this testimonial incompetence is fueled by a pernicious ignorance that results from her professor’s occupation of many sites of structural power or
privilege and from his disciplinary training, which is likely to exclude critiques of Aristotle’s gender politics. Indeed, the professor may be committing what Dotson calls a contributory injustice—contributory injustice “is caused by an epistemic agent’s situated ignorance, in the form of willful hermeneutical ignorance, in maintaining and utilizing structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources that result in epistemic harm” (Dotson 2012, 31). He might know that there are feminist criticisms of Aristotle (or of canonical philosophy more broadly), but fail to seek them out or allow them to change how he approaches the texts and thinkers he teaches.

In this case, the call for charity creates conditions that are likely to induce testimonial smothering. Here, the appeal to charity is used as a way to double down on epistemic injustice when it is called out. The student points to a way that an author perpetuates harmful stereotypes about women. These stereotypes contribute to the kinds of sexist prejudices that lead to women’s credibility being deflated in the first place. In response, the instructor asks her to be charitable, undermining her act of epistemic resistance while also letting stand the sexist stereotypes she critiques. In moments like these, students might understandably get the impression that their concerns are not properly philosophical, and that questions about who to read, how to respond to problematic texts, and whether an author’s claims about marginalized people are extricable from their broader philosophical theories or systems are not relevant for our discipline. This is all the more frustrating because, of course, these questions are being explored in philosophy—Emmanuela Bianchi, for example, explores the ways that Aristotle’s account of sexual difference

---

10 Below, I suggest that the climate of academic philosophy may already prime students to smother their testimony. This is perhaps an example of what J.Y. Lee calls “anticipatory epistemic injustice” (Lee 2021).

11 See also Gaile Pohlhaus Jr.’s 2012 essay, “Relational Knowing and Epistemic Injustice: Toward a Theory of Willful Hermeneutical Ignorance.”

12 I am grateful to Hanne Jacobs for suggesting this language of “doubling down.”
structure, but also undermine, much of his thinking (Bianchi 2014, 2-3); Sarah Borden Sharkey argues that by Aristotle’s own lights, he would have been a feminist (Sharkey 2016); and Marguerite Deslauriers explores whether Aristotle’s views on the different social roles of men and women emerge from his biological works or from his political works (Deslauriers 2009).  

The risk of testimonial smothering is one harm that emerges from the charitability gap—in my example, the person calling for charity has demonstrated a willingness to be quite charitable to the text, but is unwilling to extend this charity to a marginalized speaker’s critique of that text’s complicity with or perpetuation of oppressive, hegemonic social systems. Directed differently, charity might have played a more generative role than it does in the scenario as I initially offered it. First, the course instructor ought to have recognized that he was hearing testimony from a young woman who was probably just learning philosophy for the first time and who might have quite a different motivation for reading the text than he ever did. In response, he could have paused before responding to her and asked her some follow-up questions about where she was seeing sexism in Aristotle, whether she thought that sexism disqualified someone from making claims about ethics, and what a better theory of friendship might look like. Rather than assuming right away that he had correctly diagnosed the problem as a lack of charity, perhaps the instructor ought to have (more charitably!) assumed that he was not fully understanding where the student was coming from, and that he needed to spend more time listening to her concerns and clarifying his interpretation of them.

---

13 I am grateful to Carlo Tarantino for suggesting these texts.

14 See the “Decentering Charity” section below for a discussion of how this process of recognition can itself be undermined by active investments in dominant epistemic frameworks and power structures.

15 I am not making a claim here about the nuances of Aristotle’s views on women or friendship; rather, I am using Aristotle’s comments about women and friendship as an example of the kind of sexism that we often find in
This smothering can extend beyond the testimonial. In *The Epistemology of Resistance*, Medina explains that he uses “a fairly broad definition of *testimony*, as any kind of telling in and through which expression and transmission of knowledge becomes possible” (Medina 2013, 28; emphasis in original). In her essay, Dotson also seems to use a broad definition of *testimony*. But although testimonial knowledge can be obtained through conversation and through engagements with texts (28), it might also be that other forms of smothering have occurred in my opening example: the student’s question about why the class should be reading Aristotle is silenced, along with her interpretation of Aristotle as sexist and her critical assessment that this makes his presence on her ethics class syllabus suspect. It is perhaps more accurate to say that some form of interpretative smothering is occurring.\(^\text{16}\)

This moment is produced by and in turn reinforces a broader disciplinary tradition of charitability and deference to canonical texts and authors. In this epistemically violent moment, charity is revealed as an orientation device in academic philosophy. Recall that for Ahmed, orientation devices position and direct us, often along already-established life trajectories, lines of thinking, and social practices. For Ahmed, “to be oriented around something is to make ‘that thing’ binding, or to constitute oneself as that thing” (Ahmed 2006, 116). Being oriented around the call for, and practice of, charitability has many effects. I will explore one such effect that is made visible by the example with which I began: the call for charity often directs interpreters toward (or back toward, if we have dared depart) “the canon.”

There are many important questions about what it means to call a work “canonical” and

\(^{16}\) I am grateful to José Medina for encouraging me to broaden my analysis of which forms of smothering are at work in the example I offer and I look forward to reading his forthcoming essay on hermeneutical smothering as I broaden my analysis of some of the epistemic, hermeneutic, and affective harms that result from calls for charity.
about what it might mean to expand, disrupt, or undo philosophy’s canon. A problem with calls for charity like the one I describe is that these questions are foreclosed. The student is turned back to Aristotle the moment she suggests there may be something wrong with facing him. Implicitly and explicitly, she is instructed to refrain from voicing the kinds of critiques that question Aristotle’s place in the philosophical canon. She is also, by being dismissed as uncharitable, directed away from exploring other engagements of Aristotle’s work that, while crowded out by calls for charity like the instructor’s, are being published and discussed in the field. This turn toward canonicity sets her down, to use Ahmedian language, a conventional disciplinary path that reproduces sedimented philosophical traditions rather than opening other intellectual horizons (Ahmed 2016, 270). In Living a Feminist Life, Ahmed recalls that:

> When I was doing my PhD, I was told I had to give my love to this or that male theorist, to follow him, not necessarily as an explicit command but through an apparently gentle but increasingly insistent questioning: Are you a Derridean; no, so are you a Lacanian; no, oh ok, are you a Deleuzian; no, then what? (Ahmed 2017, 15)

Ahmed is concerned about the tendency to expect academics to follow particular lines of citation. Indeed, she experiences this direction as a demand that she show love—note the etymological connection to charity (or caritas) here.

In the introduction to Living a Feminist Life, Ahmed explains that in the book she adopts “a strict citation policy: I do not cite any white men” (15). She does this in order to make space for authors who have not been so frequently cited, but whose work has been important for

---

17 See Anderson and Erlenbusch 2017 for an analysis of how one’s view of the canon’s role in philosophy might impact their views on inclusive pedagogy. See Shotwell 2010 and Mills 1998 for analyses of philosophy’s whiteness and its canon as coconstitutive.

18 For Ahmed’s discussions of disciplinary paths, lines, inheritances, and citational politics, see Ahmed 2006, 22 and Ahmed 2016, 13-18.

19 See chapter 4 for further discussion of charity’s etymology.
feminism and critical race theory. Ahmed is critical of the continual reiteration of “official paths laid out by disciplines” (14). She explains that her citation policy “has given me more room to attend to those feminists who came before” (15). Ahmed is aware that her policy is a blunt one (242), but she contends that sometimes blunt tools are needed to make space for marginalized and silenced voices. The call for charity, in my view, too often renders these alternative paths (like the one Ahmed offers in *Living a Feminist Life*) impossible to find or forge.

Charitability, to be clear, does not do this directing back to the canon on its own. The course syllabus, the departmental curriculum, the disciplinary tradition of organizing introductory-level courses around canonical figures and topics, and sedimented (racialized, gendered, and colonial) institutionalized notions of what “counts” as philosophy each play a role in directing “uncharitable” philosophers toward a canon that is perceived as settled and, in many contexts, compulsory. Though I highlight the role that charitability plays in this orienting process, charitability is intertwined with many other traditions, practices, and methodologies, just as, for Ahmed, heterosexuality does not orient us toward the nuclear family on its own (it is always already racialized and gendered [Ahmed 2006, 127]). The call for charity is a call for a particular way of attending to a text: you cannot be angry or skeptical—at least not at first. Your first encounter must be a generous one. Although there is value in generous textual engagement, this generosity can become weaponized to protect the citational lines and paths already laid out by the discipline.

The student in my example is asked to return and refocus her thinking on Aristotle instead of being introduced to discussions within ancient philosophy about how contemporary

---

20 In a blog post that accompanied *Living a Feminist Life*, Ahmed also frames her policy as a blunt tool: https://feministkilljoys.com/2015/12/30/feminist-shelters/
readers might work with and through Aristotle’s sexism. Her professor misses the opportunity to introduce his student to vibrant intellectual conversations about her concerns that cannot be found within “the canon.”

Furthermore, this call for charity creates no space for taking seriously the role of sexism in Aristotle’s thought. Instead, the student may be left with the impression that philosophy is simply the kind of discipline that does not encourage questions about gender, patriarchy, misogyny, and sexism.

The call for charity is not doomed to direct philosophers toward the canon in the way I describe here. Furthermore, this example occurs in a classroom, where room for interpretation is somewhat confined by the course goals and assigned texts (which are themselves sometimes beyond the instructor’s control, particularly as states in the U.S. pass laws forbidding teachers from assigning texts about race or racism). Invocations and uses of charity vary across disciplinary contexts, such that charity’s function in philosophical scholarship, for instance, might not make this same appeal to canonicity. However, within and outside of the classroom, I have often experienced the call for charity as a trap of sorts, in which I am turned back toward an author or an argument that I have left aside or with which I have no interest in further engagement. Broader patterns of this appeal to charity direct marginalized philosophers across the discipline to canonical texts in this way—we are sometimes prevented from exploring other questions and methods if we must spend so much time demonstrating our capacity to be charitable.

I recognize that scholars mean many different things when we refer to a “canon,” and that questions of canonicity are complex and disciplinarily specific—we cannot simply claim that a text is canonical because it is foundational or because it is frequently assigned. Even so, texts like the *Nicomachean Ethics* are far more familiar to most students and instructors than, for example, secondary literature about Aristotle’s views on women, feminist interpretations of thinkers in ancient philosophy, or feminist reading practices more generally. Indeed, according to The Open Syllabus Project, *Nicomachean Ethics* is number 9 on the list of most-frequently-assigned texts at the college level. See https://opensyllabus.org/
The Affective Injustice of Being Oriented by and toward Charitability

Calls for interpretative charity can produce conditions for testimonial smothering and, in so doing, reveal charitability to be an orientation device. But the smothering effects of calls for charity have implications that extend beyond whether philosophers are respected as knowers in particular epistemic exchanges. It also prescribes particular affective modes of engagement; that is, charity encourages, supports, or demands certain disciplinarily entrenched attitudes, emotions, and styles of interpretation. I am particularly interested in the role of anger in philosophical interpretation. In this section of my chapter, I explore some of the harms that result when speakers’ affects, in addition to their testimony, are dismissed, refused uptake, or otherwise marginalized via the call for charity. I suggest that charity’s harms extend beyond that of credibility, testimonial uptake, and knowledge loss (though if these were the only harms produced by problematic calls for charity, they would already be harmful enough). In addition to and alongside their epistemic harms, calls for charitable interpretation can also produce affective harms.

Here, I linger with the anger of the student in my opening example; more specifically, I place Alison Bailey’s account of affective smothering and Shiloh Whitney’s account of affective oppression into conversation in order to identify the specific ways in which calls for charity can be affectively harmful.22 There is much to be said about affect, interpretation, and charitability, but I have narrowed my focus to explore the ways in which calls for charity often disregard speakers’ anger. The student in this chapter’s example is not only asking why she is expected to read Aristotle; she is also expressing anger. She is angry that she is expected to read the text and

---

22 I use “affective harm” and “affective oppression” interchangeably in this chapter. I reserve “affective injustice” for my engagement with Whitney’s account of it.
take seriously that it might have something helpful or important to say about friendship (or about human relationships more broadly). Whether or not we agree or identify with the students’ anger, we can use it as a way into reflecting on what else, aside from her testimony in class, is refused uptake.

Some Comments on Anger

Many feminists, particularly feminists of color, have articulated the importance of anger, offered distinctions among various forms of anger, and analyzed the ways in which racism and sexism affect how anger is perceived, circulated, and put to use.\textsuperscript{23} Anger, in addition to being a justified response to histories of violence and injustice, is a crucial tool for communicating across difference (see Lorde 1984/2007 and Lugones 2003a). For the purposes of my discussion here, I will highlight María Lugones’ pluralistic account of anger.\textsuperscript{24} In “Hard-to-Handle Anger,” Lugones explores some of the ways in which anger can be “cognitively rich” (Lugones 2003a, 104). Drawing from Audre Lorde’s “The Uses of Anger,” Lugones explains that anger can be epistemically, communicatively, and politically useful. For Lorde, “anger is loaded with emotion and energy” (Lorde 1984/2007, 127), but for this anger to be useful for dismantling personal and institutional oppressions, it must be “focused with precision” (127).

Lugones, building from Lorde’s analysis of anger, develops a distinction between first and second-order anger that offers one account of the multiple ways in which anger can be focused with the precision for which Lorde calls. On the one hand, anger can allow one to make


\textsuperscript{24} For more on Lugones’ pluralistic account of anger, see Bailey 2018, particularly pages 103-106.
demands from what Lugones calls the dominant world of sense (112). This is an anger that “makes a claim upon respect and signals one’s own ability to make judgements about having been wronged” (110). Lugones calls this first-order anger (110). First-order anger might empower and enable a marginalized person to advocate for themselves in contexts where they are at risk of not being heard. On the other hand, anger can move one beyond an official world of sense—it can be a refusal to engage with the terms set by the oppressor. Not all anger, then, is meant to convey a message that a person in a position of power or privilege would find intelligible. Lugones calls this second-order anger (111).

In a call for charity like the one I have been exploring, a speaker is prevented from following her anger. She never learns why we still read Aristotle, how we might overlook (or refuse to overlook) his misogyny, or how else she might think about his account of friendship. Her professor does not interpret her anger as conducive to her learning—it is, in his view, preventing her from engaging properly with the text. Indeed, he disregards the information conveyed by her anger. In their analysis of anger’s role in argumentation, Moira Howes and Catherine Hundleby contend that, “any theory of argumentation that does not recognize the constructive epistemological and moral value of anger in argumentation risks encouraging an oppressive standard that results in the loss of knowledge of the world” (Howes and Hundleby 2018, 238). By taking Lugones’ approach to anger, we see that the student is expressing a cognitively rich anger that does indeed reveal knowledge of the world.25,26 This anger might be

25 In part three of this chapter, I follow Lugones in exploring “worlds” (pluralized) rather than speaking about “the world.”

26 Myisha Cherry uses Audre Lorde’s defense of anger to make a related point: that although not every form of anger is epistemologically, morally, or politically generative, “Lordean rage”—an “anger directed at racist actions, racist attitudes, and presumptions (of people) that arise out of these attitudes” (Cherry 2021, 23)—is a crucial tool for resisting racism.
used to develop new or resistant interpretations of a text, but the call for charity blocks her from using her anger as a resource for knowledge or resistance to oppression.

Importantly, differently situated marginalized subjects will experience the call for charitable interpretation in quite different ways, just as anger is taken up, dismissed, or ignored in quite different ways. The anger or frustration of a white woman, for instance, will almost certainly be read differently than the anger or frustration that a person of color might express toward the same text. Indeed, whether a criticism appears to a listener as angry in the first place is often already racialized—in her critique of the non-adversarial feminist argumentation model as essentializing and white-washed, Tempest Henning points out that Black women are often mischaracterized as angry or combative when they express disagreement (Henning 2018, 204).

This mischaracterization is perhaps a result of what Alison Bailey terms “tone vigilance” (Bailey 2018, 99). Bailey contends that “tone vigilance prompts an audience either to listen for anger in a speaker’s testimony, or to fold a perceived or imagined anger into the testimony because they assume that Black women always speak from an angry place” (99). Indeed, Shiloh Whitney

27 For example, Shiloh Whitney points out that white women’s anger on behalf of (white) children does tend to gain uptake, often at the expense of communities of color (Whitney 2018, 501).

28 This model emerged in response to criticism of adversarial argumentation methods in philosophy, which were taken to be unnecessarily aggressive, hostile, oppositional, and confrontational. As Henning explains:

Asserting women typically have a particular mode of arguing which is often seen as ‘weak’ or docile within male dominated fields, the model argues that the feminine mode of arguing is actually more affiliative and community orientated, which should become the standard within argumentation as opposed to the Adversary Method. (Henning 2018, 197)

Henning criticizes the non-adversarial feminist argumentation model on the grounds that the model takes white women’s argumentation styles as representative of all women’s argumentation styles.

29 I capitalize “Black” but not “white” when referring to racial groups. When citing work that follows a different capitalization convention, I retain the capitalization in the original unless I am paraphrasing.

30 Bailey adds that “attributing anger to marginalized knowers pre-silences them. It triggers an insidious anger-silencing spiral, where reasonable judgements and observations are reduced to the angry nature of a particular group” (Bailey 2018, 99).
describes this assumption as produced by the “gendered structure of perception” (498), later adding that white feminists’ analyses of anger ought also attend to the racialized structure of perception (498-500).  

Two Conceptual Frameworks for Understanding Charity’s Affective Harms

When marginalized philosophers’ anger is waved away or shut down via the call for charity, something, in my view, has gone wrong epistemically and affectively. I have used Dotson and Ahmed to begin sketching these epistemic harms and their broader implications for approaching canonical works in the discipline. I will now explore some of the affective dimensions of the call for charitability. I suggest that the call for charity can produce conditions for what Alison Bailey describes as affective smothering and that it can also produce what Shiloh Whitney describes as affective injustice.

Bailey and Whitney each utilize feminist accounts of anger in order to explore affective oppression and violence. In “On Anger, Silence, and Epistemic Injustice,” Alison Bailey expands upon Dotson’s account of testimonial smothering and brings Lugones’ account of anger to bear on practices of silencing. Bailey suggests that smothering can be affective as well as testimonial. She explains that, “testimonial smothering has an affective dimension that I call

31 In the example I offer, I characterize the student as, indeed, being angry. As I explore the layers of affective oppression that run through calls for charity in academic philosophy, I want to remain attentive to the gendered and racialized politics of perceiving anger. But it is important to remember that whether and how philosophers identify a speaker’s anger or lack of perceived charitability, as well as the particularities of the resultant epistemic harms, are dependent upon the social identities and positions of those involved. See Alia Al-Saji’s “A Phenomenology of Hesitation: Interrupting Racializing Habits of Seeing” for an account of how racism operates “at the level of perception, affect, and prerelective experience” (Al-Saji 2014, 133).

32 Bailey and Whitney are each writing about affect, and accordingly, they cite various feminist accounts of affect, emotion and anger. They are also, however, drawing from different disciplinary traditions (Bailey largely uses resources from epistemic injustice literature, while Whitney utilizes phenomenology and affect theory. Their discussions of Lorde, Lugones, and Ahmed, however, overlap in interesting ways). In future work, I plan to explore similarities and differences in how they approach affect, but for the purposes of this chapter, I take them to be using the term similarly enough that they can be placed in conversation here.
**affective smothering**, a form of self-tone-policing that happens when the speaker recognizes that her audience lacks either the empathy or the affective competence to make sense of her anger as *she* experiences it” (102; emphasis in original). If a speaker perceives that her angry tone of voice (rather than or in addition to the content of her speech) will be deemed unacceptable or unintelligible to her interlocutor, she might soften her anger in hopes of (re)gaining epistemic credibility (Bailey 2018, 7).

For Bailey, affective smothering “exacerbates the harms of epistemic injustices because silencing neutralizes or renders invisible the knowledge speakers have of the injury their anger communicates” (97). In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed defends feminist anger on similar grounds. She contends that although we often feel angry without knowing why, “feminism also involves a reading of the response of anger: it moves from anger into an interpretation of that which one is against, whereby associations or connections are made between the object of anger and broader patterns or structures” (Ahmed 2004, 176). The feminist anger that Ahmed describes is rooted in a much broader social and political worldview and set of commitments: one’s anger is interwoven with their knowledge about the world. As Bailey puts it, “the silences that tone management produces are never empty, still, or mute. Angry tones are not affective embellishments that run alongside knowledge; they are woven tightly into it” (103). We cannot, then, dismiss anger as accidental to knowledge—anger produces, contains, and/or is evidence of knowledge.33

The student in this chapter’s example, for instance, is not merely angry at Aristotle for being sexist; indeed, we should assume that she is not surprised to be confronted with sexism in

---

33 I do not take anger’s value to be reducible to its connection with reason; rather, I take anger’s epistemological content to indicate that knowledge is inseparable from affect.
her philosophy class. She is likely also angry that she is being called to take seriously the value of reading and learning from a book on ethics that contains sexist content; that this content has not been acknowledged as problematic until she points it out; and that the terms of engagement for her course appear to preclude discussions about whether, when, how, and why to entertain philosophical works that value and uphold patriarchal gender relations.

Expressing “uncharitable” anger in a philosophy class, then, often already demonstrates philosophical skills that instructors typically aim to help students develop. But in many cases, students’ perceived emotionality is dismissed, along with the knowledge that their anger carries with it. Although philosophers often treat charity as a prerequisite for interpretation, we see here that without ever applying Finlayson’s informal norm of charity, the student in my example has asked a sophisticated philosophical question about how one shortcoming in a text relates to its broader claims. The student’s anger might be an example of what Bailey, drawing from Lugones’ work, characterizes as a form of knowing, resistant anger that “offers marginalized knowers a powerful resource for countering epistemic oppression” (Bailey 2018, 93).

Bailey understands affective smothering to be an element of epistemic injustice, while Shiloh Whitney uses affect theory, phenomenology, and feminist philosophies of affect and emotion to articulate the affective structure of oppression. More specifically, Whitney explores

---

34 In a focus group with female-identified undergraduates who had never taken philosophy courses, my collaborators and I asked participants to name some philosophers they had heard of. The students named Socrates, Aristotle, Plato, and “those ancient Greek dudes” (Lockard et al., 14). We might, then, not be too far afield in assuming that students anticipate some degree of sexism (albeit different from contemporary sexism) from the authors they read in philosophy classes.

35 For more on how standards of impartiality and reason are used to dismiss analyses rooted at anger against injustice, see Ahmed 2004, 170; Frye 1983.

36 I am grateful to Magnus Ferguson for thinking with me about Whitney’s work and its connection to literature on epistemic injustice.
the ways in which having one’s anger unjustly dismissed can result in what she terms “affective injustice” (Whitney 2018, 488). In her view, silencing anger has effects that are related—but not identical—to epistemic injustice. Affective injustice, in Whitney’s view, occurs when affective intentionality is “refused uptake in oppressive practices” (488). She cites Marilyn Frye’s reflection on anger to explain that often, the anger of marginalized people is treated as without intention; that is, it is treated as though it is not about or directed toward anything (489). Whitney explains that since affect’s circulation is crucial for subjects’ sense-making capacities and for their development and maintenance of an organized body schema, “the refusal of uptake is not merely a matter of failing to grant legibility to already constituted affects. It is also a disabling of affective intentionality, of the intercorporeal conditions for affective sense-making for the marginalized subject” (495-496).

Although the essays take different methodological approaches to affect, readers familiar with contemporary literature on epistemic injustice might immediately see resonances between Whitney’s notion of affective injustice and theories of testimonial, hermeneutical, and contributory injustice (see Dotson 2011; Medina 2013; Fricker 2007; Kidd, Medina, and Pohlhaus Jr., 2017). Whitney describes her account of affective injustice as running parallel to accounts of epistemic injustice (Whitney 2018, 495). In her view,

While *epistemic* injustice damages the credibility given one’s claims, *affective* injustice damages the weight afforded one’s feelings. The weight at issue is not that of belief, but of affective force: when my anger is unjustly refused uptake, it is not appropriately *moving* to others; it does not *affect* them as it should. (495; emphases in original).

Here, Whitney characterizes epistemic injustice as only describing damage to speakers’

---

37 See Whitney 2018, 489-495 for more on how she understands the relationship between intentionality, affect, and the body schema.
credibility. This characterization misses the ways in which epistemic injustice damages one’s epistemic capabilities, undermines their intelligibility to others, and depletes communities of epistemic resources. It is perhaps more accurate to suggest, as Bailey does, that contemporary work in epistemic injustice does not analyze affect and emotion in detail (Bailey 2018, 109). For Whitney, as for Bailey, spending time with affect is important: the refusal to give uptake to a marginalized person’s anger creates “conditions for uniquely affective forms of exploitation and violence” (Whitney 2018, 496). These uniquely affective harms are, for Whitney, not subsumable into the epistemic realm.

In Bailey’s view, on the other hand, when they are affectively smothered, “speakers suffer a double epistemic injury—neither their testimony nor their anger get uptake” (103). For Bailey, we can locate the harm of affective smothering within existing conceptions of epistemic harm: speakers are unable to use their anger as an epistemic resource because their affect, as well as their testimony, is silenced. To put it another way, Bailey understands affective harm as a facet of epistemic harm while for Whitney, affective harm runs parallel to epistemic harm (495).

Despite their differences, the accounts of affective oppression that Bailey and Whitney offer have some important things in common. They are committed to exploring the lived, felt experiences of anger in order to talk about the body, affect, and emotion rather than bracketing these considerations to focus on testimonial exchange. They also each explore the implications of affective harms for intersubjective, intercorporeal practices of meaning-making. In my view, we can approach questions about anger and charitability through a lens mostly informed by epistemic injustice literature, or through a lens mostly informed by affect theory and phenomenology. Each helps reveal what is at stake in calls for charity, and to develop an account of how the epistemic harms are connected to the affective harms. In Bailey’s view, literature in
epistemic injustice has not yet explored affect—and anger, in particular—in sufficient detail (Bailey 2018, 109). My concern in this chapter is not with determining whether or not anger is best-understood through affect theory or through epistemic injustice literature; instead, I read Bailey and Whitney together in order to develop a more robust account of the ways in which calls for charity that dismiss or affectively marginalize anger are doing harm to already-marginalized subjects. Calls for charity that produce testimonial and affective smothering are harmful because they prevent speakers from contributing to meaning-making practices; they can undermine speakers’ confidence in their interpretations and critiques; they contribute to the development of a hostile communicative climate; and they often act as distancing strategies for avoiding examining problems with dominant philosophical methods and texts.

Moments of uncharitability are often moments of affective oppression. While I am not making a universal or unconditional claim about the ways in which marginalized philosophers encounter and experience calls for charity, it is often the case that marginalized philosophers are confronted with the call for charity and that they/we assume—and experience—a testimonial incompetence from our audience. Although not every marginalized philosopher shares the same experiences with calls for charitability, it seems to me that on the whole, unevenly distributed calls for charity are tools for inducing testimonial smothering and affective oppression, and that this smothering widens the charitability gap. A marginalized speaker who is critical of an author or text for its complicity in or perpetuation of racist or sexist ideologies might be quickly dismissed by an interlocutor who simply asks that she be charitable. As a result, the speaker may

38 I do not want to ignore or disregard important methodological and citational differences between Bailey’s and Whitney’s approach, but I also most interested in understanding the connections between their projects. I wonder, for instance, whether affective smothering could be understood as one type of affective injustice.
come to perceive her interlocutor as not testimonially competent enough to address her concerns about racism or sexism more generally, and she may no longer feel able to pursue her questions in a given philosophic context, be it a course, a department, or the discipline as a whole.

Marginalized philosophers must often undertake extra labor in order to prove that we are capable of understanding texts in which we might have little interest (and in fact, might want to leave aside in our own work). This is not merely an annoyance (though it is very annoying!)—it is an anxiety-producing distraction from our work. Distributing calls for charitability unevenly—in addition to protecting canonical thinkers from certain kinds of criticisms and maintaining existing norms of argument and critique—could contribute to philosophy’s pipeline problem by dissuading women and people of color from continuing with the subject and by adding to the difficulty of advancing in the profession should they decide to continue.39 We must also spend time, as Dotson discusses, “rebounding” from our experiences, checking in with our colleagues about whether we were being unfair in our criticisms and developing roundabout framings of our concerns about reading, teaching, and researching racist and sexist thinkers. Whitney also emphasizes the extra affective labor that marginalized people must often expend processing affects (like anger) that were marginalized, denied uptake, or exploited (Whitney 2018, 497).40

39 There are, of course a great number of reasons why one may have difficulty advancing in the profession, and many of these are related to broader features of higher education rather than structural problems within academic philosophy. I take it that transforming our disciplinary attachment to charitability is necessary, but far from sufficient, for making philosophy a discipline more welcoming to people who are not straight, cisgender white men.

40 Indeed, the structural racism and sexism that produce this need for epistemic and affective labor can also have negative physiological effects. In her account of meta-oppression, Jackie Scott uses Shannon Sullivan’s work on the physiology of racist and sexist oppression to explain the ways in which being unable to process or work through one’s racial oppression become an additional form of oppression. She explains that according to Sullivan, “racism contributes to the weathering of non-white bodies as indicated by the disproportionate incidences of particular medical problems (cardio-vascular disease, diabetes, and accelerated physiological aging) among people of color” (Scott 2020, 3). See Shannon Sullivan’s The Physiology of Sexist and Racist Oppression for an account of affect, emotion, epidemiology, embodiment, and structural oppression (Sullivan 2015). See also Whitney’s discussion of
In the example I offer, testimonial and affective smothering do not, I take it, occur primarily because the instructor is perniciously ignorant about women’s credibility or about Aristotle’s sexism. That is, problematic invocations of charity do not occur only because of conscious or unconscious prejudices held by listeners; rather, disciplinary norms of academic philosophy function to privilege already-dominant methods, forms of engagements, and modes of dialogue. The problem is rooted in philosophy’s structural whiteness and maleness and the concomitant commitment (conscious or not) to discrediting or remaining ignorant about ways of knowing, thinking, or communicating that would challenge existing disciplinary standards. In my view, philosophy’s disciplinary climate, in addition to (or perhaps prior to) particular testimonial exchanges between individuals, can produce conditions where marginalized knowers feel that they/we must smother our testimony. J.Y. Lee’s account of anticipatory epistemic injustice may capture my concerns about philosophy’s climate. Lee explains that anticipatory epistemic injustice “refers to the various wrongs that epistemic agents may suffer as a result of anticipated challenges in their process of taking up testimony-sharing opportunities” (Lee 2021, 564). A philosopher may not need to be dismissed directly; they may anticipate that they will be dismissed and subsequently self-silence or revise their question, comment, or critique in ways that they believe will gain uptake. Although pernicious ignorance certainly plays a role in the perpetuation and widening of the charitability gap, the charitability gap is both a result of

Fanon’s account of affective tetanization (Whitney 2018, 507) and Al-Saji’s work on Fanon and the affective weight of colonization (Al-Saji 2020).

41 I am grateful to Nora Berenstain for encouraging me to explore the connection between disciplinary structures and the charitability gap. See also Alexis Shotwell’s analysis of “whiteness as method” and its operation in academic philosophy (Shotwell 2010, 119) and Nora Berenstain’s discussion of motivated ignorance in “White Feminist Gaslighting” (Berenstain 2020, 8).
individual philosophers’ ignorances and a result of harmful disciplinary structures.⁴²

**Refusing Charitable Worlds**

As described above, the first way that the charitability gap brings unruly philosophers back into line with the discipline is by creating conditions of testimonial smothering. The second, and related, way that the charitability gap does this bringing into line is by creating conditions of affective oppression. Third, the charitability gap can perform this disciplining function by preventing the interruption of unjust worlds. In her essay, “Wrongful Requests and Strategic Refusals to Understand,” Gaile Pohlhaus Jr. uses Lugones’ account of worlds to defend the practice of refusing to understand certain positions or ways of thinking. While attempting to understand others is usually important for meaning-making and for treating one another as epistemic subjects (Pohlhaus Jr. 2011, 224), there are cases when refusing to perform this understanding can be “ethically and epistemically productive” (223). Pohlhaus Jr. contends that some requests for understanding are demands for subjects to remain in an unjust world of sense.

Pohlhaus Jr. uses Lugones’ account of worlds to show how practices of understanding are relational, contextual, and political. On Pohlhaus’ reading of Lugones, “worlds are actual ‘lived social arrangements’ (25) that exist in tension with one another due to relations of power that are embedded in and made possible by human intersubjective relating” (Pohlhaus 2011, 230). For Lugones, a world is a space—physical and conceptual—of sense-making, interaction, and habitation. Worlds are actively made, re-made, and un-made; they can be inhabited by dominant or resistant subjects; they coexist simultaneously; and people can travel from one to another (some more easily than others) (Lugones 2003b, 87-89).⁴³ Medina describes Lugones’ “world”

---

⁴² See chapter 3 for an extended discussion about structure.

⁴³ Bailey reminds us that “Lugones uses the term ‘world’ in a way that is purposely ambiguous and unfixed.”
as “a shared horizon of meaning and interpretation that discloses possibilities for experience and action” (Medina 2020, 215).

Pohlhaus Jr. contends that when a marginalized person is asked to perform an act of understanding that would require them to remain in or travel to an unjust or oppressive world, their epistemic agency is being problematically curtailed (Pohlhaus Jr. 2011,232). Even if they are not forced to agree with the view presented, the request necessarily requires one “to participate within the world that gives sense to what is to be understood” (235). This curtailment of agency, in Pohlhaus’ view, is an epistemic violence (237), particularly because it is asymmetrically enacted—marginalized people are disproportionately asked to perform these acts of understanding. This asymmetry is problematic because it requires additional affective and epistemic labor from marginalized people. Indeed, the request can be an instance of epistemic exploitation. Emmalon Davis explains that

> When extra epistemic responsibilities are routinely allocated to members of underrepresented communities, these individuals find themselves confronted with higher volumes of epistemic labor than their dominant peers. Often, this labor is not compensated (or is inadequately compensated); sometimes the labor is not even recognized as labor. Call this the harm of epistemic exploitation. (Davis 2016, 493)

The request for someone from a marginalized community to remain in an unjust world of sense often puts them in the position of having to explain and justify their refusal. Or if one does have to participate in the unjust world of sense, they are often still placed in the position of explaining

---

‘Worlds’ are purposely incomplete, Worlds are not utopias. They are filled with flesh and blood people. Worlds need not be constructions of a whole society, they may be niches” (Bailey 2018, 104).

See the Lugones Lexicon developed by the “Feminism, Intersectionality, Decolonialism: The Work of María Lugones course (taught by Nancy Tuana and Emma Velez in fall 2017 at Penn State University) for further elaboration of Lugones’ conception of worlds. I am grateful to Emma Velez for showing me this resource.
how and why it is unjust. Both are acts of epistemic labor that someone from a dominant group would not need to perform and from which they are likely to benefit. These refusals that Pohlhaus describes, then, help protect one’s epistemic agency, they interrupt the unjust epistemic habits of others, and they gesture toward possible other (resistant) worlds (238-239).

For Pohlhaus Jr., sometimes pointing out an injustice requires stepping outside—and perhaps remaining outside—of the world in which that injustice makes sense. That is, “demonstrating the harm that the requested understanding does can only be done from worlds that actively resist the sense of the world one has been implicitly asked to inhabit” (232). Importantly, this refusal is not the kind of refusal of uptake that Dotson characterizes as epistemic violence; rather, it is a refusal that makes space for resistance. Some forms of resistance can only emerge when marginalized subjects refuse the terms and worlds that have been set out by dominant structures of sense-making.

Lugones’ notion of worlds is developed within a particular tradition of Latinx feminism. She frames her description of worlds and world-traveling explicitly as tools for thinking about what it might mean for women of color to develop coalitions with one another across racial identities (see Lugones 2003b, especially 83-85). While I do not want to take Lugones’ notion of worlds too far from the context in which it emerged and remains embedded, I find Pohlhaus Jr.’s connection between world traveling and refusal to be illuminating for my analysis of interpretive charity’s risks and harms. The curtailment of epistemic agency is one part of the problem, but Lugones’ discussion of worlds captures that the problem is even more thoroughgoing, operating “beneath” the level of epistemic agency. Bailey explains that worlds, for Lugones, “shape the affective textures of our angry experiences” (104; emphasis in original). When marginalized people—or, as Lugones describes them, oppressed⇌resisting subjects (Lugones 2003, 84;
Bailey 201,8 105)—are required to enter or remain within oppressive worlds, there are important implications for how affects are produced and experienced. The structures and affects that we use to make sense of our worlds retain their dominating, oppressive character when we are prevented from thinking, speaking, or interpreting in ways that fail to “make sense” within an oppressive discursive framework. Philosophy cannot be done otherwise, remade, or made more inclusive if our interpretive and dialogic practices continually demand that marginalized philosophers move into or remain in unjust or oppressive worlds.

When a speaker is prevented from practicing a certain kind of refusal to understand, she becomes trapped in a world that does not respect (or even fully acknowledge) her as a knower. She is not only prevented from developing resistant epistemic practices, or sidetracked from building coalitions with other resistant knowers; she is prevented from exiting or reimagining an entire world of sense-making (Pohlhaus Jr. 2011, 235). A smothering-inducing call for charity can be a call to remain in a hostile or oppressive world. The student in the opening example is asked to take seriously the possibility that Aristotle’s sexism does not matter to his philosophy, or to remain within a world that fails to take his sexism seriously. She is asked to remain in a world of sense where it is coherent—even ethical—to say that she owes men more attention and affection than they owe her, and that this inequality grounds authentic friendship. The world of philosophy is thus framed as unchangeably sexist, such that the only live options are to either reject Aristotle (or indeed, philosophy as a whole) because of this sexism or to see sexism as inevitable (and thus not worth thinking carefully about in Aristotle).

In *The Epistemology of Resistance*, José Medina suggests that charity is one tool for resisting epistemic and hermeneutic oppression. Medina searches for ways of engaging one another that better-facilitate “everyone’s ability to participate in meaning-making and meaning--
expressing practices” (Medina 2013, 109). For Medina, different contexts and situations call for different resistances to epistemic and hermeneutic injustice, and knowers with varying levels of privilege will have different responsibilities for correcting these injustices. One general suggestion he offers is that “as a rule of thumb, our hermeneutical efforts and interpretative charity should be proportional to the degree of hermeneutical marginalization experienced by the subjects in question” (110). One should recognize when they—because of their interlocutor’s marginalized identities or non-dominant style of communication or meaning-making—are likely to misunderstand this interlocutor or take their claims to be false, incoherent, or inconsistent. Medina suggests that upon recognizing this risk, a hearer should make a special effort to interpret the speaker’s testimony charitably.44

In her essay, “The Episteme, Epistemic Injustice, and the Limits of White Sensibility,” Lissa Skitolsky offers an additional analysis of epistemic injustice that complicates the idea that a hearer should—or in fact could—make a conscious effort to offer charity, or to “adjust” their level of charity according to a particular situation. Skitolsky contends that if testimonial injustice has its source in a consistent habit of perception and imagination conditioned by a system of white supremacy that generates its own sensibility to furnish its own visual ‘evidence,’ then we cannot hope to ‘correct’ for this particular type of epistemic injustice by an appeal to our own prereflective and ‘spontaneous’ powers of moral perception to better ‘recognize’ the epistemic authority of individuals who we cannot see or imagine as reliable knowers (Skitolsky 2019, 211; emphases in original).

If Skitolsky is correct that our perceptions and sensibilities are not correctable in the way we might hope, it might seem that any self-reflective process that relies on recognizing, and then

44 Here, Medina seems to suggest that there is a baseline level of charitability according to which hearers can calibrate their allocation of credibility. He does not explore charitability further in The Epistemology of Resistance, but I take it that any such baseline level of charitability would, like his account of how to resist epistemic and hermeneutical injustices, be highly contextually specific.
correcting for, prejudices that reproduce the charitability gap is already imbued with oppressive structures of perception and interpretation. We are likely, it seems, to be overly charitable to our assessments of our own charitability; that is, we interpret our practices of charitability as fairer, less biased, and more carefully considered than they often are or could ever be, given that oppressive power structures construct the very perceptive and interpretive faculties we use to make these judgements.

To avoid being overly charitable in our assessments of our own charitability, philosophers would need, then, to avoid attempting to repair our discipline’s epistemically unjust systems, structures, or behaviors in isolation. In her discussion of epistemic and hermeneutic virtues, Miranda Fricker explains that because epistemic injustice (including testimonial and hermeneutic injustice) is rooted in unequal power relations rather than in individuals’ biases, “it is not the sort of thing that could itself be eradicated by what we do as virtuous hearers alone” (Fricker 2007, 174). Medina also recognizes the limitations of individual self-reflection, explaining that “epistemic responsibility cannot be properly identified and addressed independently of the agent’s social position within structural processes and networks of social relations” (Medina 2013, 252). It is only through collective, imaginative practices that problems of epistemic (and, I would add, affective) oppression can be addressed.45

Medina mentions charitability only briefly in his book, and in his discussion of epistemic friction and social imagination in The Epistemology of Resistance, as well in his work on epistemic activism (Medina 2020) and social imagination (Medina 2013) Medina emphasizes that in addition to developing strategies for becoming more epistemically virtuous knowers and

---

45 See also Medina’s discussion of epistemic friction in The Epistemology of Resistance (especially chapters 2 and 6).
community members, people must also work to shift the structures of sensemaking and knowledge practices that produce the very conceptual and perceptual resources we then use to address epistemic injustice. His “rule of thumb” (to which I return in chapter 4) is not meant as a solution to all questions of charitability, but it is perhaps a place to start (indeed, it is a place to which I return in chapter four). Even though the charitability gap is systemic and, as I will explore in the following chapter, resistant to our efforts at closing it, some increased level of awareness and concern for how we allocate charity might be helpful, especially when combined with other efforts at transforming our charitability practices and the discipline more generally.

Relatedly, we might wonder: would charity still function problematically in our classrooms if we used more diverse or representative texts? Perhaps following Medina, we might select texts in our classrooms that have historically been read (unjustly) uncharitably, or have been left out of philosophy classes altogether. In that case, a call for charity could facilitate students’ understanding and engagement with the author and contribute to a broader effort to close the charitability gap. But other difficulties with charitability remain: its ambiguity, its position as methodological imperative rather than as one among many interpretive orientations, and its rootedness in false notions of political neutrality indicate, in my view, that problems with charity do not fade solely by pluralizing the texts we read or assign.

I am tempted, because of instances where philosophers might either appeal to charity strategically and because of Medina’s concerns about hermeneutical marginalization, to draw a distinction between appropriate and inappropriate invocations of charity. Pohlhaus Jr. makes a distinction between appropriate and inappropriate requests for understanding, and I wonder if something similar is at play in the cases of charity I have in mind (Pohlhaus Jr. 2011, 236). Perhaps I am only concerned about misuses of charity, or perhaps some cases are inappropriate
for a reason(s) that philosophers could identify and guard against.\textsuperscript{46}

While the call for charity does not always reproduce epistemic violence or trap interlocutors in unjust worlds of sense, I do suspect that charitability is part of the structure of academic philosophy. And in our accounts of charity, we don’t (or don’t yet) have the nuance that we would need to distinguish between uses and misuses. Although I am hopeful that charity can be reimagined and renegotiated, I wonder if charity’s propensity to uphold the politico-philosophical status quo is a feature, rather than a fixable “bug” of interpretive charity. Perhaps the worrying implications of charity do not emerge in a risky dialogic exchange, or in the attempt to gain or develop knowledge; perhaps they rest within the concept of charity itself. The misuse, then, may not be a case of charity “going wrong”—it may be a case of charity functioning precisely as it is meant to. Again, this does not mean that interpretive charity must go, but it certainly is a reason to think more carefully about our charity-related practices and to de-center charitability in favor of other modes of engaging texts and one another.\textsuperscript{47}

The call for and practice of charitable interpretation is what Dotson might call risky; it can widen the charitability gap, induce testimonial and affective smothing, and trap us in oppressive worlds of sense. Even though appropriate and inappropriate uses of charity cannot, in my view, be neatly distinguished from one another, there are perhaps some important strategic, epistemic, and hermeneutic reasons to retain charitability.\textsuperscript{48} Any interpretive or dialogic practice will perform some acts of exclusion—pluralizing and making space for more ways of reading

\textsuperscript{46} I return to this question in Chapter 5.

\textsuperscript{47} See chapter four for a discussion of what it might look like to shift conversations about modes of textual engagement away from questions about whether or not an engagement is charitable.

\textsuperscript{48} I return to these reasons in chapters 4 and 5.
and engaging in the discipline may not require an abandonment of charity altogether; it might instead require a de-centering of charitability. I offer an account of what this de-centering might look like in chapter four.

**Conclusion: Charity Problems as Habit-of-Being Problems**

In this chapter I have explored some problems that both produce and emerge from philosophy’s charitability gap. I suggested that interpretive charity is a risky philosophic practice that can produce testimonial smothering, be affectively harmful, and direct marginalized subjects to remain in unjust worlds of sense. My goal has been to explore one particular instantiation of the charitability gap in order to identify what is at stake when we call for charity from one another. I have expanded upon Lorna Finlayson’s claim that calls for interpretive charity are political. More specifically, I have identified harms that emerge from uncritical calls for charity. These harms are epistemic—the call for charity often produces conditions for testimonial smothering, which hinders speakers’ abilities to express themselves and participate in knowledge production processes (although importantly, the call for charity does not completely erase epistemic agency—it only does so in some contexts). These epistemic harms are also affective—they are dismissive of marginalized people’s anger and they thus threaten their capacities for sense-making and participating in affective economies.

From Lugones and Polhhaus Jr., we can perhaps also understand charity’s harms as ontological—the call for charity and its accompanying epistemic and affective harms block the development of the counter-oppressive subjectivities, skills, habits, and worlds. They help constitute philosophy as a discipline that is largely committed to bracketing questions about race, gender, and oppression. In this way, the call for charity can prevent philosophers (as well as philosophy itself) from becoming otherwise. In her reflection on whiteness, settler colonialism,
and memory, Alexis Shotwell says of whiteness, “we don’t just have a knowledge problem—we have a habit-of-being problem” (Shotwell 2015, 58). Perhaps we can understand the problem of charitability similarly: problems of charity are “habit-of-being problems” that emerge because many philosophers (particularly those who occupy positions of power) feel entitled to receive charitability from others and to demand it when it is not readily given. To return to our Aristotle example: it could be that a habit of charitability is motivating the call to offer Aristotle’s sexism a charitab
le reading. The instructor may be so accustomed to charitability, and so discouraged from identifying the exclusionary implications of some calls for charity, that this call left his mouth without his full awareness that he even made it. And because has always been taught that we are all entitled to charitability from our interlocutors, he had little motivation to question whether his charitable habit was appropriate for the situation.

To close this chapter, I want to emphasize that even amidst these epistemic, affective, and perhaps even ontological harms, there may yet be room for resistance. The student in my opening example may have been dismissed by the dominant world of sense, but we ought not assume that she has lost all respect for and recognition of herself as a knower. Perhaps, for example, she is able to use her anger to build solidarity with her classmates, or to fuel her research for her final paper. Perhaps, to return to Lugones’ helpful distinction, the student’s first-order anger receives no uptake, but its second-order expression flourishes. I do not wish to romanticize the student’s situation, or suggest that because there remains space for non-dominant forms of communication and meaning-making, epistemic and affective violences are really not so bad. Whitney reminds her reader that “Lugones’ account [of second-order anger] also emphasizes that the harm of the refusal of uptake in a dominant world of sense is not undone by receiving uptake in a subversive one” (Whitney 2018, 500). I aim to follow Medina, Pohlhaus
Jr., and Dotson in being attentive to the ways in which epistemic and affective marginalization and oppression are fluid, changeable, and context-specific.

There is certainly more to be said about the affective, epistemological, and worldly factors at play in specific instances when charitability is requested, encouraged, or demanded. What other epistemic violences or harms may occur in cases like this? How might additional work in affect theory inform our understanding of the effects of refusing to be charitable, or over-relying on it as an interpretative orientation? And what sorts of resistant interpretative communities emerge as a result of charity’s misuse in dominant worlds of sense? For now, I leave these questions unaddressed. In the following chapter, I explore the background disciplinary conditions that allow moments like the (not-so-) imaginary one I began this chapter with to occur.
CHAPTER THREE

PURE CHARITY AND CHARITABLE PURITY: PURISM AS A BACKGROUND CONDITION FOR CHARITY’S UBIQUITY

I propose that we develop a praxis of intersectional philosophy, to practice philosophy in a way that is mindful of both how philosophical texts, traditional or contemporary, can be read in light of concerns related to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability nationality, and so forth, and the ways these are intermeshed or inform one another and in light of how philosophical texts intersect with texts from other disciplines. *It will require that we see philosophy anew and leave behind its many claims to purity.* It will require that we be creative and that we read texts through new lenses (Mariana Ortega 2016, 218; emphasis my own).

A Feedback Loop from Purism to Charitability

In her conclusion to *In-Between: Latina Feminist Phenomenology, Multiplicity, and the Self,* Mariana Ortega calls on philosophers to abandon the discipline’s claims to purity. This call to abandon purity is one that, I will show in this chapter, requires philosophers to also abandon many of our practices around charity. In the previous chapter, I identified some of the affective and epistemic harms that can result from treating charity as a methodological or interpretive imperative in philosophy.¹ In this chapter I am turning toward some of the background conditions, assumptions, and practices that allow charity to operate in these harmful ways. What, I ask, gives sense and intelligibility to the call for charity? I explore the connections between charity and purity in order to understand part of the background apparatus that allows the call for charity to function in the epistemically and affectively harmful ways I describe in chapter 2. I

---

¹ As I suggest in chapter 1, this methodological imperative is, in practice, unevenly distributed—as a discipline we do not seem to be gripped with concerns about offering charity to marginalized authors.
argue that ethicopolitical purism, as described by Alexis Shotwell in her book *Against Purity*, and ontological purity, as described by María Lugones in “Purity, Impurity, and Separation” provide the backdrop that allows charity to appear useful as an interpretative tool for engaging with texts. These accounts of purity are connected to one another, but I highlight different elements of each—for instance, I find Lugones’ notion of split/separation to be useful in identifying the reading practices encouraged by charity, while I find Shotwell’s articulation of individual ethical purity to be generative for thinking about the complexities of transforming practices of charitability. Charity and purity operate in a mutually reinforcing feedback loop, such that purity politics and logics give rise to calls for charity and at the same time, calls for charity reinforce purity.

Although charity’s problems are not entirely reducible to their relationship with the purism that Shotwell and Lugones so compellingly identify and critique, I see three significant ways that commitments to charity are structured by this purism, which itself is inextricable from systems of power and interlocking oppressions. Using Shotwell’s account of ethical and political purity and Lugones’ account of ontological impurity, I make three claims about purity’s connection to charity: First, a commitment to what I call *hermeneutic purity* drives the assumption that, by using a charitable approach, interpreters can cleanly separate any potentially problematic assumptions, epistemic frameworks, or offensive claims from the “real” philosophy contained within the text. Second, purism encourages a willful misinterpretation of textual

---

2 The term “hermeneutic purity” emerged in conversation with Carlo Tarantino about Shotwell’s work and its connection to pedagogy. In this chapter, I continue to use *hermeneutic* in a fairly general way to refer to textual interpretation and meaning-making. I am interested, in future work, in exploring the connections between my own account of hermeneutic purity and work in philosophical hermeneutics; I am thinking specifically of Gadamer’s work on horizonality and interpretation, but also of Paul Ricoeur’s account of distanciation and appropriation (Thompson 1981, 18-19; Ricoeur 1981, 94). I thank Avery Smith for suggesting that Ricoeur may be a useful and important interlocutor and I look forward to engaging with more of his work.
critique as refusal to engage—too often, philosophers are overcome with an anxious desire to shield figures from charges of racism or sexism that, purism assumes, would damn that figure to disciplinary obscurity. And third, purism allows for a misguided individualized response to structural disciplinary problems like the charitability gap.

Shotwell is committed, in her work, to developing ways of confronting the reality that there is no way “out of” or beyond the ethically fraught and disastrous state of the world, and that the desire to hold oneself above this fray is both problematic and ineffective—I assume (charitably, perhaps!) that many philosophers recognize at least some of the complex, persistent, thorny problems within our discipline and that we want our discipline to be different. Given the mess of the world and of the discipline specifically, it is understandable that we would want tools to ameliorate the harms and injustices with which we are confronted. It also makes sense that the tools most readily available to us are tools steeped in and shaped by purity—which itself is shaped by many interlocking structures of oppression. Charity is one such tool. And since purity is shaped by many interlocking structures of oppression, so too is the “purity move” of using charitable interpretation to engage with problematic texts. My hope is that in this chapter, I am able to articulate the role that purity plays in making the call for charitability intelligible, tempting, and (often) ineffectual.

In an essay exploring some of the many reasons that philosophy is one of the least diverse academic disciplines, Yolonda Y. Wilson points out that even the seemingly mundane, everyday

---

3 Recently, The Philosophy Exception Project has released an updated database that includes published literature on philosophy’s “severe equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) problem. See https://www.thephilosophyexception.ca/about

4 I cite this information in my introduction, but for ease of reference, I have included it again here: According to an APA blog post by Eric Schwitzgebel:
ways of interacting with our students can reproduce conditions that make the discipline feel—and be—hostile to women and/or people of color. When we repeatedly fail to respond to or encourage our non-white, non-male students, we perpetuate the idea that they do not belong in our classrooms. Wilson contends that “this willingness to give students who are white and male the benefit of the doubt creates a feedback loop that encourages them to continue to pursue their education, while discouraging those who are women and/or of color” (Wilson 2017, 855). We might say that the charitability gap is at work here: faculty expend effort to engage with and respond to white men at a higher rate than they do students from other identity groups.

Wilson highlights a way in which structural injustices (in this case, racism and sexism) produce behaviors in faculty that dissuade marginalized students from engaging further in

In its 2018 membership data, the American Philosophical Association reports 26% women among members responding to a demographic survey, 74% men, and 0.2% “something else”. Similarly, in 2017, Schwitzgebel and Jennings found that 25% of faculty in U.S. departments rated in the Philosophical Gourmet Report were women and that 29% of philosophy PhD recipients placed in academic jobs were women. Data from the Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED) shows that women have earned approximately 29% of philosophy PhDs since the early 2000s. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) shows that women have received approximately 32% of philosophy Bachelor’s degrees since the 1980s.

Additionally, “in its membership data from 2018, the APA finds 80% of respondents identifying as White/Caucasian, compared to 60% in the general U.S. population. Also in 2018, White students received 84% of PhDs in philosophy, compared to 70% of PhDs overall (excluding temporary visa holders).” There has been some growth among Latinx and Asian philosophy students at all levels, but currently, Blacks or African Americans constitute 13% of the general population, 10% of Bachelor’s degree recipients overall, 5% of Philosophy Bachelor’s degree recipients, 3% of Philosophy PhD recipients (only 10 total recorded by the Survey of Earned Doctorates in 2018) and also only 3% of respondents to the APA’s demographic survey. American Indians / Alaska Natives are also underrepresented, constituting about 1.3% of the U.S. population, 0.4% of Bachelor’s degree recipients, 0.3% of Bachelor’s recipients in Philosophy, and 1.1% of APA members who reported their race. In 2018, the SED recorded no American Indian or Alaska Native philosophy PhD recipients.

These numbers are not fully representative of the state of the field (they refer only to APA members who responded to a survey), but they do point to a persistent lack of gender and racial diversity in academic philosophy. Additionally, “in 2013, 9% of the [surveyed Pacific Division APA] program participants [in 2013] identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered. In both years, approximately 4% of the conference participants responded that they identify as "a person with a disability” (Tremain 2013, 4). The Philosophy Exception Project provides an extensive list of published data about philosophy’s demographics:
https://philosophyexception.squarespace.com/documentation/#data.
philosophy, which then further-cements the discipline’s status as white and male. Like Wilson seems to (though she does not employ the language of charitability) I take charity’s connection to oppression to be crucial in understanding the function it performs in our discipline. Understanding charity as structured by—and not merely perpetuating—oppression is important because charity does not simply have oppressive effects by coincidence (and so it is bad for disciplinary demographics); instead, the very same oppressive structures that calls for charity reinforce also set the stage for charity’s emergence in the first place. It is not an accident that racism and sexism are reinforced by calls for charity—it is those very norms (among others) that allow charity to do that work. To put it another way: one might be tempted to ask whether charity reinforces oppressive structures like political purity, or if charity is instead the result of oppressive structures like purity. In my view, this question misses the recursive relationship between purity and charity—purity is both a result of charity and a condition of its possibility, and charity is both a result of purity and a condition of its possibility. Calls for charity are informed by and then reinforce what I am calling “hermeneutic purity,” where we assume that a text’s problems can be cleanly separated from the parts we have already deemed useful; purity politics contribute to misunderstanding of critique as refusal to engage rather than allowing for tension and contradiction; and purity politics become a stumbling block for transforming or undoing charitability by locating the individual philosopher as both the problem and the agent of change.
Charity and Hermeneutic Purity

I did not intend to return to Aristotle in this chapter, but Aristotle returned to me in the form of Agnes Callard’s July 2020 *New York Times* Op-Ed, “Should We Cancel Aristotle?” In this piece, Callard defends the practice of reading and engaging Aristotle, despite his “inegalitarian” views and his defense of slavery as beneficial to the slave. She does not make clear in her op-ed precisely who is calling for Aristotle’s cancellation, and her deployment of the term “cancel” is indicative of a broader anxiety around any robust challenge to the notion that philosophy should be pluralized or responsive to the contemporary world. We might wonder: against whom is Callard defending Aristotle?

To set up her claim that Aristotle should not be “cancelled,” Callard asks:

---

5 Callard is not clear about how she understands the term “cancel,” and this should raise immediate concern. The term “cancel” is evolving rapidly. In an August 10, 2020 “The Daily” podcast episode about cancel culture, *New York Times* reporter Jonah Bromwich explains that it was first used in the 2010s on Black Twitter as a joke (a broken espresso machine is “cancelled” in one comedy sketch, for example). Now, the term is usually used to describe a public criticism of, a refusal to engage with, or a commitment to stop financially supporting someone who has made harmful or offensive statements. Often, however, the term is deployed pejoratively as a way to dismiss criticism of public figures who perpetuate systematic injustice, oppression, and violence. The term was picked up by Donald Trump in 2020, when, as the podcast summarizes, he claims that cancel culture is a weapon of the “radical left.” We should, in my view, be extremely careful and specific when we criticize cancel culture since these critiques are used to fuel the brutal and undemocratic crackdown against any insistence that public figures be held accountable for their actions. See https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/10/podcasts/the-daily/cancel-culture.html for more on cancel culture.

6 Callard is, I take it, somewhat limited in her ability to cite specific passages by the confines of word limits and writing conventions of *The New York Times*’ “The Stone” column. She says that “his view was that some people are, by nature, unable to pursue their own good, and best suited to be ‘living tools’ for use by other people: ‘The slave is a part of the master, a living but separated part of his bodily frame’” (para. 1). I take her to be referencing Book 1 of *Politics*, in which Aristotle also says that, “The deliberative part of the soul is entirely missing from a slave; a woman has it but it lacks authority; a child has it but it is incompletely developed” (*Politics* 1260a12-14).

7 As an example of public philosophy, this defense of Aristotle published in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and a summer of uprisings against anti-Black racism and police brutality, Callard’s op-ed misses an opportunity to make philosophy relevant to the various crises of our time in favor of defending Aristotle against an imagined attack.

8 Indeed, Bryan Van Norden asks this question in an essay responding to Callard’s op-ed, titled “Who is Cancelling Aristotle? The Panic over the Imaginary Threat to the Canon”: https://medium.com/@bryanvannorden_14478/i-am-puzzled-by-agnes-callaards-article-should-we-cancel-aristotle-92a08a4ec6de.
Should readers set aside or ignore such [racist and sexist] remarks, focusing attention on valuable ideas to be found elsewhere in their work? This pick-and-choose strategy may work in the case of Kant, Hume, Frege, and Wittgenstein, on the grounds that their core philosophical contributions are unrelated to their prejudices. (para. 3-4)

With this question and with her own immediate reply, Callard demonstrates an important role that purism plays in textual interpretation in philosophy. Callard follows up her casual mention of what she calls the “pick-and-choose” strategy’s general utility (itself already a purity move, which I will explore presently) by suggesting that when picking and choosing does not work (as in the case of Aristotle), we read him “literally—which is to say, read his words purely as vehicles for the contents of his beliefs” (para. 11) And for Callard, “it is not only that the benefits of reading Aristotle counteract the costs, but that there are no costs. In fact we have no reason at all to cancel Aristotle. Aristotle is simply not our enemy” (para. 10) Callard’s mention of picking and choosing can be understood, I suggest, through the lens of María Lugones’ account of logics of purity, or split separation. To Lugones’ articulation of this politics of purity (Lugones 2003, 121), I want to add an account of hermeneutic or interpretive purity.

María Lugones on Logics of Purity and Split Separation

To develop my account of hermeneutic purity, I need to first explain Lugones’ account of purity in further detail. In her essay “Purity, Impurity, and Separation,” Lugones argues that understanding identity and the social world as multiple and interconnected is more conducive to resisting oppression than an understanding of identity and the social world as unified and

---

9 For a response to Callard’s piece—and more specifically, to the suggestion that we can take Aristotle’s words at face value and that we should treat him, with his “inegalitarian views,” like an alien from a distant galaxy, see this blog post by Martin Lenz: https://handlingideas.blog/2020/07/21/why-using-quotation-marks-doesnt-cancel-racism-or-sexism-with-a-brief-response-to-agnes-callard/

10 See the “Collapse of Critique and Refusal” section of this chapter for further discussion of Aristotle as the enemy.
separable into clear, distinct parts. To make her argument, she contrasts what she calls “logics of purity” with “logics of curdling” (Lugones 2003, 127).11

Lugones begins her essay by recounting what happens when she tries to separate an egg, but fails to completely separate the white from the yolk. She explains that at this point, it is nearly impossible to fully extract the white from the yolk or the yolk from the white: “the intention is to separate, first cleanly and then, in case of failure, a bit messily, the white from the yolk, to split the egg into two parts as clean as one can. This is an exercise in purity” (121). A logic of purity is one that assumes there is “unity underlying multiplicity” (126) within any subject and any world—that the world is unified but also separable into pure parts and easy to understand (127).12 Even in a situation where this separability is challenged, as it is with failed egg separation, those following a logic of purity will attempt to split the egg into two discrete parts.

A curdled logic, on the other hand, is more like making mayonnaise. Lugones explains that since mayonnaise is an emulsion and all emulsions are unstable, sometimes the mixture of oil and water appears to separate or curdle. But importantly for Lugones, the oil and water in an emulsion do not actually separate; rather, they “coalesce toward oil or toward water, most of the water becomes separate from most of the oil—it is instead [of a clean separation], a matter of different degrees of coalescence. The same with mayonnaise; when it separates, you are left with yolky oil and oily yolk” (122). A curdled logic approach does not consider the oil and water to

---

11 Lugones refers in her to essay to “logics of purity,” (Lugones 2003, 126) and to “the politics of purity” (121). I take her to be suggesting that purist conceptual frameworks are themselves political. Shotwell offers a similar account of purity, in which its logics and its ontological status are themselves ethical, social, and political.

12 See the previous chapter for a discussion of the term “world” in Lugones’ writing. For an additional summary of Lugones’ account of curdled selves and logics, see Ortega 2016, 102-104.
be separate, and does not try to separate the yolk from the oil. It assumes multiplicity without also assuming unity, and does not worry about organizing the world or the subject into discrete categories that fit together into unified, yet easily separable elements.

Lugones uses separated eggs and curdled mayonnaise to explain dominant and resistant selves and worldviews. For Lugones, purity logics are connected with privileged/dominant worldviews. She contends that “the urge for control and the passion for purity are conceptually related” (129); that is, the desire for thinking of the world as unified and orderly is related to the desire to understand and control the world. People with a high level of social power and privilege are likely to take this purity-based view (130). When we take a purity-based approach to others and to the social world, we make three assumptions: first, that people’s various social identities can be split apart from one another and considered separately; second, that these separable social identities fit together to form one unified subject; and third, that these social identities are not central to how the subject perceives the social world, so they can be stripped away at any time to reveal a “true” or essential self underneath (126).¹³ These assumptions often conflict with one another, but Lugones contends that lovers of purity are “saved” from confronting the incoherence of their assumptions by their “self-deception, weakness of the will, aggressive ignorance” (132). For Lugones, no one’s subjectivity is unified or pure, but we (particularly those of us with many different socially privileged identities) feel threatened by the complexity of impurity, and so we ignore even our own impurities and cover over them with logics of purity.

---

¹³ Lugones refers throughout her essay to the use of purity and curdled approaches for understanding both selves and social worlds; she also contends that “it is important to problematize the singularity of ‘social world’ and the distinction between social world and individual” (146).
Shotwell explains that “Lugones critiques a metaphysics of purity, understood as separability, fragmentation, and standing outside culture and situatedness” (Shotwell 2017, 15). Using Lugones’ critique as a starting point, Shotwell builds out her discussion of ethics and political organizing. Shotwell explains that for Lugones, “the metaphysics of purity is necessarily a fragile fiction, a conceit under constant but disavowed threat—to affirm a commitment to purity is in one move to glance at the entanglement and coconstitution, the impurity, of everything and to pretend that things are separate and unconnected” (16). Shotwell is interested in how these moments—simultaneously a disavowal and an acknowledgement of impurity, situatedness, complexity, and inevitable implication in systems of injustice—might be transformed.

Lugones contrasts this logic of purity with a logic of curdling/multiplicity, explaining that “according to the logic of curdling, the social world is complex and heterogeneous and each person is multiple, nonfragmented, embodied” (Lugones 2003, 127). Logics of purity are oppressive because they attempt to force a subject to think of herself and of the social world as separable into pure parts, rather than recognizing their very inseparability as the grounds for resistance and transformation. For instance, a logic of purity cannot understand Lugones’ mestiza identity—an eagerness to understand racial identities as fully separable from one another means that a logic of purity does not recognize the ways that Lugones’ racial identity and her racial oppression are interlocked with one another (122). A curdled logic, on the other hand, resists oppressive categorizations enforced by purity logics, and in that resistance, it opens up new
possibilities for people with marginalized identities to understand themselves, to build up resilient communities, and to work against their own oppression (123).

Importantly for Lugones, even separating logics of purity from logics of curdling is another exercise in purity. Lugones emphasizes that there is no way to cleanly separate when logics of purity and logics of curdling are at work (Lugones 2003, 126). Making this cut between purity and curdling is, for Lugones, an example of “split separation,” where two entities are artificially isolated from one another (123). But rather than interpreting the world or ordering one’s life according to this purity and its accompanying split separation (127), one must be able to see ambiguity and interrelation where they might not initially notice it—to see through a curdled lens even when the logics of purity are dominant.

Split Separation and Concerns about Cancellation

Lugones’ notion of split separation describes, in my view, the move that Callard makes in her essay, and that many other philosophers make when they perceive canonical figures to be under some kind of threat. Lugones explains that

The assumption of unity is an act of split separation; as in conceiving of what is multiple as unified, what is multiple is understood as internally separable, divisible into what

---

14 Lugones uses the example of the Chicano (or the Mexican/American) to describe what goes wrong when multiplicitious, curdled subjects are treated with a logic of purity. She explains that “the Anglo imagines each rural Mexican/American as having a dual personality: the authentic Mexican cultural self and the American self. In this notion, there is no hybrid self. The selves are conceptually different, apparently contradictory, but complementary” (Lugones 2003, 135). The Mexican/American is thought, on the one hand, to have an “authentic Mexicanness” that can be romanticized and tokenized (135). But the “Americanness” of the Mexican/American allows them to also, in white people’s purist view, assimilate into dominant American culture, even as they will never (because they are not racialized as white) “belong” fully in social or political life (136). Being unable to comprehend that one can be inseparably Mexican and American perpetuates both the idea that the Mexican American can never be intelligibly American and the idea that “real” Americans are not Mexican.

Multiple, inseparable identities are, under a logic of purity, only ever a problem to be resolved. The problem of multiple/curdled identities may be resolved by erasing the complexity of those identities’ relationships to one another, as in the case of the Mexican/American. Or the problem may be resolved by ignoring the multiplicitious identities altogether, as is cases when all women are implicitly assumed to be white and all Black people are implicitly assumed to be men (140). A purity approach cannot recognize the opportunities for social transformation that emerge when curdled identities are not conceptualized as problems.
makes it one and the remainder. Or, to put it another way: to conceive of fragmentation rather than multiplicity is to exercise a split-separation imagination. (128)

While Lugones focuses largely on subjectivity in “Purity, Impurity, and Separation,” she is interested in moments when “the urge to control the multiplicity of people and things attains satisfaction through exercises in split separation” (Lugones 2003, 127). Split separation, for Lugones, orders people’s lives as well as our senses of our selves (127). It also, then, orders our interpretative orientations. Hermeneutic purity, as I have come to call it, assumes (and encourages) an artificial split between “problematic” and “non-problematic” elements of texts, as we see in Callard’s reference to what she calls the “pick-and-choose” method. When we call for charity, in other words, we often also perform a purity-motivated act of split separation. And we demonstrate a commitment to having the “correct” analysis rather than sitting with the multiplicity (and sometimes the messiness) of interpreting flawed texts.

What might it mean to approach a text as a lover of purity? It would mean to make the kinds of moves that Callard does: to assume that in many cases, an author’s racism, sexism, or inegalitarianism, even when it is explicitly a part of their philosophy—can be excised from the work that we as a discipline have already deemed important, interesting, or useful.15 Callard’s defense of Aristotle grants that when we read Aristotle, we cannot separate his “inegalitarianism” from his broader body of work. But she contrasts this inextricability with other cases where, she suggests, we can, in fact, understand someone’s philosophy by setting aside their racist or sexist remarks because they are apparently accidental to their central philosophical insights.

---

15 Note that this deeming important often becomes a self-fulfilling claim: a thinker’s racism can be deemed marginal at least partly because we have made it marginal in our writing or teaching about that figure. See my discussion of Mills below for more. See also my discussion of Ahmed on citational paths in chapter 2.
For Callard, these texts are what Lugones might call internally separable. The lover of purity assumes these parts to be separable, because the only intelligible alternative under a logic of purity is that the entire text (because it is a unified whole according to a logic of purity) is tainted by this racism or sexism. There is a much longer conversation to be had about the move to cordon authors’ racism or sexism off from the rest of their writings, which I explore in a bit more detail in my discussion of Kant’s writings on race. For now I will reiterate my claim from chapter 1 that while I take it that a text’s meaning always exceeds what the author intended and so the author’s own views or goals are not exhaustive or determinative of the text’s meaning (Kant himself makes this claim in the *First Critique*! [A314/B370]), we ought not use this fact to ignore the social and political contexts in which we are reading, assigning, and in many contemporary cases materially supporting, some authors over others. Indeed, it is it is *for this reason* that the text’s meaning always exceeds what an author may have intended when writing. In other words, the meaning of the text only ever emerges in a relationship (between a text and a reader) that takes place in a particular context.

Although she does not explicitly call for charitable engagements with Aristotle or with the thinkers she lists in the quoted passage above, I read Callard’s claim as a charity move similar to the one I describe in the previous chapter. In my introduction and first chapter, I explain that on the one hand, the actual language of charity is important to account for when we think about the role that it plays in academic philosophy.16 On the other hand, charity gets evoked or coded via many other terms and methods (I claim in chapter one that calls for hermeneutic generosity and suggestions that readers offer authors the benefit of the doubt make

16 See chapters 1 and 4, in which I discuss charity’s histories and its etymology at length.
the same demands that many calls for charity do). Charitability is a set of practices, or interpretative/argumentative moves. Most broadly, it is an orientation toward a text/interlocuter(s). Charity moves are so widespread in the discipline that they disappear as moves. So although Callard does not frame her call against cancellation as a call for charitability, it bears many of the same features that we see in cases when charity is explicitly requested: she claims that already-dominant figures in the history of philosophy deserves our attention but not our critique (if our critique is related to their complicity with and perpetuation of oppression and injustice). Charity moves are, to put it another way, often made in order to defend or retain hermeneutic purity.

In situations where we encourage one another to be charitable when faced with an author’s racism or sexism, what we are often asking is that interpreters bracket or set aside problematic claims as though those claims are neatly separable from the “real” ideas. Or, we are suggesting that if contemporary philosophers can interpret a text or author as not so racist or sexist, we will have a canonical author whose position in our writing, citation practices, and teaching does not need to be shifted in any way. Purity seems to have saturated our philosophic discourse such that we often (as teachers, as scholars, and as colleagues) find it quite difficult to hold in productive tension the problematic and the productive elements of a text. Resistance to this tension can commit philosophers to asking one another to ignore or leave aside elements of a

---

17 I want to flag the complications with my use of “we” here (and indeed, my use of “we” throughout my dissertation). I do not want to call up an image of some unified philosophic “we,” nor do I want to write as though every philosopher performs the kinds of calls for charity about which I am writing. Since our discipline is so oriented around charitability, I do suspect that those of us trained in philosophy will pick up some charitable habits even if we aim to resist them. We might even use these habits for our own critical or counter-oppressive ends. See chapters 4 and 5 for more on this.
text that, even if they are not central to a thinker’s overall argument, do seem inseparable from it.\textsuperscript{18}

The desire for purity, in my experience, produces some unsettling hermeneutic commitments—we feel that we must defend indefensible views in order to “save” a thinker from criticism—or worse, cancellation.\textsuperscript{19} In my central example from the previous chapter, the instructor might try to find something vaguely pro-woman in Aristotle’s comments about gender and friendship in order to encourage the kind of charity he wants from his student. This might be an example of Melamed’s characterization of charity as a “reckless hermeneutics”—in a bid to argue for Aristotle’s ongoing relevance, one offers an implausibly pro-women account of his work.\textsuperscript{20} With this desire for a not-so-messy, not-so-problematic text, the conversation shifts away from the student’s act of resistance against an instance of sexism within philosophy’s canon. In other words, one way that hermeneutic purity manifests is in the practice of bracketing an author’s racism or sexism (either within a text or within their own lives) in service of a less “messy” or ethically fraught interpretation of their work.

Calling for charity is only one way to perform an act of hermeneutic purity or split separation. But if we think of charitability as a methodology (and as not always requiring the explicit call) then we begin to see the role that charity plays even when the language of charity is not explicitly evoked. Furthermore, the charitability gap refers not only to the explicit call for

\textsuperscript{18} Callard seems to see only two options for those reading or teaching Aristotle: either we focus on the explicit arguments for the central theses that he is developing, or we focus on what she calls his inegalitarianism. Even if these are separable (and Callard herself does not believe they are), why couldn’t readers or teachers explore both? Thanks to Carlo Tarantino for pointing out this tension.

\textsuperscript{19} I explore some possible motivations for this “saving” in the “Addressing (or Not) Kant’s Racism: A Case Study” section below.

\textsuperscript{20} See chapter one for an extended discussion of Melamed’s critique of charitability.
charitable reading, but also to the discrepancy in care and attention that we provide or expect from marginalized speakers, authors, and texts. Charity moves are not always purity moves, but they often take on this structure when charity is forwarded as a tool for reading and critiquing texts that enact or repeat relations of domination. It is important to understand some charity moves as split separation/purity moves because this understanding helps explain why it is often so tempting to try to separate texts into “problematic” and “unproblematic” elements rather than seeing them as multiplicitous: the former repeats familiar relations of domination and the latter has unsettling social, political, and even metaphysical implications for the lover of purity. To put it another way, logics of purity are tools of domination and oppression. If, as I have suggested here, many charitability practices are rooted in logics of purity, then these practices are also tools of domination and oppression. Lugones’ critique of purity allows us to see more clearly that even when we are not calling for charity in ways that produce or reproduce epistemic or affective injustices, we might nevertheless be engaging in practices that retain harmful, marginalizing power structures.

Addressing (or Not) Kant’s Racism: A Case Study

I have offered Callard’s public-facing defense of Aristotle as an example of hermeneutic purity; she makes a split separation move when she claims that the problematic elements of many philosophers’ work (though not, in her view, Aristotle) can be separated out from the elements we might wish to retain. In her discussion of Aristotle, Callard also insists upon a split between Aristotle’s historical context and that of readers, claiming that instead of situating Aristotle in this way, or allowing friction to emerge between readers’ interpretive horizons and

21 Though I do not take it up further in this chapter, I am interested in the role that hermeneutic purity plays in amount of care and attention paid to thinkers who are not, so far as I can see, under any meaningful kind of threat.
Aristotle’s own, we should treat Aristotle as an unfamiliar “alien”—indeed, this move is much like Davidson’s notion of the logical alien in his account of the principle of charity.\textsuperscript{22}

I will now explore another scholarly discussion about an impure figure in the history of philosophy: Immanuel Kant. There is rich scholarly conversation about Kant’s racism that provides generative examples of charity moves, of hermeneutic purity, and of resistances to that purity. This large and growing body of literature about Kant’s racism and, increasingly, how to engage it in the classroom is helpful for identifying how “purity moves” emerge or are resisted as philosophers consider questions of canonical thinkers’ racism.\textsuperscript{23}

**Charles Mills’ Charitability**

Charles Mills develops an account of “conceptual partitioning” that we might also categorize as a split separation, or a purity move. He explains that in order to resolve the conflict between Kant’s theory of race (in which white people are at the top of a detailed hierarchized racial order) and Kant’s moral theory (in which all persons have equal moral status) many scholars hold that

either Kant’s racial views do not affect his philosophy at all (the extreme position), or that they do not affect it in its key/central/essential/basic claims (the more moderate position). The assumption, obviously, is that we have a principled, non-question-begging way to demarcate what is central from what is peripheral to his philosophy. (Mills 2017, 97; emphases in original)

\textsuperscript{22} See Chapter 1 for my critique of Davidson’s logical aliens.

\textsuperscript{23} See Bernasconi and Lott 2000 for Kant’s notorious classificatory scheme (Bernasconi and Lott 200, 8-22). See Emmanuel Eze’s “The Color of Reason: The Idea of ‘Race’ in Kant’s Anthropology” for one treatment of Kant’s racial classification (Eze 1997). Also see this Twitter thread for one part of this conversation as it is unfolding in public scholarship (this time around): https://twitter.com/bennettmcnulty/status/1297245588673593344?s=10.
Again we see what Lugones refers to as internal separation: Kant’s corpus is a unified whole, and this whole can be separated into the key/central/essential/basic claims, on the one hand, and the racist (and sexist) claims, on the other.

For Mills, however, the best way to understand the seeming contradiction between Kant’s claims that all persons are morally equal and his claims that members of some races are inferior to others is to view Kant’s notion of “person” as racialized (specifically, racialized as white) (106). All persons, in other words, are of morally equal status. It’s just that by “persons,” Kant means “white men” (Mills 2017, 99). All other “persons” are actually better-subsumed under the category of “sub-persons” (106). To return, for a moment, to Lugones’ analogy about separating an egg with a broken yolk: Kant’s racial theory and his theory of moral worth are akin to the white and the runny yolk. Try as we might, we cannot pull them apart. Taking this view of the relationship between Kant’s racism and his moral philosophy, in Mills’ view,

accommodates the sexist and racist declarations in a way less strained than the orthodox reading. In other words, there is an ironic sense in which the principle of interpretive charity—that we should try to reconstruct an author’s writings so as to maximize their degree of internal consistency—points toward such a concept’s [sub-personhood] being implicit in his thought, since in this way the degree of contradictoriness among his various claims is reduced. (106)

On Mills’ view, defenders of Kant are actually failing to be charitable, because a charitable reader is supposed to resolve inconsistencies within texts. It is then, “more charitable to Kant to see him as tacitly operating with a concept of personhood that is gender- and race-restricted” (107).²⁴

²⁴ Mariam Matar has offered an analysis of Mills’ reading of Kant and its reception as an instance of charitability operating harmfully (personal correspondence).
If Mills is correct that the principle of charity asks readers to reconstruct authors’ arguments so that they are maximally internally coherent, why are philosophers failing to be properly charitable here? Why are charitable readings of Kant that resolve his contradictory statements about personhood and race ignored, marginalized, or themselves characterized as uncharitable? It seems to me that with this example, we see once again that charity is not such a universal methodological imperative after all. Kant seems to be a case when expectations of charitability are relaxed: if a charitable interpretation requires careful analysis of this influential and canonical thinker’s racism, or if this careful analysis requires that we acknowledge this racism as baked into the roots of his moral theory, it looks like philosophers are suddenly willing to abandon charity.

This is a case in which charity’s ambiguity is particularly interesting. If we take Mills’ definition of the principle of charity to be correct, Mills is also right that he is offering Kant a more charitable reading than those who would let Kant’s inconsistencies be, or chalk them up to philosophically insignificant individual bias. But we know from my discussion in chapter 1 that maximizing internal consistency is only one way in which charity gets defined and used. Recall that for Tom Stern, charity asks that “when faced with two rival interpretation of what someone is saying, we should not interpret her as meaning the one that leaves her in the worse light” (Stern 2016, 288). If we prefer this view of charity, then perhaps Mills is not so charitable toward Kant after all, for taking Kant’s notion of personhood to exclude all but white men certainly does not leave Kant in the best possible light. I think this is why purity is so helpful for thinking about charity: it should not surprise us that the purity move of interpreting Kant in ways that split/separate his racism from his moral theory (and thus show him in the best light despite retaining contradictions) is a move far more dominant than the less “pure” move of using a
different account of charity to defend resolving his inconsistent statements about race and morals.

If we focus more on charity’s function than its definition (if we explore what it does rather than attempting to pin down what it is), it starts to make a bit more sense that charitability would show up strangely in the case of Kant: charity functions to preserve Kant’s dominance, and its definition and applications will shift as needed to do this. For Mills, charity’s status as dominant philosophical methodology can actually be used as a way to point out other philosophers’ flawed thinking/approaches to Kant. Perhaps here, Mills is practicing an impure or curdled form of charity: he is refusing a form of charitability that protects Kant from criticism against his racist theorization and instead is offering a form of charitability that brackets the standard view of Kant in service of more fully understanding the role that Kant’s racism plays in his philosophy (97) This impure charity holds space for the “problematic” and the “unproblematic” elements of Kant’s work to be inextricably (and sometimes messily) entangled.

**Purifying Kant**

In “Kant Was a Racist: Now What?,” David McCabe offers an example of this hermeneutically purist—or, as Mills puts it, a conceptual partitioning—approach to teaching Kant in light of his racism. He does recognize the importance of confronting and taking seriously Kant’s racism, but he makes two purity moves that serve to grant Kant a large—and, I think, not particularly useful—amount of charity.25 First, McCabe urges philosophers to “hold fast to that distinction” (McCabe 2019, 4) between an author’s philosophical contributions and the “other views” that they held (4) because we have an “obligation to present to our students both the

---

25 Here I have in mind Stern’s definition of charity, rather than Mills’.
intellectual tradition we represent and its potential for helping them make sense of our world” (4). I wonder why, for McCabe, we do not have an equally strong obligation to be forthright about and grapple with the racism upon which this tradition was built and which allows the tradition to continue to hold such explanatory power.

McCabe is able to draw this distinction between Kant’s racism and his philosophy because in his view, “it is not clear why we should be interested in someone’s views except where they seem likely to be philosophically significant and fruitful, and Kant’s views on race are certainly not that” (7; emphasis in original). Because, in McCabe’s view, Kant’s racism rests on bad arguments and flimsy claims (even by Kant’s own lights), McCabe feels confident that Kant’s racism will not often be useful to discuss in a philosophy class. If his racism is bad philosophy, McCabe suggests, then why teach it in a philosophy class?

This purity move to separate Kant’s racism from his philosophy—and to engage with, but ultimately set aside, arguments that Kant’s racism is inseparable from the rest of his work—allows McCabe to make a second purity move: he maintains that while acknowledging Kant’s racism is important, we should not center this racism. He explains that “we can acknowledge Kant’s racism in some way (probably when introducing him to students) and then proceed in a discussion of Kant’s texts that refers to his racism where it has philosophical or other substantial relevance (which on my argument will not be very often)” (7). McCabe calls philosophers to “present Kant’s work, but also mention the troubling fact of his racism” (8). It seems to me that underlying McCabe’s essay—and his suggestion that often it is best to merely “mention” Kant’s racism—is a broader concern that if we take Kant’s racism to be too important, he will lose relevance, as will every other racist figure in the history of western philosophy.
“Staying with the Mess” of Kant’s Racism

Victor Fabian Abundez-Guerra takes quite a different approach to Kant’s racism in “How to Deal with Kant’s Racism In and Out of the Classroom.” In this essay, Abundez-Guerra resists the pull of interpretive charity and purity. He suggests that we need to take seriously the possibility that Kant’s moral philosophy and his racial thinking are inextricable from one another because this is better exegetically, morally, and pedagogically.26

Abundez-Guerra identifies multiple problematic ways of addressing Kant’s racism but I want to highlight one in particular: he follows Mills in calling it sanitization (Mills 2017, 97; Abundez-Guerra 2019, 124). He explains that when confronting Kant’s writings on race, one might think that they “should try to filter it out of his moral philosophy. One should attempt to, in a sense, sanitize Kant’s writings” (124; emphasis in original). This sanitization process “says that moral philosophers have some good ideas and some bad ideas, and we should not let the bad ideas ruin the good ideas” (124). But to take this sanitization approach to Kant—and to skip discussion of his racial thought in the name of avoiding the bad (perhaps impure) apples is misleading to students because it forwards the idea that Kant thought that each human life had the same value and dignity (124). Furthermore, sanitization “assumes that we have a principled way of separating the central claims from the peripheral claims” (124) in Kant.27 Indeed, in this project I have argued that we apply charitable or generous separations between central and

26 Notice that Abundez-Guerra only asks his reader to consider the possibility that Kant’s racism and his writing about race have implications for his views (particularly given that he taught many more classes on anthropology and geography than on morally philosophy [Abundez-Guerra 2019, 118; Mills 2017, 106-107]). Regardless of one’s view about the relationship between them, Abundez-Guerra contends that as an instructor one has a moral, exegetical, and pedagogical responsibility to demonstrate openness to this possibility.

27 See also Mills’ assertion that “the assumption [that we can separate Kant’s central claims from the peripheral claims], obviously, is that we have a principled, non-question-begging way to demarcate what is central from what is peripheral to his philosophy” (Mills 2017, 97).
peripheral claims in ways that hide the interpretative work we have done to adjudicate between center and periphery and that protect the disciplinary status quo in ways that reproduce oppression.

When an instructor approaches Kant’s work in this way, they are, on Abundez-Guerra’s view:

assuming that one can sanitize some ideas without affecting the whole philosophy. One assumes that Kant’s moral philosophy and racial philosophy are not intricately bound together in such a way that one can delete certain ideas without affecting others. It does not acknowledge the possibility that Kant’s racial thought is consistent with his moral philosophy, bound up with it, and deeply affecting it. (125) 28

These assumptions also provide fertile grounds for epistemic injustices: they ignore the careful, rigorous, and longstanding body of work that makes connections between Kant’s moral philosophy and his racial theory (125). With Kant, we have much more than the uneasy sense that his personal racism might be in some way connected to his philosophical writing: we have, as Mills and Abundez-Guerra point out, careful explorations and engagements with how his theorization about race—not his own personal views about people of color—relate to the rest of his philosophy. To sanitize Kant in the way Abundez-Guerra describes is also to ignore or marginalize the scholarship that draws attention to these “unsanitary” elements of Kant’s work.

I find Mills’, and later, Abundez-Guerra’s, language of sanitization to be evocative, particularly when placed into conversation with Shotwell’s account of purity politics. In “The Collapse of Critique and Refusal” section of this chapter, I return to Shotwell’s work in much more detail. For now, I will say that for Shotwell, purity politics are characterized by the desire

---

28 See pages 119-120 and 126-127 for Abundez-Guerra’s own textual analysis of Kant’s racist remarks throughout his body of work—see also his citations of Charles Mills and Emmanuel Eze for more detailed explorations of how Kant’s moral philosophy is tied to his views on race.
not to be implicated in systems of oppression or suffering, and engaging in individual practices that seem to place one outside of these systems rather than engaging in collective practices that acknowledge our constitutive impurity as a starting point for ethics and politics. When we do not teach Kant’s racism, or we assume it to be separable from his moral philosophy, we hold ourselves apart from messy questions about Kant’s implication in the racial hierarchies we see today and from our own responsibility for our discipline’s canon. We “wash our hands” of the passages in Kant that we would rather not be put in the position of defending. Abundez-Guerra urges philosophy instructors to find value in studying Kant’s racism—to find value in staying with this mess—rather than trying to claim that studying Kant is valuable or important despite his racism. In claiming the latter, we “construe Kant’s racism as separate and foreign from his moral philosophy” (131) and we are likely to alienate our students. But by staying with the mess when we do teach Kant, we stand a better chance of motivating our students (131).

Abundez-Guerra advocates an approach to teaching Kant that reduces a purity-driven split separation of Kant’s writings on race from his writings on ethics. Instead of sanitizing Kant, Abundez-Guerra contends that we need “a deep acknowledgement of Kant’s racism, which means that we take Kant’s racial thought “to be reflective of his moral character” (122). We must also hold Kant accountable for his racial thought, and be “willing to consider the possibility that Kant’s racial thought is consistent with and inextricable from his moral philosophy” (117).

One of my colleagues took Abundez-Guerra’s advice to frontload Kant’s racism, encouraging her students to be on the lookout for ways that Kant’s claims about ethics directly contradict his claims about race in the assigned passages from *Groundwork on the Metaphysics of Morals*. She found that students read Kant far more carefully—and even with more enthusiasm—when they had this contextual information and when Kant’s racism was framed not
only as a fact about his biography, but as relevant for what they were reading. Some students even brought up questions of whether they should be more charitable toward Kant, given his historical context and the importance and influence of deontological ethics. Not only did charity become part of the conversation even when it was not the center or the starting point of students’ introduction to Kant; an attitude of suspicion rather than charitability achieved the pedagogical aims we often seem to seek with our calls for charity: students did the reading, they did it carefully, and they asked insightful questions of the text.29, 30

McCabe and Abundez-Guerra’s contrasting approaches to teaching Kant’s racism illustrate ways that interpretive charity and hermeneutic purity reinforce one another. Although neither McCabe nor Abundez-Guerra are explicitly evoking charitability, I take them each to be asking something like: how charitable ought we be to Kant when we introduce him to our students, given Kant’s open, consistent, and historically influential racism? Mills evokes charitability explicitly, and in doing so, he reveals charity as a method applied inconsistently, and whose value decreases when charity appears to require resolving inconsistencies in ways that acknowledge the depths of a thinker’s commitment to whiteness. Charity seems to be imbued in this conversation about Kant—it frames the approach of each essay I have engaged in this

29 I am grateful to Rebecca Scott for sharing her experience teaching Kant in this way, and for permitting me to recount her experience here.

30 I want to acknowledge that taking creative, unusual, or non-charitable pedagogical approaches as a philosophy instructor can be risky. Many of us occupy precarious spaces within our institutions, as adjunct instructors, non-tenure-track faculty, or graduate instructors. The American Association of University Professors reports that “non-tenure-track positions of all types now account for over 60 percent of all instructional staff appointments in American higher education” (see https://www.aaup.org/news/data-snapshot-contingent-faculty-us-highered#.YbtoqPHMJTZ for additional information). Some of us also might be targeted by our institutions for teaching “controversial” material that acknowledges the existence of racism. My aim in offering this example is not to suggest that my colleague’s approach to teaching Kant is the best one, or even to suggest that it is available to everyone. I am aiming, instead, to offer one example of how acknowledging Kant’s racism in the classroom can produce the outcomes that instructors want, but often fail to achieve when we rely on charitability.
section. I wonder, if philosophic charity were not taken as given, how this discussion of Kant’s racism would unfold. What would the background question(s) be?

Hermeneutic purism, I suggest in this section, reinforces and is reinforced by practices of charitability: when philosophers use the call for charity in the service of cordonning the harmful or problematic elements of a text off from the “real philosophy” it contains, we are performing an act of split separation. We are also positioning ourselves as standing above or outside of the conceptual, moral, and political mess of our canon’s history and its rootedness in forms of domination including, but not limited to, white supremacy and misogyny. Often, to call someone to charity is to call them to purity practices; at the same time, purism makes charitability intelligible as an interpretive methodology: if a thinker’s racism or sexism are, in fact, separable from the rest of their work, then we would need interpretive charity to perform this separation and “rescue” their thought.

The Collapse of Critique and Refusal

I will now identify a second way that purity logics and politics reinforce and are reinforced by charitability: in the conflation of critiques of impure texts with refusals to engage with them. In my own experience being directed toward charitability, I have been struck by the mismatch between what I understand myself to have expressed and what my interlocutor seems to have heard. In my discussions with colleagues, the same tendency has emerged time and again: a critique is interpreted as a refusal to engage with a thinker or a text. This happens, I have begun to notice, in two ways: first, sometimes a critique is offered and then misheard. Something like “how should we deal with this philosopher’s sexism?” is met with an assertion that we can still get a lot out of his work despite jarring moments of misogyny. But this response does not answer the question—it instead performs a charity move that shifts the conversation away from
actually engaging with that philosopher’s sexism. Questions about how to engage an impure text are consistently, persistently heard as assertions that we should not engage the text at all, or offer challenges to disciplinary ways of organizing and prioritizing authors, texts, and topics.

Charity, then, can sometimes be a defensive response to a perceived challenge that misperceives a critique as a refusal. An underlying purism seems to motivate this charity move; that is, purity encourages the misinterpretation of critique. To explain this connection among charity, purity, and hearing critique as refusal, I will first offer a summary of Shotwell’s account of ethico-political purism, or purity politics.

Shotwell’s Purity Politics

Although she does not discuss charity in her book, I find Shotwell’s work generative because of her careful tracing of many ways in which a desire for ethical purity makes possible and reinforces structural injustice and prevents liberatory worldmaking. As I began thinking about the many interlocking oppressions and structures that reinforce and are reinforced by practices of philosophic charitability, I found purity to be a useful framework for identifying these oppressions and structures without artificially isolating them from one another. To put it another way, there are many structures, ideological assumptions, motivated ignorances, and histories that contribute to charity functioning the way it does in contemporary academic philosophy. I have tried to capture at least part of this picture by identifying and exploring various commitments to, desires for, and practices of purity.

31 In her discussion of white women’s allegiance to white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy, Nora Berenstain explains motivated ignorance as “having a vested interest in falling in line with perceptual and evaluative expectations that their white male companions impose on them” (Berenstain 2020, 8). We might think of motivated ignorance as related to willful ignorance and active ignorance (see Pohlhaus Jr. 2012; Ortega 2009; and Medina 2013 for accounts of the willful and active ignorance).
In *Against Purity*, Shotwell is concerned about and critical of “purism” or “purity politics” that, she suggests, tend to arise as a response to the suffering and injustice of the world. This purity approach assumes that one can stand above or outside of this suffering and injustice if one makes a particular set of good ethical choices on an individual level (Shotwell 2017, 7-8). For instance, a person taking a purity approach to food might assume that she must adopt a strictly vegan diet—in doing so she may assume that she has avoided contributing to the suffering of living creatures and to the degradation of the environment (at least, as they relate to her eating habits). But this purity approach does not account for the ways that veganism—indeed all eating—does, in fact, contribute to these very harms and that individual choices about consumption do nothing to transform food systems (107). Furthermore, there is no food system we could devise that would entirely eliminate pollution, waste, and suffering.\(^{32}\)

Throughout her book, Shotwell analyzes the overlapping ways that purity shows up in the world. The ethical purity that I mention above emerges among people wanting to make positive changes in the world, but who either become committed to individualized solutions that cannot address systemic problems, or who become frozen with despair and pessimism when the depth of their entanglement becomes clear (195). This ethical purity is tied to what Shotwell might call a political purity: the reliance on having the “right” take or analysis on an issue.\(^{33}\) She is concerned about this “commitment to staying at the level of the epistemic as a response to the complexity

---

\(^{32}\) Shotwell is not “against” veganism—instead, she uses this example to illustrate our tendency to search for ways of exiting relations of suffering in which we are inextricably entangled.

\(^{33}\) Shotwell, like many feminist philosophers, refuses a hard (often purity-motivated) distinction between discussions of ethics and discussions of politics; indeed, in *Against Purity*, Shotwell is interested in the intertwining of ethics, politics, epistemology, and ontology.
and impurity of the world” (196)—the resistance to being wrong or making a mistake is one that can block political actions that open livable futures for more people.

Shotwell begins from the assumption that we will always already be implicated in a mess that we cannot clean up or solve with our individual efforts (that we cannot solve at all, in fact). These “messes” arise not only from the systemic injustices of the social world—they are also the conditions upon which any social system depends. We cannot, for instance, opt out of our complex relationships with our “outside” environment (77; 94-96) in order to achieve some pure state of health or cleanliness. Purity politics assumes we can make choices as individuals that do not in some way contribute to suffering (6-7), but for Shotwell, “however the bounds of the ‘we’ are drawn, we are not, ever, pure. We’re complicit, implicated, tied into things we abjure” (7) If we begin from this complicity, rather than from a longing for some imagined state of innocence, Shotwell argues, new normative formulations emerge (13).

Shotwell covers a broad array of issues in her book, including disability, settler colonialism, transphobia, environmental degradation, food politics, and responses to the AIDS crisis in order to think about how a politics of impurity might impact our ways of relating to one another, to our histories, and to our environments. Purism, in Shotwell’s view, is one bad but common approach to devastation in all its forms…. It is a bad approach because it shuts down precisely the field of possibility that might allow us to take better collective action against the destruction of the world in all its strange, delightful, impure frolic. Purism is a de-collectivizing, de-mobilizing, paradoxical politics of despair. The world deserves better. (9)

Shotwell does not offer a blueprint of what a politics of impurity would look like, but she shows some ways that people are beginning from and staying with (to use Donna Harroway’s phrase, as Shotwell does) “the mess.”

Shotwellian Purity and Philosophic Charitability
When I first began working with *Against Purity*, I found the text useful in helping me understand why philosophers should not entirely reject, or entirely embrace, a charitable approach to philosophy. Either one would be a purity move—assuming that a text can be made to stand outside of its racism or sexism, or assuming that because it cannot, it must be of no use to us. But as I have returned to Shotwell’s book, I have found several more generative ways of thinking about purity’s relationship to charity. The “purity move” of dismissing a text because of its relationship to oppression, injustice, and suffering is, so far as I can tell, one about which some philosophers worry even as there is limited evidence of it actually occurring.

I have come to understand purity/purity politics as both motivating and strengthened by charitability. Given that the world—including the discipline of philosophy—is as Shotwell puts it, “a mess,” (114), it is tempting to invoke charity in various ways to try overcoming or getting around thorny issues of philosophy’s imbrication with colonialism, racism, sexism, ableism, and many additional overlapping oppressions. Purism, however, sets up the background conditions for charity to function in the problematic ways I describe in chapters 1 and 2. Shotwell reminds us that “the delineation of theoretical purity, purity of classification, is always imbricated with the forever-failing attempt to delineate material purity—of race, ability, sexuality, or, increasingly, illness” (4). Purity politics, for Shotwell, is inextricable from—even made possible by—historical and ongoing classificatory ambitions and practices of constructing and then separating or isolating “the other.” When we seek the kind of ethical purity Shotwell describes, we are participating in this tradition.

---

34 Among many other examples, see Alcoff 2015 for an analysis of philosophy’s relationship to colonialism, Frye 1983 for its relationship to sexism, Mills 1998 for its relationship to racism, and Tremain 2017 for its relationship to ableism.
Purism is, to put it another way, informed by various systems of oppression and privilege.

So to say that purity politics set background conditions for charity is also to say that structural racism, sexism, ableism, transphobia, colonialism, and additional structural oppressions set up the background conditions for charitability, even as charitability then reinforces them. Purism, then, is fueling our philosophic practices. When we express a worry that any criticism of a philosopher’s problematic view means that we ought to stop reading them altogether, we are using purism to guide our thinking. To put it another way, purity contributes to a misperception/mishearing/misinterpretation of critiques—the fear seems to be that if a thinker is recognized as impure in some way (especially if that way is related to oppression), then that thinker must be thrown out. The thinking seems to be that if philosophers actually confront the white supremacist, misogynistic, colonial, and contingent foundations upon which our discipline is built, we will have no choice but to “opt out” of this discipline altogether.

I have described the role of purism in fueling mischaracterizations of critique as refusal. Charity moves also appear, as I described in part 1 of this chapter, in response to imagined challenges. Callard is not responding to any particular call to “cancel” Aristotle—or if she is, she does not cite this call in her own writing. McCabe does not describe a particular experience with a student(s) who expressed a desire to stop reading Kant—he only says that we should teach our students to resist the easy move of assuming they have nothing to learn from Kant given his racism (McCabe 209, 18).

I am struck by the resonance between these two lines from Callard and McCabe, respectively:

In fact we have no reason at all to cancel Aristotle. Aristotle is simply not our enemy. (Callard 2020, para. 10; emphasis added)
It’s not wildly utopian to think that teaching Kant via some version of the third approach might both undermine our students’ tendency to so confidently divide the world into allies and enemies and help them see that it is a much more complicated place, one in which we can sometimes learn things from those we might on other grounds condemn. (McCabe 2019, 18; emphasis added)

How is the notion of the enemy functioning here? Why is this combative language employed in defense of two quite securely positioned canonical figures? What kinds of interpretive and discursive practices are put (or kept) in place when scholars think of their interlocutors as ready for battle, particularly when these interlocutors are never specified? Who, exactly, is positioned as hostile toward Aristotle and Kant? And given that each figure seems to stand in for the entire “Western Canon” in these essays, who is positioned as making an enemy of philosophy and philosophical inquiry? Neither Callard nor McCabe identify anyone who has explicitly made an enemy of Aristotle or Kant but in their insistence that these figures are not our enemies, they have implicitly positioned students as the real enemy.

I turn again to Sara Ahmed’s work to help me understand how these purity-infused charity moves are hostile to students. In her powerful essay, “Against Students,” Ahmed explores several ways in which institutional racism and sexism are framed as problems located within the student body. She explores “a series of speech acts which consistently position students, or at least specific kinds of students, as threats to education, to free speech, to civilization, even to life itself” (Ahmed 2015, 235). When students do not sit happily in an academic institution—when they point out and organize against the problems with the institution—they become the problems.

Ahmed identifies four interrelated “problem student” figures that emerge in anxious response to students’ challenges to universities’ business as usual: the consuming student (who

---

35 Ahmed’s essay is published online in The New Inquiry. I cite page numbers of my downloaded PDF version of her essay, but the direct quotations can also be found by searching https://thenewinquiry.com/against-students/
considers their university education a product to which they are entitled control), the censoring student (who works to cancel campus talks by unwanted speakers and thus undermine the free exchange of ideas), the over-sensitive student (whose feelings have to be managed in the classroom using things like trigger warnings), and the complaining student (whose accusations of sexual harassment are mere complaints that jeopardize faculty members’ reputations and careers) (2). Invocations of the censoring student and the consuming student conceal the actual power dynamics between students and faculty members; they also “work to create an impression that students have all the power to decide what is being taught as well as what is not being taught” (7; emphasis in original). Students become the enemy against which the material on a syllabus must be defended.  

The figure of the “problem-student” seems to loom over metaphilosophical conversations about diversifying syllabi, about philosophy’s purpose, and about broader efforts at inclusivity. In her description of the censoring student—who is labeled censorious and against free speech when they push for universities to cancel talks by unwanted speakers or demand syllabus diversification—Ahmed contends that “by hearing student critique as censorship, the content of that critique is pushed aside. When you hear a challenge as an attempt at censorship you do not have to engage with the challenge. You do not even have to say anything of substance because

---

36 These parenthetical asides are descriptions of how the students are presented as problems—they are not meant to characterize Ahmed’s views on students, or my own!

37 The rush to defend canonical figures against charges of racism or sexism—and the related rush to defend prominent contemporary thinkers against evidence of sexual harassment and assault—can also be characterized, in my view, as forms of what Kate Manne describes as “himpathy”: the tendency for men who commit violent actions—particularly sexual violence—to “receive sympathy and concern over their female victims” (Manne 2020, 5). See also Manne 2018 for a more detailed account of himpathy. In this case, Aristotle and Kant receive sympathy and concern (indeed, even impassioned defense) over and above any suggestion that their work might not always be useful or appropriate to engage. I am grateful to Ann J. Cahill for suggesting that Manne’s work on himpathy is related to my work on charity.
you assume the challenge is without substance” (8). This passage is particularly relevant for issues of philosophic charitability toward canonical figures. Recall Finlayson’s claim that by calling a critique or an interpretation uncharitable, one “refuse[s] it recognition as a serious philosophical criticism” (Finlayson 2015, 66). Philosophers, then, have methodological grounds for refusing to hear certain kinds of critiques: if these critiques do not meet an ever-shifting standard of charitability, they are not serious (or, as Ahmed but it, they are challenges without substance).

Callard and McCabe are not responding to any existing critique or refusal put forth by students (or if they are, they are not naming these critiques in their writing). They have invented a challenge, or at least a challenger. They also give themselves a rather easy dilemma to respond to: indeed, we could say that they are the ones being uncharitable because it is far easier to refute an argument for canceling Aristotle than it is to refute (or deny legitimacy to) a more nuanced critical reading of him. Purity politics appears to inform the structures of the imagined critiques (students are refusing to read texts that are implicated in structural harms and injustices) and proposed solutions (we can separate out the harmful elements from those that are not harmful, and if we cannot to this, we can claim that these elements are not actually harmful because they are mere historical curiosities).

(Academic) Disciplinary Power

Before I move into an exploration of purity’s role in structuring the interventions that we perceive as useful for addressing it, I want to pose an additional set of questions about charity and purity. As I have already emphasized throughout this chapter, no one (or no one I can find anyway) is suggesting that we stop reading Aristotle or Kant—these thinkers are not under threat! How, then, can we make sense of Callard’s op-ed? Or of McCabe’s claim that students’
desire to categorize Kant as bad because of his racism is preventing them from understanding complexity and nuance? How can we make sense of repeated calls for charity when these calls do not respond to what was said?

Each form of misinterpretation (the mishearing of an existing critique and the invention of one) is an example of willful ignorance. There are several scholarly analyses of willful ignorance and its effects, but I find the discussions offered by Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr. (2012) and Kristie Dotson (2012) to be most helpful for understanding this charity-related conflation of critique and refusal.\[^{38}\] Pohlhaus Jr. defines willful ignorance as occurring when “dominantly situated knowers refuse to acknowledge epistemic tools developed from the experienced world of those situated marginally” (Pohlhaus 2012, 715). Willful hermeneutical ignorance, then, not only prevents dominantly situated knowers from having particular information (though it does do this); it also operates at a conceptual level: particular epistemic resources are ignored or left aside, even when they would provide a fuller picture of a given phenomenon. Pohlhaus Jr. describes these refusals to acknowledge marginalized epistemic tools as allowing “dominantly situated knowers to misunderstand, misinterpret, and/or ignore whole parts of the world” (Pohlhaus Jr. 2012, 715). Willful hermeneutical ignorance is a problem because it can produce what Dotson calls “contributory injustice”: an epistemic injustice occurs when epistemic agents insist upon “maintaining and utilizing structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources that result

\[^{38}\] For an additional account of willful ignorance, see Tuana 2006. Tuana develops a taxonomy of ignorance. Often, ignorance is not an innocent or politically neutral absence of knowledge; instead, it is actively socially produced and maintained in order to preserve existing power structures. Tuana describes five different types of ignorance in her article, including willful ignorance. For Tuana, “willful ignorance is a systematic process of self-deception, a willful embrace of ignorance that infects those who are in positions of privilege, an active ignoring of the oppression of others and one’s role in that exploitation” (Tuana 2006, 11). See also Mariana Ortega’s 2006 essay, “Being Lovingly, Knowingly Ignorant: White Feminism and Women of Color.” Ortega develops an account of “an ignorance of the thought and experience of women of color that is accompanied by both alleged love for and alleged knowledge about them” (Ortega 2006, 57).
in epistemic harm to the epistemic agency of a knower” (Dotson 2012, 31). The principle of charity (indeed, charity habits/practices more broadly) is one such structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resource.

Elena Ruíz explains that “part of the frustration with diversifying the teaching of philosophy today is that the sources often exist; the texts are there. But the worldviews and narrative tactics generally used in noncanonical readings are often seen as literary deviations from the mainstream story of philosophy” (Ruíz 2014, 203). Feminist philosophers, philosophers of race, philosophers of disability, philosophers doing work in decolonial theory, queer theorists, and many others have developed epistemic resources (including methods of reading, critiquing, and interacting) that ground their/our critiques of canonical thinkers. Students who are angered by the material they read have in many cases already developed the ability to recognize and negotiate texts and disciplines that attempt to (and often do) alienate them. These resources are sometimes related to charitability, but often charitability is left aside in favor of suspicion, resistance, and refusal. When uses of these epistemic resources are ignored, or preempted by purity-motivated calls for charity, the discipline misses opportunities to expand what it means to do philosophy. Marginalized knowers are also further-marginalized by contributory injustice. When philosophers misunderstand critiques of problematic thinkers as refusals to engage with them, or when they imagine critiques against problematic thinkers to which they then respond by defending those thinkers’ importance and relevance, they dismiss very real, urgent, and philosophically relevant questions so that they can respond to what they perceive to be an untenable (because it is so uncharitable) position.

A commitment to purism contributes, I have suggested, to an inability or an unwillingness to even comprehend a critique of influential canonical figures as anything but
“cancellation.” It also often means that having a productive conversation about, say, Aristotle on slavery, is incredibly difficult because it almost immediately becomes a kind of rescue mission, as we see in Callard’s piece. By using the call for charity to deny that a critique can be anything other than an outright refusal, philosophers’ love of purity allows us to remain ignorant of just how deeply a thinkers’ racism or sexism runs throughout the rest of their work; of how we might talk productively with students and with one another about the implications of our canon’s history and its position within the discipline; and of the impure truth that there is a vast distance between a critique (even a sharp critique) and a refusal to engage. There are, of course, instances of refusal. In the previous chapter, I discussed Sara Ahmed’s refusal to cite white men in her book Living a Feminist Life, a citational practice she employs in order to center work by women of color. And in her analysis of Zora Neale Hurston’s political writings, Lindsey Stewart explores ways in which “self-respect requires refusal” (Stewart 2020, 58): when “playing along” with a dominant system or structure requires ignoring ongoing oppression and injustice, refusal emerges as a way to “exit the game altogether” (64) rather than resisting it. But to reduce every “uncharitable” critique as a refusal to “properly” engage a text is to (perhaps willfully) misunderstands the wide array of ways in which marginalized philosophers position ourselves in relation to canonical figures in the discipline.39

In addition to the purity-driven blaming of students and the willfully ignorant responses to critiques real and imagined, there seems to be a meta-philosophical (or perhaps a meta-disciplinary) problem at work in motivating calls for charity. There is something important to be

---

39 It also misunderstands the political utility of many forms of refusal, but this misunderstanding is not central to my argument in this chapter, so I leave it unexplored here. See my discussion in the previous chapter of Pohlhaus Jr.’s defense of refusals to understand and of the ways in which refusing to offer charity can allow philosophers to exit or remain outside of dominant/oppressive worlds.
said, I think, about the role that power plays in driving the purity moves I have described in this chapter (both calling for charity and taking an overly-charitable approach to canonical thinkers’ stature/status in the discipline). These purity moves are not merely ethical failings on the parts of individual philosophers—indeed, Shotwell wants to interrupt the assumption that the individual person is the default unit of ethical analysis. These purity moves are responses to a perceived loss of power.\footnote{I am grateful to Theodra Bane for encouraging me to think more directly about power’s relation to charitability.}

There is much more to be said about power and its relationship to charitability than I am able to include here, but here I want to very briefly sketch the role that power—more specifically, the perceived \textit{loss} of power—plays in orienting our charitability habits and practices. In \textit{Living a Feminist Life}, Ahmed contends that “power works as a mode of directionality, a way of orienting bodies in particular ways, so they are facing a certain way, heading toward a future that is given a face” (Ahmed 2017, 43). Power is not itself an orientation device; instead, “power operates through directionality and orientation” (20). We are oriented in some ways and not others because systems of power encourage some ways of facing over others. Ahmed offers the example of deciding not to marry or have children: often, women who decide against marriage and children are viewed as harming themselves (because they do not get to experience the joys that come with following this life path) and as harming others (because others sacrificed much in service of following this path). Ahmed explains that “so much conservation of power rests on the assumption that not to conserve the familiar forms of an existence would cause damage to what might be or who might be” (197). Although Ahmed is talking here about expectations of repeating heteropatriarchal familial structures, I also see
power’s conservation happening in this way that canonical thinkers are “saved” such that their already-familiar faces remain familiar.

To leave Aristotle or Kant’s position in the canon and in the discipline unchallenged is to also leave power structures in place—I have explored this in chapters 1 and 2. It is to keep the discipline looking and feeling familiar, but it is also to keep oneself feeling comfortable and familiar. This persistent resistance (and often outright refusal) to de-center dominant thinkers, texts, methods, and social norms is often a self-protective strategy for keeping things in place. Indeed, I wonder if behind arguments like those that Callard offers is a fear of de-centering or sharing the spotlight with Aristotle (or any non-canonical thinker/idea).41 Perhaps a central fear or difficulty (that we try and fail to resolve using calls for charity) is not that we do not know how to deal with Kant or Aristotle, but rather that we do not know how to deal with ourselves and one other. The unspoken fear may go something like this: I’m no Kant or Aristotle. If they become neglected within the discipline because they said racist or sexist things, then what will happen to me if it turns out that I said some racist, sexist things in my own work? Rather than sitting with this discomfort, one might rely on charitability as a tool to circumvent it.

Purity-Driven “Solutions” for the Charitability Gap

Thus far, in this chapter I have identified two ways that purity can lay the groundwork for problematic charitability practices which, in turn, reinforce the very purism that motivated the practices in the first place: first, purity politics inform the assumptions we make about textual interpretation. Hermeneutic purity treats racism and sexism as impurities which must be excised,

41 Ahmed offers an analysis of the relationship between power and fear in The Cultural Politics of Emotion: “I reflect on the role of fear in the conservation of power, by considering how narratives of crisis work to secure social norms in the present” (Ahmed 2004, 64).
ignored, or taken as reasons not to read the text at all. Second, purity politics contributes to the (willful) misunderstanding of critiques of canonical philosophy: the lover of purity (as Lugones would describe them) cannot but respond to criticism of the philosophical status quo as a threat to the discipline’s identity and power. Even when no one is making the kinds of uncharitable claims that the lover of purity fears, their specter is called up as a foil in order to protect the discipline whose foundations is, as Elene Ruíz puts it, “forged of loose and sanding stone” (Ruíz 2014, 203).

In addition to producing problematic calls for charity, purity also informs how we address the problem; that is, even when we recognize charitability as having political implications, as disproportionately harming marginalized philosophers, and as a tool best cut-out for protecting the disciplinary status quo, purism plays a role in shaping how we approach ameliorating the problems with charitability. To explain this phenomenon further, I turn to a few examples from my own experiences talking about charity with my peers and colleagues.

When I present this project at conferences, I am typically approached after my talk by an earnest, curious lover of canonical philosophy. He takes seriously my critique of the overreliance on charity, and he is thinking about the broader implications of my claim that we cannot rely on charity as a tool to arm us against the racism and sexism of canonical philosophy. But then comes the question. A version of “Can I assign ____ in my class?”

Aristotle.
Augustine.
Kant.
Heidegger.

---

42 I am not always taken seriously—the first time I presented this work, one audience member asked a question ostensibly for another panelist. To preface his question, he said to me, with a sneer, “I don’t know why we are talking about whether or not to read Searle. This is ridiculous.” My fellow panelist was kind enough to ask me if I wanted to take a moment to respond to that comment. I laughed at the question-asker and said no.
These are the figures I remember. That I can find in my research notes.

Several interesting things are happening in these moments. First, notice how we have slipped from a discussion about the risks of charitable interpretation to a discussion about whether it is ever appropriate to assign a problematic figure. The question is no longer about how or whether to deploy charity, or about why we might work to interrupt the disciplinary orientation toward a very specific and yet inconsistent notion of charitability. Instead, the question becomes whether, given my criticisms about interpretative charity, these figures should be read at all. Already there is a purity-based interpretation of my work—that if I am talking about racism and sexism in canonical philosophy, I have a standard response to the question of whether to assign an impure figure or an impure work.

Second (and not centrally related to purity politics but still, I think, worth highlighting): notice the variety of thinkers on the list above to which I am asked to respond! This list is demographically homogenous, but contains vast methodological and historical differences. I am certainly not an expert on every figure in the history of philosophy and because of this, I could not hope to answer the question of whether to keep any one of them on a syllabus.

Third, a great many contextual factors are elided in the question of whether (as opposed to how or when or why) to teach an impure figure. To know whether any figure or text ought to remain on a syllabus, I would first want to know:

43 Indeed, notice how I have spent much of this chapter exploring how purity-driven charitable orientations seem to foreground questions about assigning problematic figures!
- What class are you teaching?
- What are your course goals?
- How do you understand the role that this text plays in meeting your course goals?
- What is the narrative of the course? Is there room for counter-narratives? Or space to present alternatives to students?
- How does the class, this text, and/or this author fit into the broader department or university curriculum?
- Are students likely to learn about this text, idea, or author in other places?
- Are you formally or informally required to teach particular figures, topics, or texts?
- Do your students have to take a philosophy class as part of their general education curriculum? Do they have to take more than one philosophy class?
- How are you planning to address the racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, and/or elitism in the text?
- Is this text one about which you consider yourself an expert?
- What do you think your students might be interested in/care about? Will this text help you connect up with those interests/concerns?
- What is happening right now in the world that might be inviting you to re-think the role that this text or author plays in your course or on your syllabus?44

Shotwell would remind us that there are no “pure” texts. Indeed, when articulating her own account of purity, Shotwell describes Mary Douglas’ 1966 Purity and Danger as “an important touchstone for thinking about purity” (Shotwell 2017, 13). But Shotwell also explains that

44 Thanks to Rebecca Scott and Theorda Bane for suggesting several of these questions.
the book does throw up frictions for the anti-oppression critical theorist; Douglas refers consistently to “primitive cultures,” by which she means mostly Indigenous non-Western cultures, and there are certain hiccups in her discussion of gender and sexuality. The book is usable in part because Douglas applies an ethnographic eye also to purity practices of the Christian Bible and critiques contemporary texts that attempts to use “primitive cultures to buttress psychological insights.” (13)

To situate her own account of purity and impurity, Shotwell turns toward Douglas’ earlier work—she does not ignore Douglas’ text but she also does not make excuses for the difficulties she finds there, nor does she rely heavily on Douglas’ critique of purity to develop her own. It might be tempting, when we confront the impossibility of a pure text or figure, to throw up our hands in favor of a kind of radical hermeneutic relativism—if everyone is problematic then why bother drawing any distinctions about how, or worrying about which problematic thing we endorse?45

This, in addition to being an epistemically lazy way of flattening all textual impurities into one monolith to then be dismissed, is precisely the kind of “purity politics of despair” (195) that Shotwell cautions against.46 She explains that “this approach begins to interpret the world, discovers that there is no easy solution to suffering and implication, and stops at making the more manageable agential cut of personal purity practices” (195). It is easier, particularly in a world built on and obsessed with purity of various kinds, to either ignore impurities or to seek individualized and individualizable solutions to ethical and political questions. Instead, the


46 See Medina 2013 for a detailed discussion of epistemic laziness as a vice common to those with structural power and privilege. See also the following chapter of this dissertation for a discussion of epistemic/hermeneutic virtues and vices and their relation to charitability. I should also say: questions about whether and how to read impure texts and figures are important, as are questions about which standards and interpretative tools we can and should apply when we engage with them. I do not deny the importance of these questions, but I do reject them as strategies for avoiding confronting the problems and risks of charity, and I do reject answers to these questions that rely on an ethics and politics of purity.
impossibility of a return to or achievement of purity means that we should abandon purity as a goal. But for Shotwell it also means we must find more creative, generative, coalitional ways of working toward better futures nonetheless (196).

Although well-intentioned, and getting close to an important question about how, if not charitably, we ought to engage philosophic texts, the question of whether to continue teaching an impure figure or text as a response to problems with charitability is a purity move: it locates the “solution” to the charitability gap at the level of the individual philosopher. The questions are about whether or how one can keep certain figures on one’s syllabus. The assumption (and it is a tempting one!) is that if we change what we assign and make a few adjustments to when and how we talk about charitability, then we will be “in the clear”—we will no longer be at risk of committing acts of epistemic violence or of perpetuating unjust disciplinary norms. It is an individualist response to a pervasive structural problem. Recall that the move toward this kind of response is, on Shotwell’s view, unsurprising. One common response to the injustice, oppression, and the impossibility of being free from implication in these systems of suffering is the desire for and working toward purity. But for Shotwell:

Being against purity means that there is no primordial state we might wish to get back to, no Eden we have desecrated, no pretoxic body we might uncover through enough chia seeds and kombucha. There is not a preracial state we could access, erasing histories of slavery, forced labor on railroads, colonialism, genocide, and their concomitant responsibilities and requirements. There is no food we can eat, clothing we can buy, or energy we can use without deepening our ties to complex webs of suffering. So, what happens if we start from there? (4-5)

To Shotwell’s description of complex webs of suffering, I would add that there is no philosophy we can read without being implicated in a tradition built on white supremacy, sexism, academic elitism, and many additional forms of interlocking oppression. We can make moves to resist or remake these webs, perhaps by diversifying our syllabi/curriculum or adopting modes of textual
engagement that have been marginalized in our discipline.\textsuperscript{47} But these efforts will always be partial, and our philosophic practices are always at least somewhat embroiled in and informed by our discipline’s fraught history and present. Relatedly, there is no perfect or pure way to utilize charity—indeed, even a total rejection of charity is a purity move because many philosophers use charity as a tool for encouraging engagement with marginalized philosophers and philosophies. Each time I am ready to throw charity aside, I see this happen and am reminded that the answer to the charitability problem is not so straightforward!\textsuperscript{48}

A purity-driven response to my work—especially to my analysis of some calls for charity as producing testimonial and affective smothering—is understandable. If we see charity’s harms most starkly in conversations among individual philosophers, it certainly is important to think about how those conversations might be conducted differently. But just because we see a problem with charity when we attend to certain one-on-one exchanges does not imply that improving charity’s function in the discipline will require only individual reflection or vocabulary changes.\textsuperscript{49} Problems of charitability do not emerge, I have suggested, solely from individual prejudices or stereotypes. Accordingly, resisting or restructuring charitability will require collective work and transformation rather than individual pedagogical interventions. I return to what an “impure” charitability might look like in chapters 4 and 5.

\textsuperscript{47} I have been involved in several such efforts during my time as a member of this discipline—see, for example, the “Diversifying Phil 130 Resource Guide that I developed in conversation with colleagues within and outside of Loyola University Chicago: https://clairelockard.weebly.com/uploads/1/2/3/0/123040370/diversifying_phil_130_final_guide.pdf

\textsuperscript{48} I take up questions about whether and when to retain charity as a philosophic tool in the following two chapters.

\textsuperscript{49} I think Nora Berenstain for her question in response to a paper I presented at the 2019 Feminist Ethics and Social Theory (FEAST) conference, which has helped me think more broadly and structurally about charity.
And so we have a third element of the charity-purity feedback loop: when we learn of the charitability gap, we are inclined to address it by changing our individual practices. In my earlier thinking, I have made this very assumption: that if we can talk about charity this way and not that way, or avoid charity language altogether, we are in the clear. That charity’s problems do not come through in other ways, or that we are not also responsible for charity’s history and ongoing operation. Purity can produce or set the stage for the call for charity, as I discuss in the previous two parts of this chapter. Further, it can contribute to inadequate thinking about how to address the call for charity once we do recognize it as problematic.

Is Refusal Rooted in Purism?

Before I conclude this chapter, I want to describe one worry that we might have about the role that purity politics plays in some refusals to practice charitability. This worry is, I will suggest, largely unfounded. It might seem that a desire for purity can result in the refusal to engage with texts or interlocutors who hold oppressive views. That is, perhaps purity politics is located not in those calling for charitable interpretations of problematic texts, but in those refusing to offer this charity in the first place. We might grant, following Stewart and Polhhaus Jr., that there are broader political implications of this refusal. Indeed, depending on the context, refusal can be justified and even necessary. But at other times, the refusal to be charitable can come from the desire to remain untouched by a problematic figure who really might have something generative to add to one’s own critical or counter-oppressive project.

We might think back to the imagined student from chapter 2 who is critical of Aristotle—if she rejects Aristotle’s work entirely, she loses the opportunity to learn about feminist approaches to ancient philosophy (including defenses and critiques of Aristotle), or about
contemporary feminists’ uses of Aristotle’s work. She need not, in the end, be persuaded that Aristotle’s account of friendship is useful to her own life or work, but by approaching Aristotle’s work as not “purely” sexist, she learns far more about his work than she otherwise would have, and she encounters a community of thinkers who share many of her concerns.

Furthermore, the refusal to offer charity might seem to rely on the assumption that there are, in fact, texts or authors whose work is entirely free from socially, politically, and/or ethically worrying content or implications. A critic of purity should worry about both this assumption and its consequences. Lugones and Shotwell each offer resources for understanding and resisting purity frameworks, and these resources are what allow me to identify a set of problems with charity. It is not only that charity can be epistemically unjust or hermeneutically unhelpful (though in my view, it can); it is also that the desire and demand for interpretative charity reflects a desire for a kind of social and conceptual purity that never has, and never will, exist, and whose pursuit can foreclose the development of more generative “impure” resources for social transformation.

I have grappled with this concern myself: is my critique of charity, and my refusal to read charity moves and habits charitably, itself a purity move? Perhaps. On the whole, however, I am not convinced that the same kind of purity politics runs in all directions with regards to charitability. I see strategic calls for charity that are motivated not by purity politics, but by a determination to stay with the mess of always-flawed texts and frameworks, and by a commitment to stand in solidarity with thinkers and colleagues whose work runs against the

---

50 See, for example, Deslauriers 2009; Bianchi 2014; Sharkey 2016. I am grateful to Carlo Tarantino for suggesting these texts.
To suggest that someone who expresses skepticism at the usefulness or relevance of, for example, Kant or Aristotle, is practicing the same politics as those who defend them, is to ignore the role of social and institutional power in structuring our disciplinary conversations. And to claim that this “purity politics” of refusal (which is not an accurate description in the first place) deserves the same concern and consideration as the actual, widespread, and pernicious purism I describe in much of this chapter is yet another way of widening the charitability gap. While it is certainly possible that philosophers sometimes resist charitable interpretation in ways that reflect a commitment to some sort of ontological, ethical, political, and/or epistemological purity, this is not a widespread pattern, tradition, or set of practices around which an entire discipline is oriented and to which it is (largely uncritically) committed.

**Toward an Impure Charitability**

In this chapter, I have drawn a connection between purism (as articulated by Alexis Shotwell and María Lugones) and charity in order to explore some of the background conditions and commitments that allow for and are strengthened by contemporary charitability moves and practices. I have argued that charity and purity are mutually-reinforcing and that their connection is recursive. Hermeneutic purity encourages charitable split-separation moves that divorce an author’s oppressive views from what is framed in contrast as their “real” philosophy. Furthermore, purism allows for willful misinterpretation of critique, such that critiques appear as uncharitable regardless of their content (or their existence!). And finally, purity politics emerge

---

51 I expand upon this observation in the following two chapters.
even as we work to counter charitability’s harmful effects. This purism is tied up with various interlocking structural oppressions.

My hope is that in highlighting the charity-purity feedback loop, I have illustrated the importance of locating the problem with charity not solely in individual philosophers’ actions, but also in the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy that structures our world(s) and our discipline.\textsuperscript{52} Without pointing toward any broader social or political structures (as I begin to do here when I connect charity practices to purism), I risk locating misuses of charity solely with individual philosophers; that is, I reduce the problem to one of individual prejudice or bias. While these things can certainly motivate calls for charity, there is so much more going on in these moments. If I locate problems with charitability only with individual philosophers, I misunderstand charity’s harms (in ways that underestimate them) and I miss the systems of oppression the produce and are reinforced by charitability; furthermore, I misidentify the interventions that are necessary for doing charity differently if I do not connect particular calls for charity to the structures that make them possible and intelligible.

Shotwell contends that since there is no way “out” of impurity or “back” to a prior state of purity, “we need to shape better practices of responsibility and memory for our placement in relation to the past, our implication in the present, and our potential creation of different futures” (8). In my analysis of purity’s relationship to charity in academic philosophy, my goal has been to contribute to this shaping. In the first three chapters, I have provided an account of charity’s historical uses, of the risks philosophers take when we call for or practice charitability, and of the logics and politics that inform many calls for charity. In my final two chapters, I reimagine

\textsuperscript{52} I borrow this descriptor from bell hooks (hooks 1995, 185).
charitability, turn toward non-charitable hermeneutical practices as resources for those interested in resisting the pull of interpretative charity, and explore some cases when charitability may be worth retaining (even as we must also revision/reimagine it).
Chapter 4 marks a shift in the focus of my dissertation. I am undertaking a task that is much less comfortable to me than critique: I am reimagining. In chapters 1, 2, and 3, I was interested in identifying the assumptions that philosophers tend to make when we rely on charitability; in understanding the mechanisms by which charity’s histories and effects are disregarded; and in exploring the epistemic, affective, and hermeneutic harms that result from uncritical (and even critical) calls for charitability. In chapters 4 and 5, I shift toward reimagining charitability, and toward exploring interpretative tools that might produce more generative engagements with problematic texts than those that tend to result from an uncritical reliance on charitability. This is a rather speculative part of my dissertation; that is, I do not claim to have offered an entirely new vision of what our discipline ought to do with difficult or impure texts. Instead, I examine strategies that seem more promising than existing charitability practices. I also reexamine charitability in the final chapter, attending to ways that charity can be used strategically, or despite its risks.
CHAPTER FOUR

TURNING AWAY FROM CHARITABILITY: CRITICAL LOVE, EPISTEMIC AND HERMENEUTIC VIRTUES, AND INTERPRETING OTHERWISE

A community of thought and interpretation is a community of solidarity, that is, a community of subjects who are prepared to think and believe together as they act on their beliefs through collaborations, and who are ready to be responsive and accountable to each other as they try to share their experiential and agential perspectives (José Medina 2013, 306).

Toward Non-Charitable Alternatives

Charity, as I hope to have shown in chapters 1, 2, and 3, is a selectively enforced methodological imperative in academic philosophy that results in a charitability gap in which those least likely to be interpreted charitably are disproportionately expected to offer charitability. This imperative is rooted in and in turn reinforces a logic and ethics of purity and in doing so, it produces affective and epistemic harms. The charitability gap is a structural feature of the discipline that likely contributes to philosophy’s whiteness, maleness, cis-ness, and straightness. Harmful charitability practices and structures also cannot be entirely ameliorated or eliminated at the individual level.

I am skeptical of a reliance on individual philosophers’ self-reflection and adjustment of charitability practices as a tool for closing the charitability gap because these practices often emerge from and reinforce philosophical purism, but I do not want to dismiss all individual-level shifts in disciplinary interpretative practices. In The Epistemology of Resistance, José Medina contends that “it is important that we take responsibility for impoverished communicative and
interpretative habits, no matter how well-entrenched, unconscious, and inescapably socially produced those habits may be” (Medina 2013, 111-112). Shifts in interpretative methods, in Medina’s view, require collective shifts in interpretative habits and practices even if the roots of these habits are social or systemic. There are, then, changes that individual philosophers can make in our interpretative and dialogical practices that might eventually de-center charity’s dominance as a methodological tool.

In chapter 2, I discussed this need to de-center charity, but I did not elaborate on what “de-centering charity” might look like in practice. I take up that task now. We need a way of assessing interpretative moves and critiques that does not rely on a too-narrow vision of charitability. If calls for charitability are ill-equipped for the task of engaging with problematic texts, what are some hermeneutic values and principles that are worth pursuing?\(^1\) I am not interested in offering a universal set of guidelines for interpretation; instead, I respond to a narrower set of concerns: if charity ought not be used to articulate or respond to questions about the problems we see in canonical (or contemporary!) philosophy, what else are we left with that might help us navigate these texts? Are there cases when charitability would be useful? If so, how can philosophers get better at identifying them?

My answers to these questions are partial and somewhat speculative. I am convinced that given its risks and harms and given its limited interpretative and pedagogical uses, charity as it is currently practiced is, on the whole, best left aside as a philosophical methodology.\(^2\) While it may seem that charity’s risks and harms can be avoided or undone if we close the charitability

\(^1\) I am grateful to Jackie Scott and José Medina for encouraging me to take up these questions in detail.

\(^2\) Although I am convinced of charitability’s limitations and problems, I do return in the following chapter to the question of whether I have neglected some of its generative uses.
gap by offering more charity to marginalized texts/thinkers and expecting less charity from marginalized philosophers, a reliance on charity tends to reproduce and reinforce existing relations of domination under the guise of love and care. In this chapter, I will explore some hermeneutic values and principles that, in my view, are worth pursuing. I cannot repair charity or offer a general plan or set of interpretative practices to replace it. What I can offer is a set of three considerations that might aid in revisioning charitability and charity practices: first, approaching texts with love does not require the generalized, decontextualized charitability to which we are accustomed, and approaching impure texts with a situated and particularized form of love offers greater benefits than using a generally charitable approach; second, to get better at imagining appropriate alternatives or supplements to charitability, philosophers looking to de-center charitability can turn to existing examples of textual engagements that are generative, but not charitable; and third, a framework of epistemic and hermeneutic virtues and vices can assist philosophers in determining whether and how to engage with problematic texts.

First, I explore charity’s etymological connection to love, problematizing the overly general reliance on love that a politics and hermeneutics of charity seems to require. I suggest that Kristie Dotson’s approach of radical love is one interpretative orientation that works well precisely because it works against the dominant notion of charitability as a decontextualized methodological imperative, or as necessary for interpreting anything at all. Next, I identify three interpretative orientations that, in my view, center non-charitable reading methods: Adriana Cavarero’s method of stealing, Mariana Ortega’s combination of Latina feminist phenomenology and Heideggerian phenomenology, and Sara Ahmed’s blunt citation policy in Living a Feminist Life. Finally, I provide specific reflective strategies and pedagogical resources for philosophers to utilize when approaching questions of charitability; more specifically, I apply José Medina’s
framework of epistemic virtues and vices to the problems of interpretation that I have explored in my dissertation. I suggest that by considering which virtues and vices are facilitated by various interpretative moves, philosophers can evaluate engagements with problematic or impure texts without assuming from the interpretative outset that charitability is a virtue. I conclude with two suggestions for teaching in ways that de-center charitability.

I want to make two clarificatory points before I begin: First, my aim in this chapter is not to offer a new methodological imperative or a set of methodological imperatives to replace charitability; to do so would be a purity move that attempts to excise charity from academic philosophy and replace it with an imperative that I prefer. My aim instead is to begin developing responses to questions about how to approach, engage, teach, and be in community with problematic philosophical texts. There cannot be one prescribed method for doing this, because our reading practices and purposes as a discipline are quite different from one another. Instead, I offer this chapter as an exploration of what emerges when charity is set aside, or practiced as a small part of a larger set of interpretative and critical commitments. Second, I am leaving open the possibility that charitability is sometimes necessary or useful. And although I am interested in offering non-charitable alternatives to charity, these alternatives are partial, variable, often connected to charitability, and somewhat tentative. Imagining alternatives can be quite difficult! It is much easier for me (and, I take it, for many of us trained in academic philosophy) to knock ideas and concepts aside and asunder than it is to build alternatives. But we are living in a world that cries out for alternatives, and I want to take this chapter as an opportunity to practice developing them. I welcome suggestions, criticisms, questions, concerns, and addendums.

---

3 See the following chapter for a longer treatment of charity’s generative and strategic uses.
Part 1: Charitability, Critique, and Love

I begin by taking seriously some of what calls for charity purport to offer, but rarely deliver. In this section, I trace charity’s etymology in order to explore the connections between charitability and love. I problematize a reliance on charitable love as one that leaves relations of domination unchallenged and reproduces colonial, capitalist, and individualist logics. Although charitable love is a very particular form of love that is too-often overly generalized and applied in inappropriate contexts, I will suggest that there are cases when tying together love and interpretation can produce important philosophical insights. These insights, however, emerge not as a result of a general practice of charity, but instead as a result of a contextually specific, critical love that resists the pull of traditional notions of philosophic charitability. I offer one example of this contextually specific hermeneutics of love, though I also caution against adopting it outside of its context.

Following Charity’s Etymology

When I tell people that I am writing a dissertation about the call for interpretive charity in academic philosophy, they often respond by telling me about charity’s etymology. Early on in my research, this constant return to etymology also felt like a constant return to a rather traditional way of doing philosophy—it was not clear to me whether (or how) knowing that charity comes from the Latin caritas, which comes from the Greek agape (ἀγάπη), could be important to my analysis of the term’s contemporary use.⁴ I am, after all, more interested in the call for interpretive charity than I am in the practice of charitable interpretation in either

⁴ See the entry for “charity” in the Oxford English Dictionary for additional information on the connections among charity, caritas, and agape (ἀγάπη). I am grateful to Abram Capone for assistance in parsing the shifting translation of agape.
hermeneutics or in the philosophy of language. Ultimately, I did follow charity’s etymology, and I followed it to love. I trace charity’s etymology here because I want to think about how the term’s connection to love has oriented philosophers.

In “Trust As Hermeneutic Principle,” Bejan does not explore the etymological roots of charity beyond connecting it to the Latin caritas, but this connection to love can be found even in pre-Christian Greek: agape (ἀγάπη), in addition to being translated into English as charity, was also translated as love. This love is not romantic (romantic or sexual love are typically described as eros). As Greek terms came to signify Christian concepts, agape was used to refer to God’s love for man and man’s love for God and for his neighbor. Interestingly, agape was translated into two separate Latin words (and eventually two separate words in the vernacular, up until the 17th century) to distinguish between the active and passive versions of unconditional love (actively, dilectio; and passively, caritas). To be charitable in this exegetical tradition is to passively harbor unconditional love for the person or persons toward whom one is charitable. Later, agape was consistently translated as love rather than charity in English versions of the New Testament.

Although agape eventually came to refer to love rather than charity, for roughly 1200 years, agape was translated in both ways. Perhaps as a result, caritas’ Christian connotation seems to have carried over into the English charity’s early uses. Early uses of charity in English are rooted in notions of Christian love. The definition of the term offered by the Oxford English Dictionary characterizes charity as “a disposition to judge leniently and hopefully of the character, aims, and destinies of others, to make allowance for their apparent faults and

---

5 I have come to believe, however, that the call and the practice of charitability are inextricable from one another, and that an analysis of one requires an analysis of the other.
shortcomings; large-heartedness. (But often it amounts barely to fai
mindedness toward people disapproved of or disliked, this being appraised as a mag
naminous virtue).” This definition, while it does not mention God or Christian love, ap
pears, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, to be rooted in a sense of Christian love of God and fellow people, as we find with agape and caritas. In fact, while this is perhaps the general definition that comes closest to charity’s philosophical connotation, it comes third in the Oxford English Dictionary’s account of the word, after the explicitly theological definitions.

In its etymological account of the term, The Oxford English Dictionary cites a quite early use of charity that seems to resonate with contemporary philosophic uses of the term (though, following Foucault’s caution in “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” we should not interpret this as evidence of charity’s concrete or unchanging meaning [Foucault 2001, 341-342]). In his defense of the pamphlet he distributed railing against women performing in stage plays (for which he was being tried for sedition), William Prynne (himself a lawyer), told the judge, “Your Lordship therefore might have in charity forbore to quarrel with my two syllogismes against stage plays (which are both formall and substantiall too) till you had produced some better of your owne in their defence” (Quoted in Oxford English Dictionary entry for “charity,” but also found in Gardiner 1877, 42.)

This court case is from 1634—here already we see a notion of charity that is quite close to what we see today in philosophy (and deployed, funnily enough, in service of allowing a sexist claim to go unchallenged). Far from being a newer disciplinary quirk, particular to Davidsonian philosophy of language or to analytically-oriented argument analysis,6 the call for

---

6 See the “Taking a Partially Genealogical Approach to Charity” section of Chapter 1 for more exploration of charity’s presence long before Davidson popularized it in Anglo American philosophy.
interpetive charity—a call that uses the language of charity explicitly—can be found both in and out of philosophy as early as the 17th century.⁷

Although it is beyond the scope of my project to explore charity’s etymology in further detail, my brief exploration has allowed me to better understand the term’s connection to notions of love—for much of history, a charitable attitude is not merely one of generosity or benevolence.⁸ Instead, it is an act of love. Joel Weinsheimer writes that “charitable interpretation is an act of caritas: love of literature” (Weinsheimer 2000, 406). He claims, as I summarize in chapter 1, that charity is not merely one among many available modes of interpreting. Indeed, it is not even a special or privileged way of interpreting that the interpreter should be attracted to by its ethical pull (408) or part of a Ricoeurean dialectical relationship between faithful and suspicious reading (408).⁹ Instead, charitable interpretation is more fundamental. For Weinsheimer, it is what makes understanding and communication possible in the first place:

Charitable interpretation is not equally valuable with other kinds of interpretation in the manner of eclecticism; it is not morally superior to other kinds of interpretation in the manner of ethicism. For charity militant, it is the only kind of genuine interpretation—and hence not even a dialectical rapprochement among alternatives is possible. (409)

In the passage above, Weinsheimer calls his view “charity militant.” One must, if they want to understand the text they are reading or the person they are talking to, interpret them charitably.

---

⁷ I am not claiming here that our definitions or uses of charity have remained static from the 1600s until today; rather, I am highlighting a history that, in my experience, is often unacknowledged in charity’s contemporary invocations.

⁸ I would be interested in developing a more detailed analysis of charity’s etymology in future work. For more in-depth analyses of the theological valences of charity (and earlier terms like agape and caritas), see Scholz 1999; Weinsheimer 2000.

⁹ I return to Ricouer’s notion of suspicious reading in the next chapter.
Again, this “must” is not moral—instead, Weinsheimer characterizes charity as “a hermeneutic a priori” (421). It is what lays the ground for dialogue and disagreement. I return to Weinsheimer here in order to highlight that to claim charitability as a hermeneutic a priori is also, in a way, to claim that love is a hermeneutic a priori. That is fascinating, and I unpack some of its implications in this section.

How much do we learn about what charity does from an etymological account of the term? Does knowing charity’s Greek and Latin roots tell us very much about the how the concept orients us philosophically? Or does this knowledge merely offer prescriptions for how interpreters should—or must, if we take Weinsheimer’s view—orient ourselves toward texts and/or interlocutors? For Ahmed in The Cultural Politics of Emotion, etymology is a generative starting point for thinking about what emotions do, rather than about what they are.10 Throughout her introduction, she uses etymologies to identify and describe senses and effects of words; for instance, she notes that “the word ‘emotion’ comes from the Latin, emovere, referring to ‘to move, to move out’” (Ahmed 2004, 11). By connecting “emotion” to the physical shifting that emovere describes, Ahmed is able to identify and describe the ways in which emotions circulate as they structure boundaries, illustrate and cement the formation of attachments, and even transform from emotion into “objects of feeling” (11). Here the etymological becomes a tool for understanding how words orient our bodies and our thinking.

Problematising Love

A charitable orientation, then, is also an orientation toward love. When we fail to be specific about how we understand love and which objects toward which we advocate directing

---

10 Thanks to Carlo Tarantino for reminding me of Ahmed’s approach to etymology in her work on emotion.
love, we run the risk of weaponizing love in service of systems of domination. Not every philosophical account of charity foregrounds this love explicitly, but I will follow love back to Sara Ahmed’s *Cultural Politics of Emotion* to emphasize some ways in which the call for charity uses love as a tool for preserving methodological, dialogical, and interpretive norms in philosophy.

I return to Weinsheimer’s analysis of charity here because in his description of what he calls “charity militant,” Weinsheimer emphasizes the love demanded by charitability. In Weinsheimer’s view, “all interpretation is charitable interpretation” (Weinsheimer 2000, 422). Interpretations are “not critical, not even criticism. Perhaps they are better called uncritical. However, I would rather call them charitable, recalling the etymology of the word. Charitable interpretation is an expression of *caritas*: love of literature” (Weinsheimer 2000, 406). Weinsheimer is writing in response to what he calls “tradition bashing” (406), when suspicious readings prioritized uncovering untenable trends in the works of canonical thinkers.¹¹ Instead of searching for and exposing these untenabilities, Weinsheimer returns to Augustine’s *caritas*, where “the meaning of all scripture is charity or love. An interpretation that does not promote love is wrong; and conversely it is right if it does so, even if the author did not intend it in that place” (409).¹² Augustine’s interpretation is a sacred practice—for Augustine and for Weinsheimer, all objects of interpretation are interpreted as though they are scripture.

Weinsheimer explains that “for Augustine, charity is not merely a subject matter, moreover; it is

¹¹ I return to the tension between suspicious and charitable readings in Chapter 5; see Eve Sedgwick’s “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You” for an analysis that critiques hermeneutics of suspicion but that also refuses the suspicious-charitable dichotomy. I will also note here that I am highly skeptical of “tradition bashing” as an influential or problematic trend in academia.

¹² I offer an analysis of Augustine on *caritas* in chapter 1.
an attitude of humility, the approach of someone who has something to learn from the text” (409). On this view, it is only this love that allows us to learn from the texts we read.¹³

Not every account of charity is so explicitly tied to love, but even in accounts of charity that do not discuss affect and emotion, the language of charity remains—as Ahmed might say, the language of charity “sticks” (Ahmed 2004, 11-12). When we call for charity, we are calling, even when we do not intend to, for a particular kind of love. This love is rooted in approaching texts and interlocutors as sacred, and as having something to teach us that is worth learning. This love—this charity—is, as I describe here and in chapter one, thought to be a condition for the possibility of disagreement and critique. All texts and interlocutors should, according to most accounts of interpretive charity, receive this love. And all interpreters should offer it.

I want to take seriously the possibility that love and charity are important to consider together. An appeal to charitable love is always also a repetition of relations of domination. To put it another way: charity orients interpreters to the kind of benevolent love that (re)instantiates, rather than reimagining or transforming, existing relations of inequality and domination. I use Sara Ahmed’s critique of love as a tool for bridging difference and Dean Spade’s account of charity as blocking relations of mutuality and solidarity to make this claim. Charitable love repeats relations of domination, such that a call for an act of charity, interpretive or otherwise, is better at maintaining unjust social and hermeneutic conditions that it could ever hope to be at transforming them. Although there are important differences between interpretative charity and

¹³ Here Weinsheimer relies on Gadamer’s Heideggerian claim that the meaning of language will always exceed its propositional content (416). A charitable interpretation is what allows an interpreter to grasp the meaning that the speaker did not intend or anticipate.
the charity about which Ahmed and Spade are critical, I am interested in the ways their critiques are relevant for academic philosophy.\footnote{I do not offer a general history of charitable giving or philanthropy in this chapter. See Brenner 1960/1988 for a classic history of charity and philanthropy (see also his 1994 \textit{Giving: Charity and Philanthropy in History}) and see Friedman and McGarvie’s 2003 edited volume for a more recent analysis of charity’s role in U.S. history. See also Mananzala and Spade 2008 for a critique of charitable approaches to addressing systemic social oppression and inequalities.}

In \textit{The Cultural Politics of Emotion}, Ahmed problematizes the social and political usefulness of the loving attitude that charity advocates. This problematization is part of her broader argument that “love is crucial to how individuals become aligned with collectives through their identification with an idea, an alignment that relies on the existence of others who have failed that ideal” (Ahmed 2004, 124). Love organizes groups of people by orienting them toward a particular goal or ideal, and it requires, in Ahmed’s view, a group of people who are \textit{not} oriented, or have failed to be oriented toward, that ideal. She begins her chapter, “In the Name of Love” by noting the propensity of right-wing fascist and white-supremacist groups to reframe their hate as love, for their own race or for their nation (Ahmed 2004, 122-123).\footnote{See Shannon Sullivan’s \textit{Good White People} for a related account of white supremacist groups in the U.S. refashioning hate into love (Sullivan 2014, 152-153). See also Grant J. Silva’s “Racism as Self-Love” (2019) for an account of self-love as an attachment to racial privilege and status.}

Ahmed wonders what we do when we do something “in the name of love” (124)—why is this assumed to be better than taking action out of some other motivation or affective orientation, especially when so many atrocities have been framed as acts of love? She is suspicious of the appeal to love as a political tool for connecting and communicating across difference:

\begin{quote}
Part of me questions the ‘benevolence’ of such good feelings and indeed imagines benevolent intellectuals reaching out to the poor, the dejected and the homeless and offering them their love. Love is not what will challenge the power relations that idealization ‘supports’ in its restriction of ideality to some bodies and not others. In fact ‘to love the abject’ is close to the liberal politics of charity, one that
\end{quote}
usually makes the loving subject feel better for having loved and given love to someone presumed to be unloved, but which sustains the relations of power that compel the charitable love to be shown in this way. (141)\textsuperscript{16}

Here Ahmed directly connects acts of love to acts of charity, and she sees these acts as inseparable from power structures: bestowing charitable love is a way of \textit{not changing power relations}. Charitable giving, or a “loving” act of reaching out to those who have failed to live up to some loved ideal, might make the giver feel good about themselves, but it does not meaningfully address systematic inequalities or injustices.

Dean Spade shares Ahmed’s criticism of the affects, power dynamics, and effects of charitable giving. He contends that mutual aid is a crucial tool for responding to and building solidarity in the face of environmental, social, and political crises, contrasting the structure and function of mutual aid with that of charity. In “Solidarity Not Charity!” (here I quote the standalone essay rather than the book chapter with the same title), Spade explains that “\textit{charity, aid, relief, and services} are terms used in various contexts to denote the provision of support for survival to poor people where that support is governed by rich people and/or government” (Spade 2020b, 140; emphases in original). This “top-down” approach to aid often comes with particular requirements, paperwork, and deference to hierarchies. For Spade,

\begin{quote}
The charity model encourages us to feel good about ourselves by “giving back.” Convincing us that we have done enough if we do a little volunteering or posting online is a great way to keep us in our place. Keeping people numb to the suffering in the world—and their own suffering—is essential to keeping things as they are. In fact, things are really terrifying and enraging right now, and feeling \textit{more} rage, fear, sadness, grief, and despair may be appropriate. Those feelings may help us be less appeased by false solutions, and stir us to pursue ongoing collective action for change. (Spade 2020a, 28)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{16} Charitable love, in my view, functions this way in philosophy too. Critiques of canonical figures are perceived as attacks—they are thought to make that figure vulnerable and this figure must be rescued by an act of charitable interpretation. Charity, often, as I describe in the previous chapter, protects those who are perceived as vulnerable to being misunderstood, mischaracterized, or unceremoniously tossed outside of philosophical relevance.
Charity keeps the social and political status quo in place, relying on existing and problematic models of aid and social change rather than facilitating solidarity. Indeed, the charity model encourages us to think that all we can do to address poverty, inequality, and injustice is “give back”; that people in need of assistance are somehow at fault and must prove themselves worthy of benevolence; and that there are no broader social systems playing a role in creating poverty, under-resourced communities, and human suffering. Spade points out that “resistant intellectual traditions have consistently raised the concern that reforms [using the charity model] emerge in the face of disruptive movements demanding justice but for the most part are designed to demobilize by asserting that the problem has been taken care of, meanwhile making as little material change as possible” (Spade 2020b, 132).

Charity and charitability practices, on Spade’s view, do not merely fail to meet communities’ needs; they contribute to the dominance of the unjust social, political, and economic systems that caused these needs in the first place. In *White Privilege*, Shannon Sullivan puts this problem with charity plainly, explaining that “when good will takes the form of charitable action, the people being helped might get a little bit of benefit—some money, some access to social services, and so on—but the overall structural problems that created the inequalities and need for help aren’t addressed (Sullivan 2019, 93). Charity, on Sullivan’s view, does not allow for structural change even if it allows for small and temporary improvements—indeed, Spade suggests that charity actually *blocks* structural change. Although interpretative charity in philosophy does not claim to address social and material inequality, it does, in my
view, share with the charity model a tendency to reinforce existing power structures rather than transforming them.  

Ultimately, Ahmed claims that she “would challenge any assumption that love can provide the foundation for political action or is a sign of good politics” (141). I want to add to Ahmed’s challenge: we should challenge, or at least question, the assumption that love can provide the foundation for interpretation. If the love Ahmed critiques here is similar to the love philosophers evoke (though far more implicitly in most cases) when we call for charity, then we should be critical of the ways that calls for charity can function as tools for shoring up disciplinary norms and borders. Even at its best, the call for charity as a call for love is one that risks eliding conflict and difference.

These “liberal politics of charity” are inseparable from charity’s ties to histories of capitalist, colonial, and imperial domination, which Ahmed discusses further in the first chapter of The Cultural Politics of Emotion. She begins by quoting a letter circulated by Christian Aid to its donors. In the letter, the charity attempts to persuade the reader to make donations to stop the use of landmines. Ahmed points out that the reader (who has already given to Christian Aid before) “is presumed to be moved by the injuries of others, and it is this movement that enables them to give” (21). Christian Aid appeals to the sadness and anger that the reader is presumed to

---

17 See Jane Addams’ “The Subtle Problems of Charity” for an additional account of the problematic interpersonal and social dynamics associated with charity and philanthropy (Addams 1899).

18 She qualifies this challenge later in the chapter—I return to her qualification below.

19 Here is the full passage that Ahmed cites: “Landmines. What does this word mean to you? Darkened by the horrific injuries and countless fatalities associated with it, it probably makes you feel angry or saddened. I’m sure you will be interested in the success stories that your regular support has helped to bring about…Landmines. Landmines are causing pain and suffering all around the world, and that is why Christian Aid is working with partners across the globe to remove them…Landmines. What does this word mean to you now? I hope you feel a sense of empowerment.’ (Christian Aid Letter 9 June 2003)” (Ahmed 2004, 20; emphases in original).
feel when they imagine the pain of others. This sadness and anger is, Ahmed contends, “what allows the reader to enter into a relationship with the other, premised on generosity rather than indifference” (21). Interestingly, “the other” who is harmed by the violence of landmines seems to fade into the background. The agents of change are the charitable donor and the charity itself. For Ahmed, “this letter and the charitable discourses of compassion more broadly show us that stories of pain involve complex relations to power” (22). Questions of charity and charitability, for Ahmed, are inseparable from questions of power relations.

Discourses of charity like the one exemplified by the Christian Aid letter not only elevate givers into positions of power; they also allow generosity to become “a form of individual and possibly even national character; something ‘I’ or ‘we’ have, which is ‘shown’ in how we are moved by others. This transformation of generosity into a character trait involves fetishism: it forgets the gifts made by others, as well as prior relations of debt accrued over time” (22). In the letter, there is no acknowledgement that the use of landmines has a history—war and poverty do not occur in social or political vacuums. As Ahmed points out here, and as Spade and Sullivan also explain, the call to give to a charity often masks the social, political, and economic systems that necessitated the charity in the first place. Ahmed reminds her reader that “in this case [of the Christian Aid letter], the West gives to others only insofar as it is forgotten what the West has already taken in its very capacity to give in the first place” (22; emphasis in original). The West, in Ahmed’s view, has taken away the capacity of non-Western nations to give—the West is the reason there is a lack in the first place, and what is given was unjustly taken (then this taking was forgotten and repackaged as a giving). For Ahmed, “the giving repeats as well as conceals the taking” (22; emphasis in original).
The call to give to charities (to be charitable) is a moralizing one—it becomes part of one’s character to be generous. Or maybe even part of one’s academic discipline. Charity is tied to compassion and generosity, and so to refuse this is to refuse some virtue that is taken to be unambiguously good. Ahmed’s discussion of giving and forgetting is helpful for thinking about why calls for charity in philosophy can be misguided—are we asking people who do not have resources to give to now owe philosophy a debt? To offer charity? In calling for charity we, as I suggest in chapter 2, often make unjust demands of our interlocutors.

The language of charity also evokes histories of colonial domination—practicing charity allows for the continuing imposition of western values and social fantasies onto “non-western others” who have already been subjected to colonial domination. In her essay, “Interrogating Charity and the Benevolence of Empire,” Neerman Shaikh frames charity as a tool for exercising power and domination. She explores some of “consequences of [imperial] interventions made in the name of charity” (Shaikh 2007, 83). Shaikh is concerned with U.S. imperialism and colonialism specifically, suggesting that we “regard the ascendance of American empire and the consequences of its desire to do good as participating in an earlier colonial tradition” (84). Practices of international philanthropy and charity are inseparable from this colonial tradition and the fantasy of the U.S. as a progressive, “developed” nation. She reminds her reader that “it would probably be incorrect to assume that the principal impulse behind the imperial conquests of the 18th and 19th centuries was charity” (85). This “civilizing mission” was often framed as an act of goodwill, used to pull “less developed” nations into “modernity.” Shaikh reminds her reader that “the task of dispensers of goodwill is complicated and fraught, and history teaches us the extent of the damage done in the name of good” (88-89). The desire to help is, on this view,
ineextricable from a desire to extend or impose one’s own social and political practices onto communities whose practices are then erased.

In his critique of philanthrocapitalism, Japhy Wilson makes a stronger claim, suggesting that initiatives like the Millennium Promise (a project whose goal was to eliminate extreme poverty by 2015 through philanthropic interventions in local economies) are actually tools for wealthy Westerners to revel in the social fantasy of ourselves as benevolent saviors. This kind of philanthropy allows “a disavowed enjoyment of pseudo-colonial relations of domination and submission” (Wilson 2014, 1147). He cites the Table for Two initiative as an example: here, “calories saved” at upscale restaurants in Japan, the U.S., and Europe were “donated” to children in “Africa” (particular places in Africa were never specified in marketing materials). Wilson points out that “in this staging of the relations of global inequality, the familiar criticism of charity as ‘crumbs from the rich man’s table’ is not challenged as a misrepresentation, but is explicitly performed as an ethical act” (1148). Here we see another instance of charitability being forwarded as what Ahmed calls a moral imperative.

Franz Fanon’s brief remarks about charity in Wretched of the Earth remind us of the material effects of maintaining a colonial fantasy of benevolence. In his analysis of the violence of decolonization, Fanon condemns the tendency of colonizers to withdraw capital from their former colonies once those colonies gain independence. Fanon reminds colonizers that “Europe is literally the creation of the Third World” (58) and that its opulence is made possible because European colonizers stole the wealth located in colonized lands. He explains that

> When we hear the head of a European nation declare with hand on heart that he must come to the aid of the unfortunate peoples of the underdeveloped world, we do not tremble with gratitude. On the contrary, we say among ourselves, ‘it is a just reparation we are getting.’ So we will not accept aid for the underdeveloped countries as ‘charity.’ (Fanon 2004, 59)
Formerly-colonized people, says Fanon, are not interested in charity given by the “benevolent” former colonizer; instead, any financial compensation ought to be viewed as reparation for colonial theft and plunder. Charity, on Fanon’s view, is a tool for colonizers to use in order to erase and forget colonial histories and violences.

I am not asserting here that the features of and problems with charitable giving can be directly mapped onto my critique of philosophic charitability, though I remain interested in our reliance on the language of charity in philosophy.\(^\text{20}\) The colonial and imperialist legacies of charity and charitable love do, however, suggest that an advancement of love as an interpretative orientation carries with it fraught and problematic conceptual baggage.\(^\text{21}\) We might also wonder what sorts of social fantasies we are indulging in with our calls for interpretive charity. But “charitable love” is only one form of love; indeed, if we have a more particularized account of love and its object, we may be able to avoid some of the problems of charity I have described throughout my dissertation. I offer Kristie Dotson’s account of radical love as a generative and contextualized example of centering love as an interpretative or methodological tool.

Kristie Dotson on Radical Love and Black Feminist Philosophy

Although “charitable love” is only one form of love, it tends to be adopted in academic philosophy as a universally applicable affective and interpretative orientation. I have suggested

\(^{20}\) I thank Robert Budron for reminding me to remain attentive to differences between charitable interpretation and the politics of charity more broadly.

\(^{21}\) I did not come across this book until shortly before completing my final dissertation draft, but I want to note here that in *Acts of Conspicuous Consumption: Performance Culture and American Charity Practices*, Sheila C. Moeschen traces the connections between charitable sentiment and understandings of physical disability in the United States. She claims that “to track charity’s lineage in the United States is to simultaneously elucidate the fraught legacy of physical disability as both a concept and a social position” (Moeschen 2013, 5). I look forward to exploring her work on charity and ableism.
that if we take charity’s etymological roots seriously, we should take seriously the term’s connection to love. But to claim that charitable love (or charitability as love) is necessary for all interpretation is to take a particularized notion of love (charitable love) that is too broad. That is, if we understand charity as love, we risk taking an overly and falsely general view of love, which in turn has the potential to reinforce problematic norms in philosophy. Furthermore, the persistence of the language of charity should move philosophers to question the relations of domination that seem inseparable from calls for charity. Benevolent or charitable love is better-suited for maintaining the philosophic status quo than it is for thinking the discipline anew.

If I am correct that charitability is an orientation device in academic philosophy that encourages philosophers to practice a problematic form of love toward texts and toward one another, is charitability doomed? Is there a way to approach a text or an interlocutor lovingly, but without repeating problematic disciplinary norms? Or should the notion of charity be abandoned altogether?

There is, in my view, no “pure” or “proper” deployment of charity that I can uncover or develop. I offer no perfect set of circumstances under which the call for charity is justified, does no harm, and stops being risky. We should also problematize the desire to “save” charity. What interpretative orientations might be available if charity’s hold is loosened? We should restructure the idea that our generosity is tied to agreement, or to suspending criticality. For now, I do believe that the language of charity itself should largely be left aside, even if we are appealing to some form of love or openness. The explicit reproduction of colonial stereotypes (which we find in Quine and Davidson) along with the dominating relations called forth by charity as a moral

---

22 I thank Andrea Warmack for this point.
imperative for the privileged, should encourage philosophers to rethink what we are asking when we ask for charity.

Maybe, though, some of the interpretive and dialogic impulses in the call for and practice of charitability can orient us differently. A politics and hermeneutics of charitability might reproduce harmful power relations or disciplinary standards, but this is not the only way that love can operate in our interpretative lives. After offering her critique of (charitable) love, Ahmed explains that

I am not ‘against love,’ and nor am I saying that love has to work in this way. Whether it is the dizzy, heady and overwhelming feeling of love for a lover, or the warmth and joy at being near a friend who has shared one’s struggles, it is our relation to particular others that gives life meaning and direction, and can give us the feeling of there being somebody and something to live for. A politics of love is necessary in the sense that how one loves matters; it has effects on the texture of everyday life and on the intimate ‘withness’ of social relations. (Ahmed 2004, 139-140)

I share Ahmed’s skepticism of charitable love, and I am deeply concerned about charitable love within and beyond academic philosophy. But I also share her conviction that love can and does function otherwise. I also agree with Ahmed that “how one loves matters.” How we love the texts we read matters, and this love need not be charitable. We need to think anew about what it means to love a text or a thinker, or to offer a loving interpretation.

In her essay “Radical Love: Black Philosophy as Deliberate Acts of Inheritance,” Kristie Dotson claims that doing Black philosophy—particularly Black feminist philosophy—requires the philosopher to demonstrate “radical love for black people” (Dotson 2013, 38). Her radical love is one that “takes a steadfast commitment to centering black women, an unwavering trust that such centering will reap theoretical fruit, and a willingness to stake these claims in the face of many who would find my orientation, quite frankly, ludicrous” (38). Here Dotson discusses
the importance not only of citing Black feminist theorists, but also of trusting that these citations will be generative for her philosophy.

Those doing Black and Black feminist philosophy must, because of anti-Black racism inside and outside of the academy, practice love for Black philosophy, philosophers, and communities by doing the historical and archival work to uncover thinkers whose contributions have been ignored, marginalized, or erased—as Dotson puts it, they must work to undo “process-based invisibility” (39). In practicing this love, Black feminists must often create systems of interpretation that highlight rather than render abstruse that production [of black women’s theories]. The amount of creative philosophical work that goes into creating systems of interpretation that feature rather than obscure black people’s theoretical production should not be underestimated. It includes a set of tasks and abilities that are infrequently taught in graduate programs in philosophy, where there is often a presumption that ‘standard’ interpretive strategies are sufficient for every kind of theoretical production. (39)

On my reading, interpretive charity is one of these “standard interpretive strategies” against which Dotson positions radical love. Philosophers are, in her view, given tools that would make reading Black philosophy more difficult and require more hermeneutical labor. Dotson is advocating quite a different notion of love from Weinsheimer—this radical love is to be practiced in response to anti-Black racism; the silencing of Black voices; and the goals of uncovering, engaging with, and continuing the work of Black thinkers. Radical love is not a general principle that makes all interpretation possible, and in fact, it would be an inappropriate

---

23 See Dotson’s “On the Costs of Socially Relevant Philosophy Papers: A Reflection” (2019) for her further analysis of the labor of learning standard interpretive approaches while also seeking or developing alternative interpretive tools.

24 Perhaps these “standard interpretative strategies” are methodological imperatives. See chapter one for my characterization of charity as a methodological imperative.
approach to take with many other texts. This radical love is needed as a response to anti-Black racism; it is not a default hermeneutic orientation.

Dotson explains that this notion of radical love is incredibly risky in academic philosophy—compare this to the casual way that so many of us call for charity in academic philosophy. She contends that although it should be obvious that Black people’s work and cultural contributions contain particular and useful theoretical principles, “many conceptions of what counts as philosophy or ‘properly’ philosophical implicitly or explicitly disallow this kind of trust [of black people and their theoretical contributions] due to either pernicious conceptions of philosophical engagement or unabashed anti-black sentiment” (41). Academic philosophy, in other words, often blocks the very kind of love with which Dotson wants to approach Black authors and texts. It seems to me that this love is blocked, in part, by another, quite different notion of love: charitable love, which masquerades as universal and a priori (Weinsheimer 2000, 421). The acts of love and trust that are thought to constitute a properly charitable interpretation are, in fact, often withheld from marginalized thinkers. Although we can tie interpretative charity to its etymological roots in love, the call for interpretive charity is one of the standard interpretive tools that has made possible the silencing of Black voices from academic philosophy, and has made Dotson’s radical love both so necessary for Black philosophy and so risky to practice.

One could suggest that the problem with love here is that it should be extended to Black philosophy and philosophers, but that practitioners of philosophy are failing to do so. Interpretation is going wrong, on this view, because charity isn’t being extended appropriately. But Dotson is not calling for a Weinsheimerian interpretive charity here—she does not advocate that a general hermeneutic principle be extended to Black thinkers. Instead, she puts forth a
different, and more specific form of love, rooted in Black feminist thought. This love is not a general interpretive principle that must be applied to all texts, because not all texts or authors have been marginalized and invisibilized by the anti-Black racism that Dotson describes. Even if one agrees with Weinsheimer that a broad notion of charitable love is what allows for textual interpretation at all, this is a love that cannot do interpretive justice to Black philosophy. Dotson’s focus is on Black and Black feminist philosophy, but a more general notion of charitable love will likely also be inadequate for reading and putting to theoretical use many additional marginalized areas within our discipline. Problems of charitability cannot be addressed by simply replacing charitable love with radical love because radical love is a methodological and affective orientation that Dotson advocates specifically for Black and Black feminist philosophy. I explore her notion of radical love here to show one way that charitable love is inadequate for those interested in transforming the discipline and to explore one way of using love in interpretation and textual engagement that does not repeat the relations of domination that charitability so often does. Ameliorative practices will need to, as Dotson’s radical love does, respond to particular histories and contemporary contexts of various interpretative communities.

I have suggested in the first part of this chapter that if we take charity’s etymological history seriously, we should take seriously the term’s connection to love. And if we understand charity as love—even as there are a great many philosophic accounts of what love is—a too-general notion of love has the potential to reinforce problematic norms in philosophy. Furthermore, the persistence of the language of charity should move philosophers to question the relations of domination that seem inseparable from calls for charity. Benevolent or charitable
love is better suited for maintaining the philosophic status quo than it is for thinking the discipline anew.

**Part 2: If not Charity, then What?**

In part one of this chapter, I explored charity’s etymological connection to love in order to highlight some of the social and political commitments of charitable love that interpreters ought not, in my view, reproduce. I suggested that charitable love is one particular form of love that can masquerade as a generalized love that makes interpretation possible. Instead of this charitable love, I advocated for a particularized, contextual form of love as a promising interpretative or methodological tool in academic philosophy. In the second part of this chapter, I move away from charitability altogether in order to offer a second set of strategies and practices that revision dominant disciplinary interpretative practices. If philosophers are interested in de-centering charitability, we can and should turn to existing scholarly examples of textual engagements and analyses that are not particularly charitable, but that are generative, interesting, and imaginative. These examples do not capture every form of non-charitable textual analysis, and my treatment of them is briefer than I would prefer. But my aim is to offer resources for philosophers interested in imagining ways of engaging canonical texts that do not rely on charitability. I offer stealing (as described and practiced by Adriana Cavarero [1995] and Amy Richlin [1992]), combining anew (as practiced by Mariana Ortega [2016]), and leaving aside (as practiced by Sara Ahmed [2016] and described in chapter 2 of this dissertation) as a few approaches with which we can think as we reflect on the role of charitability and non-charitability in philosophy. These examples are rooted in feminist theory, and I do not offer them as new methodological imperatives, or as strategies for interpreters to uncritically adapt and apply to other contexts. Instead, I aim to show some ways in which charity is already being de-
centered, and that this de-centering can, but need not, involve a lot of engagement with canonical texts.

Stealing

One method that feminist philosophers and classicists have utilized to engage productively with problematic texts is what Adriana Cavarero calls “stealing.” In the introduction to *In Spite of Plato*, Cavarero contends that “in the Western tradition female subjectivity is buried under figures of hyper-masculine men, and by figures of women constructed by men” (Cavarero 1993, 4). She searches classical myth and literature for a place within theory for feminine subjectivity, but when she thinks about the mythic heroes of “the western canon,” she only sees the male subject (Cavarero 1995, 3). Where, Cavarero wonders, is there room for women who are not mere objects of men’s thought (3)? Where are the women whose presence and action defy the “central status of the male subject” (3) in Western myth? Cavarero explains that since she does not see these figures, she has “stolen them” (4).

By “stealing,” Cavarero means that she takes women from their contexts in classical myths, epic poetry, and ancient philosophy and reads them against the dominant grain that would portray the women as passive, controlled by men, or active only because they demonstrate masculine features of some kind. Cavarero is forthright about her thievery, explaining that “theft it is indeed, in the form of a tendentious robbery that pursues its object, unconcerned with recognizing the objective quality of the figures in their context. On the contrary, these figures are freely replayed, reactivated by a new way of thinking: the categories of the philosophy of sexual difference” (5). Cavarero contends that that patriarchal order performed an “original act of

---

25 I thank Rachel Silverbloom for offering comments on my summary and analysis of Cavarero.
erasure” (5) of feminine subjectivity, and that her thievery allows for the women in classical myths to come to life in new ways. She explains that “in the hermeneutical game, a measure of inherent arbitrariness has always been granted to all interpreters” (7) and that her approach “allows the traces of a new kind of story of philosophy to unfold, revealing both its primary connective categories and its most tenacious lines of development” (8). This arbitrariness is especially interesting because it suggests that Cavarero’s narratives of feminine subjectivity have no more authority than those from whom she is stealing. But in a way, this is part of the point: why, Cavarero pushes us to ask, do we accept arbitrariness in cases when feminine subjectivity is denied, but call it out when feminine subjectivity is celebrated? Cavarero is interested in the possibilities that open when the dominant philosophical narrative is rendered otherwise.26

In her book’s first chapter, Cavarero steals Penelope from Homer’s *Odyssey*. After Odysseus’ years-long absence, Penelope is told that she must marry a new suitor so that he can rule Ithaca. Penelope is allowed to finish weaving a tapestry before she must remarry, and so

---

26 I wonder about whether and how Saidiya Hartman’s method of critical fabulation relates to Caveraro’s method of stealing. In “Venus in Two Acts,” Hartman describes critical fabulation as her strategy for writing with and against archival materials that claim (but always fail) to preserve historical records of the transatlantic slave trade. Hartman also uses this method in *Lose Your Mother* (2007), *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), and *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (2019) to write about the ongoing effects of slavery in anti-and-post-bellum America and in Ghana (in *Lose Your Mother*). Hers is a “history written with and against the archive” (Hartman 2008, 12) that aims to “jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done” (11). For Hartman, “writing a history of the dominated requires not only the interrogation of dominant narratives and the exposure of their contingent and partisan character but also the reclamation of archival material for contrary purposes” (Hartman 1997, 10). She knows that she cannot treat archives as pure sources of raw or objective information, but she also knows that she must engage with them in order to have any information about Black life in 19th and early 20th century America at all. Hartman’s archival work and critical fabulation are importantly different in scope and purpose from Caveraro’s analysis of classical myth, and the language of “stealing” is inapt. Cavarero is “stealing” largely from fictional stories, while Hartman’s archival work is much more ambiguously related to the fictive. But Hartman and Cavarero are each interested in offering a retelling (or for Hartman, a recasting) of dominant stories and challenging widely accepted assumptions about them. In future work, I would like to think more about what Hartman’s method might highlight about ways of reading (and of reading otherwise) in academic philosophy. I thank Rachel Silverbloom for suggesting that I consider connections and differences between Cavarero’s stealing and Hartman’s critical fabulation and I look forward to reading her work on the topic.
every night, she unravels what she wove during the day. Cavarero contends that Penelope’s weaving and unweaving “is her way of slowing down the tempo of a constant repetition that keeps her solitude intact and saves her from larger events” (12). She is not merely resisting an impending marriage; she is not waiting patiently for the return of her husband (as she is understood to be doing in many readings of The Odyssey); she is creating her very own temporality that stands apart from the action-filled, forward-oriented temporality of the main story (and the men driving it). As Cavarero puts it, “by unravelling and thereby rendering futile what little she has done, she weaves her impenetrable time. This extended intermission becomes an absolute time removed from history’s events” (14) This new form of time runs counter to dominant notions of linearity and progress; indeed it “nullifies any usefulness or completion through its rhythmic undoing” (17).

Penelope’s unraveling and its accompanying countertemporality are, on Cavarero’s reading, an insurmountable stumbling block to the men in Ithaca who wait impatiently for her to finish weaving. Cavarero speculates that “Antinous, the arrogant, threatening stranger, must have suspected that it does not take that many years to weave a cloth. Yet he knows that there is nothing he can do. The dilated time, the endless, cadenced sameness that Penelope weaves is impenetrable” (14; emphasis in original). It is tempting to imagine Penelope as a faithful wife, waiting patiently for her husband to return. But Cavarero offers us other possibilities; in her view, Penelope (indeed, all figures in myth) “has a certain malleability with respect to these interpretive intentions. Penelope has a symbolic power of her own that is open to different readings” (13). Cavarero wonders if, for example, Penelope does not recognize Odysseus when he returned because she does not want to recognize him (13).
For Cavarero, “Penelope does not weave, or, to be more specific, she undoes the weaving she has already done, thereby nullifying the role that the patriarchal symbolic order has assigned to her” (16). Her act of resistance can be understood as broader than what we might initially suppose, and it is made all the more subversive because it is “rooted significantly in the womanly experience of weaving, and transforms a role into its own liberating rejection” (18). For feminist interpreters to leave Penelope alone is to forever relegate her to a private space, to assume that this privacy is outside of her control, to cast her in the role of submissive, lonely wife, and to foreclose the possibility of any meaningful agency. To steal Penelope, on the other hand, is to imagine all of the ways she was resisting—or can be read as resisting—the patriarchal order even as she was inescapably trapped within it. Indeed, Cavarero contends that “Penelope is the emblem of an order that requires her to be an industrious and faithful wife; but, precisely for this reason, she also becomes a figure who denies and disrupts the time and place assigned to her” (16). Rather than remaining faithful and charitable to Plato’s passing mention of Penelope in the Phaedo, Cavarero moves from this mention (her chapter’s epigraph) toward a feminist characterization of Penelope and in doing so, she develops a new reading of the Phaedo’s claims about life, death, and being a philosopher.

In her essay “Reading Ovid’s Rapes,” feminist classicist Amy Richlin offers an interpretative approach that is perhaps related to Cavarero’s, though they do not cite one another. Richlin begins with a summary of what feminists (up to 1992, when she was writing) had done with misogynistic classical texts. She explains that “feminist critics advise readers to resist the

---

27 Recently published novels that retell Greek myths by focusing on “minor” women in them might also be practicing a form of stealing. I am thinking, for example, of Madeleine Miller’s Circe and of Jennifer Saint’s Ariadne.
text, to read against the text, to misread or reread the text, to reject the canon of Western literature and make a new one, or end canons altogether” (Richlin 1992, 161). Richlin also reminds her reader of the usefulness of an earlier approach: another kind of stealing that she calls appropriation (161). She explains that “as it happens, a myth of Ovid’s has seemed important to steal: Philomela, raped, her tongue cut out, weaving her story to her sister who had thought her dead” (161).

Richlin outlines four options for reading Ovid (and other authors whose myths and poems contain violence against women, sexism, and/or misogyny). The feminist reader can write in ways that bring academic disciplines like classics outside of the academy; they can “blow up” (179) the canon by critiquing sexist texts and replacing them with alternatives; they can ask about what the text can still do today and what it has done to women in the past; and/or they can appropriate these stories for their own feminist projects. For Richlin, there is no way out of discourses of power, hierarchy, or sexism. But this does not mean that, as Suzanne Kappeler puts it, “art will have to go” (178). In a move similar to Cavarero’s (she even uses the language of stealing, though she does not seem to take it from Cavarero), Richlin wants to take a text like the Metamorphoses and “misread” it in ways that center the agency of the women without ignoring their suffering and oppression. For Richlin and for Caverero, to dismiss western myth rather than revisioning the women within it is to write women out of history altogether, but to engage with them uncritically is to do them (and women of their time) a grave injustice.

One additional way to think about stealing, is I think, actually a sub-type of it: it is what Judith Butler calls “rude reading” in Bodies That Matter. This is how Butler frames their own interpretation of Luce Irigaray’s work on Plato. Butler says, “in what follows, I will consider first Irigaray’s speculative mode of engaging with philosophical texts and then turn to her rude and
provocative reading of Plato’s discussion of the receptacle in the *Timaeus*. In the final section I will offer my own rude and provocative reading of the same passage (Butler 1993, 11). As I understand them, Butler argues that Irigaray is reading Plato in a way that Plato himself would not want. Irigaray is appropriating Plato for her own feminist interests. She wants to show the problems with the form/matter distinction in order to highlight the ways that the feminine gets excluded from philosophical binaries. Butler has a different reading, but they appreciate that Irigaray reads philosophy by “taking on a language that effectively cannot belong to her, only to call into question the exclusionary rules of proprietariness that govern the use of that discourse” (12). This reading is “rude” because it theorizes the feminine where the feminine was not theorized.

If I am correct that this is what Butler means by offering a “rude and provocative reading,” then I do not think we can call this uncharitable. I do, however, think it can be a productive strategy for feminists working with texts where we do not see ourselves (or we see ourselves represented problematically). I cannot explore it in further detail here, but I also see some possibilities here for pedagogy. What does it mean to read a text rudely and provocatively when you are new to philosophy? Even if I don’t want to tell my students to read rudely or provocatively, could I show them examples like this to illustrate the many ways that textual interpretations can be productive without being framed as charitable? Or more broadly, how can we bring a methodology of stealing into the classroom? Many early-career academics are expected to teach particular topics, texts, or authors. Perhaps since we are often not given a choice about *whether* to engage them, we can at least think about *how* to do so.

Combining Anew
A second generative (but not necessarily charitable!) way of engaging with problematic texts/authors is the method that I have named “combining anew”: putting canonical figures into conversation with contemporary feminist, queer, and/or anti-racist thinkers in order to extract or develop new insights. In her book *In/Between: Latina Feminist Phenomenology, Multiplicity, and the Self*, Mariana Ortega combines existential phenomenology and Latina feminisms. More specifically, she engages the work of Martin Heidegger and places it in conversation with (among others) Gloria Anzaldúa and María Lugones.

Ortega acknowledges that her approach of combining Latina feminism and Heideggerian existential phenomenology is a controversial and problematic one “not only for purists but for those who are aware of the terrible political views held and defended by Heidegger” (Ortega 2016, 5). In other words, people might think that these two sub-disciplines should be not combined either because philosophy is not very friendly to such combinations or because Heidegger’s political views were so abhorrent that he cannot be engaged productively. Ortega responds by explaining what Heideggerian phenomenology stands to gain from Latina feminism, and vice versa. She says that her aim “is to use Heidegger’s work constructively and to introduce a notion of selfhood that retains some important Heideggerian elements but, with the help of recent Latina feminist phenomenology, also takes this account beyond Heidegger’s characterization of the self” (5). In Ortega’s view, Heideggerian philosophy does not account for lived experience in the way that Latina feminism does, but Latina feminism might also be placed in productive conversation with Heidegger (and other kinds of) existential phenomenology.

Ortega recommends that philosophers leave behind our preconceived notions about “what kinds of theories and philosophies belong together and to pay attention to the intricate ways in which Latina feminist phenomenology and Heideggerian existential phenomenology cross paths
so as to disclose the self’s multiplicity” (6). In other words, Ortega is unwilling to let Heidegger’s Nazism ruin a theory of the self that actually, in her view, does a good job accounting for lived experiences. But she is also unwilling to let Heidegger’s Nazism go—as it so often does—unremarked upon (4; 222-223). Instead, she “shatters” Heideggerian phenomenology to see where the different pieces take her when she places them in conversation with Latina feminism (5). Ortega’s shattering of Heideggerian phenomenology does not attempt to “save” Heidegger’s work from feminist critique and revision by reading it charitably; instead, this shattering takes apart Heidegger’s though in order to bring out what is useful.28

A Blunt Tool: Leaving Aside

I return to Ahmed for my third example of what it can look like to de-center charitable interpretation. In the introduction to Living a Feminist Life, Ahmed explains that in the book she adopts “a strict citation policy: I do not cite any white men” (Ahmed 2015, 15). She does this in order to make space for authors who have not been so frequently cited, but whose work has been important for feminism and critical race theory. Ahmed is critical of the continual reiteration of “official paths laid out by disciplines” (14). She explains that her citation policy “has given me more room to attend to those feminists who came before” (15). Ahmed, as I describe earlier in this dissertation, is aware that her policy is a blunt one (242),29 but she contends that sometimes blunt tools are needed to make space for marginalized and silenced voices. The call for charity, in my view, too often renders these alternative paths (like the one Ahmed offers in Living a Feminist Life) impossible to find or forge. We might say that here Ahmed is redirecting

---

28 I leave it up to feminists with a better understanding of Heidegger than I possess to comment in more detail upon Ortega’s reading of him!

29 In a blog post that accompanied Living a Feminist Life, Ahmed also frames her policy as a blunt tool: https://feministkilljoys.com/2015/12/30/feminist-shelters/
charitability away from already-dominant, male-authored texts and toward marginalized texts authored by people who are not white men. This is, in my view, one way to characterize Ahmed’s blunt citational policy. I wonder, though, if she is making two separate moves: refusing charity to one set of texts, on the one hand, and freeing herself up to offer it elsewhere, on the other hand. It is Ahmed’s refusal to read dominant and oft-cited texts charitably that interests me here.

For Ahmed, feminism is a way of world-making (14); in other words, feminists build theoretical, social, political, and material structures that open more possibilities for other feminists, and for those whose lives are made unlivable by the imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy.” In *Living a Feminist Life*, Ahmed offers an approach not of outright, permanent rejection; rather, Ahmed is interested in building from work that is too often passed over, or framed as only relevant on the grounds that it relates to the work of men (recall her frustration at being asked whether she was a Deleuzian, A Derridian, or a Lacanian [Ahmed 2017. 15]). Here, Ahmed chooses to “engage” texts by white men by setting them aside; indeed, we might say that she is “bracketing” them, as marginalized philosophers are so often asked to do with our concerns about the racism and sexism we find in canonical texts.

Ahmed’s blunt citation policy is related to a broader claim she makes later in her book: that when it is clear that one cannot make an institutional, systemic, or community change that makes the institution survivable for women and people of color, she might need to refuse engagement even further. For instance, Ahmed herself left academia when she realized that her work to address sexual harassment at her university was completely draining her energy while also being given no uptake by the administration (for whom she was doing this work! [198-199]). She explains that “sometimes a feminist has to go on strike. To strike is to put your tools
down, to refuse to work by working with them. A feminist sometimes refuses to work, when the conditions of working are unjust. A tool can be what she puts down when she is striking” (242). Ahmed understands texts by white men as tools she has put down. Sometimes, in her view, it is unjust to work with them when this work necessarily means that women and/or people of color are not being cited.

I understand Ahmed to be offering an alternative reading of the trope of the angry feminist here. People are afraid that feminists will do things like refuse to engage with white men, and Ahmed is refusing to back away from this accusation. Instead, she embraces it, pointing out the possibilities that open when feminists, even for just a little while, do not engage with white men (particularly within disciplines that are dominated by the work of white men).

In part 2 of this chapter, I have characterized three sets of interpretative moves that produce generative, but not charitable engagements with canonical texts. I do not think of these approaches—Cavarero’s stealing, Ortega’s combining anew, and Ahmed’s leaving aside—as uncharitable, or as antithetical to charity. They seem to be better-described as noncharitable. I do not suggest adopting these approaches as alternatives to charity, though some projects or purposes might benefit from versions of stealing, recombining, or leaving. My aim in this chapter, though, has been a bit narrower: I hope to have shown a few ways of engaging with texts that do not center or require a charitable orientation. This allows philosophers to more effectively resist the notion that interpretation requires a particular (and narrow) form of charitability.

Part 3: Some Resources for De-Centering Charity

In parts 1 and 2 of this chapter, my concern was largely about how else to read/interpret, if not charitably. In this final section, I explore a somewhat different set of questions: how might
philosophers retain, but de-center, charity as a methodological or interpretative tool? And what should interpretation and critique look like, if charity is de-centered? I suggest that José Medina’s account of epistemic virtues, epistemic vices, and hermeneutic responsibilities offers a framework for reimagining charity practices, even in cases where it might be appropriate to interpret charitably. I also offer two specific pedagogical practices that allow for close reading but that do not begin from the assumption that this reading must be charitable. Ultimately, I suggest that instead of moving immediately to charity, philosophers can work on being attuned to the cultivation of epistemic and hermeneutic virtues and vices and arming ourselves with teaching strategies that do not rely on a politics or hermeneutics of charitability. 30

Epistemic Virtues, Epistemic Vices, and Charity

In order to discern whether, how, and when to practice charity (or indeed, to use any interpretative tool) it is helpful to cultivate epistemic virtues, disrupt epistemic vices, and have a sense of our hermeneutic responsibilities in a given context. Rather than building charitability into our accounts of virtuous or generative textual engagement, philosophers can instead work to develop the interpretative, affective, and epistemic qualities that allow us to ascertain whether charity is called for in the first place. To explain what I mean, I summarize José Medina’s account of epistemic virtues and vices.31 I then return briefly to the central example from chapter

---

30 There are, of course, many other accounts of virtue and vice in philosophy (I could even have offered a reading of Aristotle here!). I like Medina’s account for this project because it focuses on epistemic and hermeneutic traits while also keeping in view the ways in which epistemic and hermeneutic concerns are intertwined with ethical, social, and political concerns.

31 In future work, I hope also to explore the ways in which Medina’s account of shared hermeneutical responsibility might speak to questions about charitability. I am particularly interested in thinking more about how epistemic virtues and vices connect to his account of shared hermeneutical responsibilities (as these virtues and responsibilities related to charitability).
2 (a faculty member’s call for charity as a response to his student’s critique of Aristotle’s sexism) in order to show how vice and virtue function and imagine how they might function otherwise.\textsuperscript{32}

In \textit{The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustices, and Resistant Imaginations}, Medina explores the epistemic, ethical, and political aspects of social interactions in order to highlight the epistemic dimensions of oppression and offer strategies of resisting this oppression (Medina 2013, 1).\textsuperscript{33} He argues that knowledge practices have specifically ethical and political dimensions and that we must attend to these dimensions if we want to be just knowers (88).\textsuperscript{34} Expanding on work in social epistemology (especially work

\textsuperscript{32} I am grateful to José Medina for suggesting that his framework of epistemic virtues and vices might be one useful strategy for de-centering charitability.

\textsuperscript{33} For more on the ethical implications of epistemic practices, see Fricker 2009.

\textsuperscript{34} The terms “epistemic oppression” and “epistemic injustice” have been defined in many different ways across the literature. Medina characterizes epistemic injustices as “the epistemic obstacles and problems that differently situated subjects are differentially exposed to in their daily activities” (Medina 2013, 13). A specifically epistemic oppression or injustice is one that harms a subject in their capacity as a knower and/or as a participant in a community of knowledge sharing and production. Epistemic harms, on Medina’s account, reinforce and are reinforced by other forms of social injustice (27).

Sometimes, epistemic oppression is broken down into sub-categories. First, a testimonial injustice occurs when unjust social conditions prevent a hearer from taking seriously the experiences that marginalized people report (Fricker 2007, 7; Dotson 2012, 26). This deflation of credibility emerges from a hearer’s identity prejudice and/or from their membership in a community that does not value all testimony equally. Medina adds to Fricker’s characterization of testimonial injustice, explaining that a speaker is not simply prevented from giving knowledge – they are prevented from producing knowledge (Medina 2013, 92). Second, a hermeneutical injustice occurs when unjust social conditions prevent knowers from having interpretive frameworks that would even allow marginalized people’s experiences to be made intelligible (Fricker 2007, 152-155; Dotson 2012, 29-31; Medina 2013, 72). Third, a contributory injustice occurs when privileged hearers, as a result of willful hermeneutical ignorance, insists upon using “structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources” (Dotson 2012, 32) even though alternative hermeneutical resources (often developed my marginalized knowers themselves) are available.

Epistemic injustices and oppressions cannot always be neatly divided into these particular categories, but Medina, Dotson, and Fricker have found it useful to (at least sometimes) identify epistemic oppressions as being testimonial, hermeneutical, or contributory (or some combination of the three). Fricker’s framing only included a discussion of testimonial and hermeneutical injustices. In \textit{Epistemologies of Resistance}, Medina critiques Fricker’s characterization of hermeneutic injustice, calling it insufficiently attentive to the ways that hermeneutically marginalized subjects do, in fact, have the ability to make sense of their experiences long before hermeneutic resources become widely available (Medina 2013, 99). Dotson identifies contributory injustice as a third type of epistemic oppression that exists between the largely-interpersonal testimonial injustice and a largely-systemic hermeneutic injustice. (Dotson 2012, 31).
on testimonial and hermeneutic injustice) critical philosophy of race, and feminist philosophy, Medina offers (among many other conceptual resources) an account of epistemic virtues and vices that might offer guidance on reimagining charitability practices.

Medina explains that “an epistemic predicament that is (or becomes) a character flaw is what in virtue epistemology would be called an *epistemic vice:* a set of corrupted attitudes and dispositions that get in the way of knowledge” (29-30; emphasis in original). These vices are particularly common (though not exclusive to) people who are socio-politically privileged. Epistemic vices “limit the subject’s learning capacities and contributions to the pursuit of knowledge,” (31) which, Medina emphasizes, “also damage the social knowledge available and harm the chances for epistemic improvement of the subject’s community” (31). Epistemic vices, then, have consequences that extend past the knowledge practices and shortcomings of the people who exhibit them; epistemic and hermeneutic injustices affect individuals, communities, and sociopolitical structures.35

35 See the introduction of *The Epistemology of Resistance* for further discussion of this point (Medina 2013, 1-26).
In contrast to these epistemic vices, Medina identifies three epistemic virtues: humility, curiosity/diligence, and open-mindedness (42). Qualities like these allow knowledge to be more effectively shared among differently situated groups (30) and thus provide the conditions of just (or more just) epistemic exchanges. Medina describes epistemic humility as a “self-questioning attitude toward one’s cognitive repertoire” (43). Humility can help someone qualify their beliefs, identify their own knowledge gaps, better-understand how to fill those gaps, and develop insightful questions about their own knowledge and the knowledge of others (43). Medina contends, furthermore, that an attitude of humility can enable people to “detect the flaw in the dominant perspective” (79). Indeed, I wonder whether charity’s dominance can be explained in part by the difficulty of developing the level of humility required to detect the problematic (and dominant) view that all philosophical texts should be read charitably.

Medina characterizes open-mindedness as being attentive to the perspectives of others. Open-minded knowers are able to inhabit reality through the eyes of others as well as their own (44). Finally, curiosity/diligence is characterized by an attentiveness to what one does not know but also by a motivation to learn more about those knowledge gaps (43). The cultivation of epistemic virtues like humility, open-mindedness, and curiosity/diligence can help people develop the overarching epistemic virtue of meta-lucidity. Medina explains meta-lucidity as an epistemically virtuous subject’s “capacity to see the limitations of dominant ways of seeing…it provides insights into the functioning of perspectives that makes it possible to redraw our cognitive maps, to redescribe our experiences, and to reconceptualize our ways of relating to others” (47).

Medina highlights that people from oppressed/marginalized groups often have epistemic virtues because they/we need them in order to navigate oppressive worlds. And
privileged/oppressor groups tend to have vices because they/we are not required to develop nuanced, critical, or complex epistemic habits (indeed, we are often actively invested in not developing them [34]). But Medina also contends that people can and should work to change our epistemic and interpretative habits, practices, and communities in service of cultivating epistemic virtues and combating epistemic vices.

At this point, one might wonder whether interpretative charity (or charitability) is itself a virtue. And if charity is a virtue, then am I not simply re-centering, rather than de-centering, charity as an epistemic and interpretative practice? Indeed, many virtue ethicists offer charity as a fundamental virtue, and charity is one of the three theological virtues articulated by Thomas Aquinas, (See Question 62 of Summa Theologica). Finlayson also characterizes charity as an “under-examined but universally prized methodological virtue” (Finlayson 2015, 82). At the risk of dismissing a foundational claim in ethics, I want to suggest that charitable interpretation is not itself a virtue (or to be more specific: it is not necessarily an epistemic virtue). It seems that in the context of academic philosophy, charity can sometimes help us be virtuous in the ways Medina describes (open-minded, curious/diligent, and humble), but it can also be weaponized in service of epistemically vicious behavior (closed-mindedness, laziness, and arrogance). To put it another way, calls for charity are sometimes rooted in epistemic virtues and sometimes in vices. Whether or not a charitability practice is a virtue will depend on many situational factors.

Charity also, in my view, can be used as a tool for engaging in epistemically vicious practices. For example, in appealing to charity when responding to his student’s anger at Aristotle’s sexism, the instructor from my example in chapter 2 is exhibiting closed-mindedness.

---
36 There is a difference between the methodological “virtue” of charity and the more general theological virtue of charity, but I leave this distinction unexplored here.
and arrogance. He may be not in denial about the existence of Aristotle’s sexism, but he does appear “closed to certain phenomena, experiences, and perspectives” (34) that might destabilize his view of Aristotle (or at least his way of teaching Aristotle in an introductory course). The refusal to engage meaningfully with his student’s contestation (even if some of her contestation is a result of her lack of knowledge about Aristotle or about ancient Greek philosophy or culture) prevents the instructor from complicating his own approach to Aristotle; being charitable does not, in this case, appear to make him a better knower, teacher, or interlocutor.

Furthermore, in his insistence that the correct way to read and understand Aristotle requires charitability, the instructor has demonstrated arrogance. He assumes that his student has nothing new or interesting to offer about the relevance of Aristotle’s sexism. Perhaps he also assumes that scholarly critiques of Aristotle’s sexism are irrelevant to his own understanding of the text and to his teaching of it. Arrogance gets “in the way of discovering facts without prejudging, of articulating and justifying one’s claims properly, or responding to objections responsibly, of being genuinely open to contrary evidence, and so on” (32). Under the guise of charity, the instructor is not thinking or behaving virtuously. Instead, he uses the call for charity to exhibit epistemically vicious behavior. I suggested in chapter 2 that there were many other, potentially more epistemically virtuous ways to respond to his student’s angry critique. The instructor could have become curious about Aristotle’s gender politics, their effect on readers, and existing engagements with questions of gender and sexism in ancient philosophy. He could have affirmed his student’s anger rather than (perhaps as a way to avoid examining his own assumptions about addressing sexism in philosophy’s canon) attempting to diffuse it by calling for charity.
I am perhaps following Medina in offering a rule of thumb regarding charity. Medina suggests that “as a rule of thumb, our hermeneutical efforts and interpretative charity should be proportional to the degree of hermeneutical marginalization experienced by the subject in question” (Medina 2013, 110). I suggest something a bit different: if we are going to use charity, we ought to use it only when it facilitates or demonstrates epistemic virtues (such as, but not limited to, curiosity, open-mindedness, and humility) and not when it facilitates or demonstrates epistemic vices (such as, but not limited to, laziness, closed-mindedness, and arrogance). To put it another way: in order to know whether to center charity in our interpretations or critiques, we need first to discern whether this charitability would allow us to operate in epistemically virtuous ways. When evaluating interpretative moves, then, we should not ask whether the move was charitable, but instead whether it is aiding in the development of epistemic and hermeneutic virtues (or aiding in the development of resisting epistemic and hermeneutic vices).

This rule of thumb might appear to merely repeat problems of hermeneutic relativism; after all, couldn’t someone simply claim that their charitable reading of, say, Aristotle as in need of our charity regarding his attitudes toward women is helping him become or remain epistemically virtuous? Maybe so. But Medina also contends that we “are obligated to interrogate the limits of our interpretative horizons and to expose ourselves to interpretative challenges that may require extending or transforming the interpretative resources available to us” (110). And there is perhaps a degree of arbitrariness here, as Cavarero contends there is in every interpretation (see my discussion of Cavarero in part 2). My concern here is to make space for charity, but to suggest that instead of building charity into our vision of what an epistemically

---

37 I (somewhat begrudgingly!) thank Abram Capone for suggesting that I address this problem.
or hermeneutically virtuous practice is, we get better at identifying cases when charity is not aligned with virtue.38

Scholars working in hermeneutics have noted the lack of clarity regarding which interpretative practices are virtuous and which are not. In his forthcoming paper on Gadamer’s view of hermeneutic character virtues and vices, Giancarlo Tarantino highlights the difficulties of identifying generalized interpretative virtues and vices. He contends that discerning what hermeneutic courage or cowardice (to take just one example of a vice) means or looks like will involve some assumptions about the broader end, or the hermeneutic good, towards which we ought to be oriented, such that reading ‘Gadamerianly’ will be relevantly different (though with some occasional overlap) from those who, whether they realize it or not, display a hermeneutic character that reads ‘Machiavellianly’ or ‘Christianly’ or ‘Objectively’ or ‘Chaotically’ and so on. (Tarantino forthcoming)

For Tarantino, hermeneutic vices and virtues are deeply and inextricably intertwined with the particularities of each interpreter and interpretative community. We must make some assumptions about reasons for interpreting in order to set any standards for interpretation, but these assumptions ought to be made explicit, challenged, and altered across time.

Though not writing about Gadamerian hermeneutics, Medina makes a related point about his approach to meliorating epistemic and hermeneutic injustices:

To address the highly situated forms of hermeneutical marginalization that interlocutors can encounter, what we need is not a set of fixed principles of interpretation, but rather, as Fricker argues, something like a communicative and interpretative virtue: an indefinitely context-sensitive hermeneutical sensibility that displays an attentiveness and responsiveness to those struggling to make sense given adverse hermeneutical climates” (Medina 2013, 112; emphasis in original).

---

38 Here I also think of Medina’s commitment to “meliorism, to making things better without being shackled to any particular picture of ‘the best’” (12; emphasis in original). I am aiming here to develop charitability practices that better-serve marginalized members of academic philosophy, but I am not tied to one particular vision of what these practices look like.
Citing Miranda Fricker’s work in *Epistemic Injustice*, Medina suggests that although we cannot and should not put forth a universalized account of hermeneutic virtue, aiming at (and then revising and re-envisioning) this virtue can help address “interpretative gaps” (110) that harm people in marginalized/oppressed groups.

Relatedly, although Tarantino resists (rightly, in my view) making general claims about what a Gadamerian hermeneutic virtue or vice might be, he acknowledges that perhaps an account of hermeneutic courage and cowardice, or hermeneutic patience and foolhardiness can offer a promising place to begin, particularly for those teachers who hope to accompany students toward the practice of hermeneutic virtues and away from hermeneutic vices. The anger, frustration, bewilderment, excitement, numbness, and fright that accompanies both our and our own students’ engagements with philosophical texts may serve as a rich source for rethinking what positive hermeneutic role such emotions can play. (Tarantino forthcoming)

Tarantino’s account of Gadamerian hermeneutics draws from a different tradition and body of scholarship than Medina’s discussion of hermeneutical responsibility, but each thinker is committed to a view of interpretative virtue (broadly construed) that is contextual, flexible, and revisable.

**Pedagogical Tools for De-centering Charity**

In my view, de-centering charity is necessary (though not sufficient) for getting better at discerning when and how charity is hermeneutically and pedagogically appropriate. In this final section of part 3, I offer two pedagogical practices as examples of how to teach without over-relying on charitability: including an “emotion reflection” element in homework assignments and offering students a selection of “philosophical moves” from which to choose for class discussion or homework. These practices prompt students and instructors to approach texts in a wider variety of ways than charity typically encourages.
**Emotion Reflection Paragraph**

The first strategy is to assign students an “emotion reflection paragraph” in addition to any writing they do about an assigned text. Giancarlo Tarantino developed this prompt as one element of his students’ weekly notes assignments in which they also summarize the text, analyze passages, and develop their own questions about the reading. I have also used this notes assignment structure, including the emotion reflection paragraph, in my social and political philosophy course. The prompt that students receive is:

A. Emotion Reflection Paragraph
When you are finished reading the assigned piece, write one full paragraph (5-7 sentences minimum) responding to this question prompt:
What is one emotion that came up for you while you were reading/listening/watching? What does that emotional response teach you about the assigned piece? Why do you think the assigned piece brought that emotion out for you?

In the four-part Notes assignment, the first thing that students are asked to talk about is how they felt about the text and how that feeling affected their overall understanding of it. Before they summarize the reading, analyze a particular passage, or develop questions about the text, students reflect on their own affective reaction to it. This creates space for anger, frustration, love, boredom, curiosity, confusion, and a number of other responses. The response might inform the rest of their notes, but it need not.\(^{39}\) My goal in using this assignment is to show students that their feelings about a text are relevant, important to acknowledge, and fruitful places from which to begin a philosophical analysis.\(^{40}\)

---

\(^{39}\) I grade this assignment for completion and offer written feedback about their summaries, questions, and quote analyses; that is, I am not evaluating their affective responses, though I do often respond to their descriptions of how they felt. This assignment structure as written may be most effective for instructors who have small class sizes, but it appears adaptable for larger classes.

\(^{40}\) Students have a set number of opportunities to skip assignments without it affecting their grade, so if they do not want to share their feelings about a particular text, they do not have to.
Making Philosophical Moves

Initially developed by Ann J. Cahill, and adapted (and put into poster form) by Rebecca Scott, this list of discussion moves is designed to help students respond to texts and to one another:

![Discussion Moves for Philosophical Conversation](image)

**Figure 1. Discussion Moves for Philosophical Conversation**

I have found these discussion moves to be helpful for a broad range of teaching goals: online and in-person discussions move at a slower, but more intentional pace; students who do not yet understand what it looks like to have a generative or helpful class discussion have a clearer sense of what happens in these conversations; and a students can practice listening closely to their
peers or reading texts closely in order to then respond appropriately. Rather than encouraging students to interpret charitably in order to then say something else about a text, offering them a range of interpretative options seems to allow for the cultivation of hermeneutic and epistemic virtues more broadly. And rather than calling for charity in the classroom, instructors can call for reason-giving, summary, points of disagreement, or implications (to name a few moves listed above). Indeed, with these two pedagogical practices, I am beginning to envision the conceptual spaces and interpretative orientations that open if, instead of aiming to teach students to be charitable, we make it our goal to teach them to be curious, imaginative, reflective, or open to being surprised. Charity might sometimes relate to some of these goals, but sometimes it might not.

**Some Lingering Questions**

I began this chapter by asking a question that has persisted throughout chapters 1, 2, and 3: if charitability is a selectively enforced and applied methodological imperative that tends to harm marginalized philosophers and that relies on a logic and politics of purity, and if these features of charity suggest that it needs to be de-centered as a philosophical method, then what does this de-centering look like? How can we evaluate our interpretations and arguments? Or to put the question a bit more broadly: how can philosophers reimagine and transform our relationship to charitability?

I made three proposals in my attempt to address these questions: First, I suggested that philosophers can retain a hermeneutics of love, but that this ought not take the form of a charitable love that leaves relations of domination in place and unchallenged. Instead, I

---

41 Students can also be assigned certain moves, or if the moves are written on cards, given a certain number to “spend” during discussion.
suggested a contextual, flexible, and critical hermeneutics of love (like the radical love that
Dotson describes and practices). I also cautioned against applying a particularized hermeneutics
of love to too-wide a set of interpretative situations. Next, I offered three examples of feminist
engagement with philosophy’s canon that, in my view, are generative but not charitable (or in the
moments when we might see charity, it is not the primary interpretative or methodological
orientation). These examples serve as resources for philosophers who want to de-center charity,
but who have trouble imagining the interpretative results. Finally, I brought Medina’s framework
of epistemic virtues and vices to bear on questions of charitability, suggesting that charity is not
itself a virtue but that working with epistemic virtues and vices can help philosophers get better
at discerning when, how, and why charity can be practiced in particular communicative
exchanges and interpretative situations.

As I reach the end of this chapter, I have many more lingering questions than I have had
in earlier chapters: have I replaced charity with a new set of methodological imperatives in my
call for contextualized, situated love; for reading in solidarity with marginalized communities;
for stealing, combining anew, or leaving aside; and for the pursuit of epistemic virtues? Or, if my
suggestions for de-centering charity have been sufficiently contextual and flexible, have I done
enough to develop concrete resources for academic philosophy to begin radically reimagining its
relationship to charity? I am somewhat unsettled as I reach the final pages and remain unsure of
whether I accomplished what I set out to do. But perhaps this unsettledness is a generative note
on which to end; indeed, I bring this unsettledness into the next, and final chapter when I ask
what about charity I may have overlooked or dismissed.
CHAPTER FIVE

TURNING BACK TOWARD CHARITY: A REFLECTION ON MY POSITION TOWARD CHARITY

For a past use not to be exhaustive, we have work to do, the work of enabling a tool to be used for other purposes (Sara Ahmed 2019, 222).

In this dissertation, I have characterized charitability in a rather uncharitable way. I have suggested that philosophic charitability, far from being a sacred reading practice or a useful tool for discerning the “essence” of a text or argument, is instead a selectively enforced methodological imperative that performs and repeats exclusionary disciplinary practices. Philosophers’ reliance on charitability produces misreadings, contributes to affective and epistemic injustices, and orients philosophers in ways we often do not recognize or reflect upon. I have, in short, offered many criticisms of charity. But in this chapter, I will problematize the methodological orientation underlying these criticisms, attending to what my critique may have missed thus far.

Ultimately, my aim is not to rescue or reframe charitability; instead, I want to explore what else, in addition to the exclusion, oppression, and methodological mundanity, might emerge from calls for and performances of charitable interpretations. In moments when charity is requested, demanded, or otherwise put to philosophical use, there are more effects than those I have detailed thus far. Charity, I suggested in the previous chapter, is not doomed to repeat a difference-flattening, paternalistic, and imperialistic form of love. Its position as a methodological imperative is not unshakeable. Perhaps charity’s excesses, its drive toward
textual reverence, and its riskiness also have moments of generativity, surprise, or (as Ahmed might put it) queer use. Ahmed explains that “queer use” refers to “how things can be used in ways other than that for which they were intended or by those other than for whom they were intended” (Ahmed 2019, 199). Ahmed is clear throughout her work that past usages are not determinative of future uses (she discusses this in her critique of charitable love, for example [see chapters one and six of The Cultural Politics of Emotion]). But “for a past use not to be exhaustive, we have work to do, the work of enabling a tool to be used for other purposes” (222). In this dissertation, I have characterized charity as a methodological tool. I am interested, in this final chapter (which also serves as my conclusion), in examining the work already being done to use charity as a tool for purposes other than protecting philosophy’s disciplinary status quo.

In chapter 4, I offered methodological tools that aid in de-centering charity. These tools were, in my view, not themselves charitable. By contrast, my questions in this chapter are about retooling charity, though they are not about how to save, recuperate, reframe, or reorient charity. Nor are my questions about the conditions of charity’s correct or proper use. Instead, my central question is about what else emerges from charity’s wreckage. What might be grown or generated, not only in spite of, but also because of, charity’s existence as an interpretative orientation? And what has my not-so-charitable approach to interpretive charity occluded?

I make my turn back toward charity in two parts: I begin by characterizing my critique of charity as a paranoid, or suspicious approach, engaging with Eve Sedgwick’s account of paranoid reading and Rita Felski’s analysis of the role that a hermeneutics of suspicion plays in

---

1 These other purposes might be queer, and they might also be curdled. I discuss it briefly in this chapter, but I hope to develop a fuller account of the connection between queer uses and impure/curdled uses in future work.
literary studies. It has become important to me that I reconsider charity and charitability practices in dialogue with these critiques of suspicion, and their concomitant endorsements of reparative and other non-suspicious hermeneutic practices. My aim in exploring my project’s relation to paranoia or suspicion is to explore and navigate my method’s own limitations and to identify ways in which suspicion and paranoia often rely on, rather than oppose, one another.

Much of my work in this dissertation is concerned with identifying the limitations of charity as a methodological imperative, but an imperative toward suspicion is, as we will see, also risky. In the second part of my chapter, I ask the question I posed above: given that my work takes a suspicious stance toward charitability, what might I have missed? Ultimately, I suggest that my project’s paranoid/suspicious orientation misses two generative aspects of charitability: first, charity has important strategic uses that might aid in closing the charitability gap; and second, because charity is never “pure” (that is, rarely is an interpretative methodology or orientation entirely or solely charitable), practicing or advocating for charitability can often open space for or already include non-charitable practices. My reconsideration of charity allows me to attend to the possibility that charity’s uses can actually work against charity’s own harmful effects. If I leave this possibility unexplored, then I miss charity’s potential as one tool (among many) for transforming philosophy.

**Part 1: Suspecting Charity**

In the first part of this chapter, I explain what I mean when I say that my approach to charity in this work has been suspicious, or paranoid. After defining “suspicion” and “paranoia” I characterize my project as suspicious in two ways: my critique of charity itself is a suspicious/paranoid approach and it also defends a form of suspicious or paranoid interpretation. Lastly, I explain some limitations of suspicious or paranoid reading and interpretation.
Suspicious and Paranoid Interpretation

I begin with a description of suspicious, or paranoid, reading and interpretation. This conversation about suspicion is ongoing in literary theory, queer theory, and cultural studies, and I have found it to be generative for my own thinking about charitability and generosity in philosophy. A hermeneutics of suspicion or paranoia is one that seeks to unmask or reveal the hidden depths of a text, typically to point out hidden violences or harms that the text perpetuates (while also appearing to disguise its participation in these violences). A paranoid reading of a text, in other words, searches for and exposes the ways that a text is intertwined with and reproduces the harmful/oppressive structures and discourses from which it originates. In *The Limits of Critique*, literary studies scholar Rita Felski offers a helpful template of how a suspicious analysis tends to go: “‘You may think you are beholding X,’ declares the critic, ‘but you are really seeing Y’” (Felski 2015, 129). And to those who think that Y has some radical or resistant social or political potential, the suspicious reader searches for ways that Y in fact, actually reinforces the problems with X. They are looking, in other words, for what the text is hiding (85).

Queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s essay, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re so Paranoid, You Probably Think this Essay is About You” is part of a much larger discussion about the role of suspicion and paranoia as methods in the humanities. In

---

2 In this chapter I am working primarily with Sedgwick’s characterization of paranoid reading and with Felski’s closely related analysis of suspicious reading, but these texts are embedded in a much larger conversation about reading, interpretation, affect, and method in which Sedgwick’s work has been central. In addition to Felski’s book (2015), see Muñoz 2009, Love 2010, Weigman 2014, and the “Surface Reading” special issue of *Representations* edited by Best and Marcus (2009). See also Laubender 2019 (52-53) for a thorough but concise overview of responses to Sedgwick’s work on paranoid reading. Heather Love writes that “it is useful to compare Sedgwick’s late turn to reparative reading with a whole range of new methods in the humanities and social sciences that have stepped back from powerful but blunt methods of critique” (Love 2010, 240-241), like suspicious or paranoid reading.
chapter 1 of this dissertation, I characterized interpretative charity as a methodological imperative in academic philosophy. By contrast, in her reflection on dominant methodologies of critical theory and cultural studies throughout the 1990s, Sedgwick characterizes paranoid reading as a methodological imperative.³ She points out that in left-leaning political theory, cultural theory, feminist theory, queer theory, and critical theory, much energy is spent revealing or uncovering hidden violences in texts or in contemporary social structures and practices. Felski expands upon Sedgwick’s claim, contending that a hermeneutics of suspicion is often taken to be the only sufficiently rigorous or politically useful interpretive methodology (Felski 2015, 17).

This suspicious, or paranoid reading, places its faith in the unmasking, revealing, or exposing of problems, injustices, and hidden meanings within texts. Suspiciously oriented scholarship seeks to answer the question, “is X true and how can we know?” instead of considering what Sedgwick calls the performativity of knowledge. What, Sedgwick asks, does “pursuing, having, receiving, and exposing knowledge of X do?” (Sedgwick 2003, 124). To return to my own example from chapter 2, we might ask: what does having knowledge of Aristotle’s sexism do for readers of the Nicomachean Ethics? What have we learned from revealing this sexism that we did not already know, or could not have already guessed?

Sedgwick is clear that a paranoid analysis is often justified: many forces are, in fact, out to get us, particularly when we exist on the social and political margins. And a paranoid

---

³ In the “This Project as a Suspiciously Positioned Defense of Suspicion” section below, I explore the relationship between charitableness as methodological imperative and suspicion as methodological imperative.

⁴ “Paranoid reading” is sometimes also described as “symptomatic reading.” Robyn Weigman writes that “whether generated through Marxist or psychoanalytic traditions, symptomatic reading is taken to confer epistemological authority on the analytic work of exposure, honing left critical conceptions of power as repressive, mystifying, and occluding” (Weigman 2014, 6).
position/orientation toward a claim like Aristotle’s is, in my view, part of what allowed feminist philosophy to emerge as an intellectual orientation and tradition.

Still, according to Sedgwick, it is too-often assumed that a hermeneutics of suspicion is required of a productive analysis or social critique, particularly if one is theorizing about oppression and/or systems of power. Sedgwick frames this method as paranoid, but Felski finds the language of suspicion to be less pathologizing and thus more useful. This discussion of suspicion and paranoia is informed by many philosophical methods and thinkers, but as I say above, it is largely circulating in literary studies, cultural studies, and queer theory. Indeed, there is relatively little direct engagement with Paul Ricoeur’s articulation of the hermeneutics of suspicion or with philosophical hermeneutics more broadly (Sedgwick 2003, 124-125; Felski 2015, 21) Sedgwick reminds her reader that although the language of suspicion comes from his work, contemporary scholarship that takes a suspicious position is practicing a different form of suspicion than Ricoeur describes:

Ricoeur introduced the category of the hermeneutics of suspicion to describe the position of Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and their intellectual offspring in a context that also included such alternative disciplinary hermeneutics as the philological and theological “hermeneutics of recovery of meaning.” His intent in offering the former of these formulations was descriptive and taxonomic rather than imperative. (Sedgwick 2003, 124-125)

Sedgwick explains that in *Freud and Philosophy*, Ricoeur was offering a descriptive account of several different hermeneutical methods and exploring their relation to one another. For Ricoeur, interpretation can be a “recollection of meaning” (Ricoeur 1970, 28), in which interpreters analyze objects but do not question or problematize the conditions upon which the objects’ appearance to us depends. This approach implies “the belief that language, which bears symbols, is not so much spoken by men as spoken to men, that men are born into language, into the light
of the logos ‘who enlightens every man who comes into the world’” (30). A hermeneutics of recovery of meaning, in short, aims to discover meaning that is already there within a text or an object of interpretation. By contrast, a hermeneutics of suspicion “is not an explication of the object, but a tearing off of masks, an interpretation that reduces disguises” (30). Language is not taken as given and meaning is not revealed or recovered; instead, language and meaning are constructed by often-unconscious processes and hidden structures that must be revealed and deciphered. A hermeneutics of suspicion holds that nothing means what it first appears to, and that what a text says is not what it means. Felski explains that “Ricoeur distinguishes between…a reading that demystifies and a reading that restores” (Felski 2015, 107). This hermeneutics of recollection and the hermeneutics of suspicion are two schools or methods of interpretation for which, Ricoeur explains, a general theory of interpretation would need to account (32).

Ricoeur contrasts recovery and suspicion, but he does not advance one method over the other. In Sedgwick’s view, this has shifted in the decades since Ricoeur developed the distinction between recovery and suspicion: “to apply a hermeneutics of suspicion is, I believe, widely understood as a mandatory injunction rather than a possibility among other possibilities” (Sedgwick 2003, 125). As paranoid reading gained traction across the humanities, anything other than a paranoid analysis was taken to be naïve, utopian, or complacent (125-126). Paranoia, according to Sedgwick, is an imperative and a “uniquely sanctioned methodology” (126; emphasis in original), particularly in queer theory: the thinking became that if one does not take a paranoid stance toward a text, one is likely to miss the ways in which that text enacts and endorses homophobia.
This Project as a Suspiciously Positioned Defense of Suspicion

Importantly, Sedgwick’s description of paranoid reading (and, as we will see later in this chapter, Felski’s articulation of suspicious reading’s limits) cannot be mapped neatly onto conversations about (un)charitability in philosophy. Being accused of being uncharitable might simultaneously be an accusation of paranoia or suspicion, but this is not always the case. And the intellectual history/genealogy of suspicion and paranoia overlap but do not coincide with the intellectual history/genealogy of charitability. There are, however, moments in Sedgwick’s essay and in Felski’s book that resonate with many of the charitability practices I have analyzed in chapters 1-4. For example, Felski suggests that rather than approaching theoretical projects as critical or suspicious plumbing of textual depths for what has been stubbornly hiding (that is, approaching tests using a hermeneutics of suspicion), interpreters can take what she calls a “postcritical” approach. The postcritical approach aims to “strengthen rather than diminish its object—less in a spirit of reverence than in one of generosity and unabashed curiosity” (Felski 2015, 182). Here, Felski ties intellectual curiosity to generosity, echoing Sedgwick’s claim that suspicion or paranoia relies on finding what was already presumed to be present in a text, rather than making space for experiencing surprise at what one did not expect (Sedgwick 2003, 130).

Sedgwick suggests that while paranoia and suspicion have vital roles to play in critical inquiry, a reparative position toward texts (informed by Melanie Klein’s psychoanalytic account of the term [128])5 is a promising complement to paranoia. Sedgwick finds the language of positions useful because she is analyzing paranoia and reparation as “critical practices, not as

---

5 According to The New Dictionary of Kleinian Thought, reparation “involves facing loss and damage and making efforts to repair and restore objects internally and usually externally as well” (Bott et al. 2011, 92). Reparation is a creative and imaginative activity that allows the one making reparation to process their own feelings of loss and guilt while retaining a sense of hope (93). Klein’s work has been taken up in both clinical and critical/theoretical contexts (see Laubender 2019 for an analysis of how these uses can be considered together).
theoretical ideologies (and certainly not as stable personality types of critics), but as changing and heterogenous relational stances” (128; emphasis in original). For Sedgwick, there is no paranoid or reparative reader; instead, there are paranoid and reparative reading positions and practices. She also explains that

the reparative reading position undertakes a different range of affects, ambitions, and risks [than the paranoid position]. What we can best learn from such practices are, perhaps, the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them. (150-151)

Although I am not taking a Kleinian approach to affect or interpretation, I take Sedgwick’s suggestions here to be exciting: there are so many ways to position ourselves toward texts and other objects that were not made to facilitate our flourishing. “Suspiciously” is only one of these ways. And “charitably,” I might add, is another.

In the second part of this chapter, I return to some of the passages that appear to advocate for a form of charitability. For now though, I think with Sedgwick and Felski about the role of suspicion in my own work. Although I am tempted to offer a skeptical response to claims that suspicion should be met with generosity, I want to resist this urge (for now) and instead, tarry with the possibility that charity or generosity can open, rather than close, space for resisting hermeneutic, epistemic, and affective oppression. To do this, I am going to suspend my suspicions about charity and instead think more about my own project’s methodological orientation (or position, to adopt Sedgwick’s language). I see my project as having two sets of connections to paranoia and suspicion. First, my own attitude toward charitability is one of suspicion; that is, I take a suspicious position toward charity, and this has important implications
for the conclusions I draw. I have sought to reveal epistemic, affective, and hermeneutic harms and shortcomings of a dominant philosophical method, arguing that charity has faded into a background methodological requirement and that it ought to be uncovered and problematized. I have also searched for underlying, structural reasons to explain charity’s dominance as a philosophic method, positing a disciplinary and an individual (though often unconscious) commitment to purism as one possibility.

I have also placed a certain amount of faith in exposing charity as doing more harm than its proponents acknowledge. Though I have tried to make clear that reflecting on charity’s risks and adjusting our own individual charitability practices will not be sufficient to remedy the charitability gap, I have spent the bulk of my dissertation cataloguing the many ways in which charity’s seeming benevolence hides a less-than-generous methodological commitment to the philosophical status quo (when I could have abandoned charity from the very beginning!). My tendency has been to shy away from the possibility that there is anything about charity that ought to be retained—indeed, in this chapter’s introduction I resist the framing of rescuing or saving charity in favor of exploring the ways in which charity is connected to non-charitable methods and positions. I have also suggested that by setting aside charity—or at the very least, suspending our belief that charity is necessary for a generative interpretation—space can be made for interpretative affects and orientations that are not charitable, but are doing justice to texts and to philosophical communities.

---

6 And of course, we might characterize concerns about paranoia or suspicion as themselves paranoid or suspicious! (Felski 2015, 9).

7 There is also something paranoid about the writing of an entire chapter in which I anticipate questions that my readers might have about my less-than-charitable treatment of interpretative charity!
My project’s connection to a hermeneutics of suspicion continues in an additional way: not only have I been suspicious in my approach to charity; I have also advocated for a suspicious or paranoid stance toward canonical texts in philosophy. To put it another way, this is a suspicious project that puts forward a defense of suspicion as hermeneutic method. I have suggested that the discipline of philosophy has important lessons to learn from suspicion and its associated affective, political, and interpretative commitments. Philosophy is regularly described as a combative field in which the most important aim is “winning” an argument by beating one’s interlocutors at their own game, but this characterization is only part of the picture: being combative (or uncharitable in some other way) as a marginalized philosopher or toward a dominant philosopher is too-often met with the call for charity.

It might be tempting to characterize suspicion as the opposite of, or the alternative to, charitability, but I want to resist making this move. If suspicion and charity are each positions we can take toward objects of analysis, or if they are methodological tools, then they are better-understood as serving different purposes than as opposites. Furthermore, how we characterize the relationship between suspicion and charity will depend on what we mean when we refer to each. For example, if by “charity,” we mean something like Weinsheimer’s hermeneutic a priori (see chapters 1 and 4 for further discussion), then the very possibility of suspicion relies on an initially charitable interpretation. By contrast, Sedgwick and Felski each treat paranoia/suspicion as affective and epistemological positions.

---

8 In the rest of this chapter, when I use the phrase “hermeneutics of suspicion,” I am referring to Felski and Sedgwick’s characterization of the method, rather than to Ricoeur’s original framing (Felski points out that Ricoeur only used the phrase “hermeneutics of suspicion” in his later autobiographical reflections, not in *Freud and Philosophy* itself [Felski 2015, 31]. Ricoeur does, however, name “the school of suspicion” in *Freud and Philosophy* [Ricoeur 1970, 32]).
Literary studies does not seem to have the same language or history around the notion of charitability that philosophy does, so although I see some statements that appear to me as charitable moves or practices, I do not want to import this language without doing more reading in that field. I also do not think that all non-charitable interpreters are practicing a hermeneutics of suspicion. For example, Sara Ahmed withholds interpretative charity from white male authors in *Living a Feminist Life*, but she is not critiquing them or treating their work with suspicion; she is setting it aside.

Like Sedgwick, I am compelled by considering suspicion as one among many possible hermeneutic orientations or positions. In her essay, Sedgwick asks, “how are we to understand paranoia in such a way as to situate it as one kind of epistemological practice among other, alternative ones?” (Sedgwick 128). In this dissertation, I have worked to position charity as also one among many possible hermeneutic orientations that is too-often framed as the primary hermeneutic orientation. Still, setting charitability and suspicion in opposition does not capture their interaction with one another. Sometimes, one’s suspicious position toward a text may be what allows them to later offer a charitable interpretation of it; that is, charitability is sometimes made possible by one’s initial suspicion. Or sometimes suspicion and charitability may operate concurrently. Perhaps a project of revealing hidden textual depths is rooted in and fueled by a charitable position toward the text’s political possibilities. As I have framed charity, it is roughly accurate to claim that suspicion and charity are epistemological practices or

---

9 I am thinking of Felski’s assertion (also quoted above) that postcritical reading seeks to “strengthen rather than diminish its object—less in a spirit of reverence than in one of generosity and unabashed curiosity” (182).

10 I explore the interaction between charity and suspicion in Part 2 of this chapter.
methodological tools that stand in contrast with one another, but that often interact with and rely upon one another.

Some Limitations of Suspicion

Suspicion, as any method, is limited. Or as Felski suggests, it can do some things well and some things poorly or not at all (Felski 2015, 8). In my project, I have developed an account of what charity does poorly, or not at all. Working on similar sets of metatheoretical issues but asking quite different questions about them than I do in this dissertation, Sedgwick and Felski identify several features of suspicious reading (and its broad uptake as a critical method) that limit its usefulness. First, reading with suspicion can become tautological; that is, “it can’t help or can’t stop or can’t do anything other than prove the very same assumptions with which it began,” (135). When we assume that we will find in the text some reason to justify our suspicion, we then go searching for something to justify our position. And, predictably, we find it. As a result, a paranoid analysis “may be experienced by the practitioner as a triumphant advance toward truth and vindication” (135) when it is in fact merely a confirmation of what they assumed to be the case.

Second, paranoid or suspicious reading tends to reproduce itself as method. Sedgwick points out that “each unanticipated disaster seems to demonstrate more conclusively that, guess what, you can never be paranoid enough” (Sedgwick 2003, 142; emphasis in original). Failing to notice some hidden element of the text produces in the interpreter a sense that next time, she must be even more vigilant. This reproduction is part of how paranoia, in Sedgwick’s view, came “to seem entirely coextensive with critical theoretical inquiry rather than being viewed as one

---

11 Sedgwick offers a similar view: “paranoia knows some things well and others poorly” (Sedgwick 2003, 130).
kind of cognitive/affective theoretical practice among other, alternative kinds” (Sedgwick 2003, 126).

Third, suspicious or paranoid reading places its faith in a particular form of exposure. I describe this above as a feature of suspicion, but it is also a limitation of the method. A hermeneutics of suspicion assumes that if one can identify, diagnose, and reveal a problem that no one else has adequately recognized, then they have made meaningful progress toward addressing that problem. Indeed, we might say that a hermeneutics of suspicion or paranoia is quite charitable in its estimation of the power of revelation. As Sedgwick puts it, “it’s strange that a hermeneutics of suspicion would appear so trusting about the effects of exposure” (138-139).

Felski reminds her readers not only that exposure’s effects are far from guaranteed, but also that suspicion of what appears given is not itself a political orientation: one can be suspicious about, say, vaccine efficacy or climate change—and be responsible (to varying degrees) for a great deal of harm or suffering—just as one can be suspicious of laws and policies that uphold forms of classist, racist, and patriarchal domination. Suspicion is not, according to

---

12 Cynthia Townley’s account of epistemophilia is perhaps instructive here. She characterizes epistemophilia as “the love of knowledge to the point of myopia” (Townley 2006, 37). Townley is interested in the damages that result from epistemophiliac models of epistemic responsibility that devalue or seek to eliminate ignorance (51). I wonder whether a myopic focus on knowledge acquisition is tied to a hermeneutics of suspicion or paranoia: a suspicious reader seeks to develop and disseminate knowledge without considering whether a lack of knowledge about X was really the problem in the first place, or accounting for ways in which acquiring and disseminating this knowledge can be harmful.

13 Another problem with suspicious interpretation (though this problem is not central to my argument here): it assumes that violence is hidden when it is in fact, often readily visible or perceptible: “the force of any interpretive project of unveiling hidden violence would seem to depend on a cultural context, like the one assumed in Foucault’s early works, in which violence would be deprecated and hence hidden in the first place” (Sedgwick 2003, 140; emphasis in original). My much-annotated copy of Sedgwick’s essay has color-coded notes about how much truer Sedgwick’s claim feels with each re-read.
Felski, an ethics or a politics, though suspiciously oriented academics offer narratives that seem to claim it as both (Felski 2015, 86). Suspicion is a position and a method, according to Sedgwick. I have also come to think of suspicion as an interpretative or philosophical tool that is sometimes well-suited to a task and sometimes not.

To summarize the limits of suspicion: for Sedgwick and for Felski, we lose other critical and affective interpretive practices and strategies when we see paranoid inquiry as our only viable critical option. A paranoid reading is one rooted in the desire not to be caught off-guard or surprised by what one finds in a text—one must always already know about the hidden violences, problems, or inconsistencies therein (Sedgwick 2003, 130). Paranoia even becomes tautological when the reader cannot do anything besides prove that the assumptions they began with are vindicated by the text (135). This can be a problem because it becomes difficult to make any kind of critical headway. With its faith in the power of exposure and its rejection of other reading strategies that focus on positive affective modes like joy, paranoid reading can get us stuck (131, 135).

It may seem odd for me to claim that suspicion/paranoia and charitability are both methodological imperatives since they seem so opposed to one another. One simple enough response is that Felski and Sedgwick are writing in a different discipline than I am.14 Perhaps suspicion is even more dominant in English/literary studies than it is in philosophy. I tend to think though, that since paranoia/suspicion and charitability cannot be teased apart so neatly, their statuses as methodological imperatives can co-exist. Indeed, the drawing of a neat

---

14 I was particularly struck by this disciplinary difference when Felski mentioned as an aside, “that specific work may articulate points of view that deserve to be challenged is uncontroversial” (Felski 2015, 115). In my experience as a philosopher, this “uncontroversial” move is fairly regularly challenged if the challenge is perceived as uncharitable!
distinction between a suspicious position, method, or epistemological framework and a charitable position, method, or epistemological framework seems to require a logic or politics of purity. Instead, I want to think about charity and suspicion together.

Though they do not use the language of charity, Sedgwick and Felski each draw a connection between suspicion and love: Sedgwick reminds her reader that “it is sometimes the most paranoid-tending people who are able to, and need to, develop and disseminate the richest reparative practices” (Sedgwick 2003, 150). And Felski contends that critical reason or suspicion “is often infused with moments of enchantment, and suspicion turns out to be not so very far removed from love” (Felski 2015, 113). This love, as I discuss in the previous chapter, might not be a charitable one. But here we already see ways in which a suspicious orientation or position often requires or is enhanced by non-suspicious positions of various kinds (for Sedgwick, a reparative position and for Felski, a postcritical one).

Charity and suspicion are contrasting interpretative orientations in many respects, but both misread the text in some way: charity by ignoring, bracketing, or covering over and suspicion by selectively focusing and unmasking/revealing. Felski, Sedgwick, and others working in English, cultural studies, and queer theory have focused on the limitations of taking a suspicious position. I am interested in the political, epistemological, affective, and interpretive limitations of taking a charitable position or orientation toward texts, thinkers, and interlocutors. Although academics have identified several limitations of suspicion, there has been much less attention paid to identifying problems with charity. Every interpretative orientation, way of reading, and position that one takes toward the text is limited. All readings, then, are unfinished.

---

15 I am interested, in future work, in investigating which kinds of love are referenced here. Are people writing in favor of non-suspicious reading practices advancing a notion of charitable love, critical love, or something else?
and are to some degree misreadings. It should not be surprising that charity produces misreadings of various kinds (many of which I have explored in this dissertation), or that suspicion does the same. If paranoia or suspicion is committed to revealing something about a text, then charity, it seems to me, is a covering up or over that often also has exclusionary effects.\(^\text{16}\)

My concern with charity is not that so much that it is limited, but that philosophers act as though it is not. Furthermore, we need not think charity and suspicion in strict opposition and then choose one approach over the other: sometimes charitability positions us to offer a generative and suspicious critique, and sometimes our initial suspicion leads us to moments of charitability. Instead of thinking about suspicion as an alternative to charity (as I did throughout much of my thinking about charity), we can instead acknowledge that they are inextricable from one another.\(^\text{17}\) Sedgwick and Felski do point out the ways that suspicious reading folds into what we in philosophy might call a charitable reading, but they also talk about suspicion as one among many (presumably separate or separable) epistemological, affective, or interpretative positions. This suggests to me that there is much to be gained not only by identifying differences between the charity and suspicion, but also by thinking them together.\(^\text{18}\)

**Part 2: Reexamining Charity’s Uses**

Given the limitations of suspicion that I summarize in the previous section, I want to ask: what are some risks of performing a suspicion-infused analysis of philosophic charitability? By

---

16 I thank Abram Capone for helping me frame the contrast between charity and suspicion in this way.

17 I explore some connections between charity and suspicion in the second part of this chapter.

18 And because they are motivated by concerns that suspicion is over-emphasized (and its limitations under-emphasized or ignored), Sedgwick and Felski ultimately read (to me) as advocating a form of charitability instead of a form of paranoia or suspicion.
problematizing charity, I have attempted to make more room for paranoid or suspicious reading in philosophy, limited though this suspicion is. By bracketing charity, we are, in my view, better-equipped to grapple with racism, sexism, exclusion, etc. in the canon and in our discipline. But we also, as Sedgwick points out, risk getting stuck. What, after all, hangs on revealing or affirming the existence of Aristotle’s sexism? What do we know in this moment of revelation that we did not already? I talked at length in part one of this chapter about the limits of a suspicious position, and how it risks trapping us in an “aha!” moment of exposure followed by nothing else particularly generative.

Why, Sedgwick wonders, do we take paranoia to be important or useful? What do we, as academics, take our task to be, and to whom are we revealing violences or insidious structural problems? Sedgwick began her work on paranoid reading in the late 1990s (Wiegman 2015, 8-9) and even then, she wondered which violences are actually in need of revelation. Aren’t many social harms in fact, quite visible, or apparent? Aren’t some revelations of violence re-traumatizing to already-marginalized communities, such that one’s paranoia or suspicion ought to be paired with a deep sensitivity and commitment to careful framing of revelations or unmaskings? To whom are these revelations even a surprise? As I read and re-read this essay in 2018, then again in 2019, 2020, and 2021, I was struck over and over again (and the feeling grew stronger with each subsequent reading) by Sedgwick’s assertion: many violences are not in need of unmasking. They are streaming across our news feeds; we walk past them every day; we experience them day in and day out.19

---

19 It is also important to consider who makes visible which forms of violence. In Precarious Life, Judith Butler points out that in its post-9/11 invasion of Iraq, the U.S. government “advertised its military feats as an overwhelming visual phenomenon” (Butler 2004, 148). The televised images “produce an aesthetic dimension to war” but they also “exploit and instrumentalize the visual aesthetics as part of a war strategy itself” (148). Which
With Sedgwick’s concerns about suspicion in mind, I will revisit charity in the remainder of this chapter. I explore two elements of charitability that my critique has not yet, because of its general position of suspicion, accounted for: first, charity has important strategic uses for those of us who wish to close the charitability gap and make ourselves intelligible to those who might otherwise dismiss our work. And second, charity is always, as Shotwell or Lugones might put it, impure; that is, moments of charitability are bound up with non-charitable interpretative tools, methods, and orientations (including, but not limited to, suspicion).

Charity as Strategy

In my moments of greatest frustration with the pervasiveness of charity and with the ways it seems to pull me in philosophical directions I’d rather not turn, I also remember times when, as a feminist philosopher, I have benefitted from using the call for charity as a tool for encouraging my audience to take my work and the work of my colleagues seriously. Is the dismissal of charity, then, a dismissal of a tool that many feminists need? Even as we recognize the risks of calling for charity, perhaps there are cases when we ought to deploy it nonetheless. In the previous chapter, I make the case for calls for charity that are informed by the pursuit of epistemic virtues and vices. Recall Medina’s suggestion that “as a rule of thumb, our hermeneutical efforts and interpretative charity should be proportional to the degree of hermeneutical marginalization experienced by the subjects in question” (Medina 2013, 110). Although I have offered my own, slightly different, rule of thumb, I often find myself defending or advocating for charitable or generous reading practices when the criticisms lodged at a text strike me as rooted in sexist or racist skepticism, or if a criticism seems to mischaracterize the lives might have come to matter if, rather than advertising the U.S. acts of war, media outlets had made visible the war’s effects on Iraqi citizens, and on those whose deaths have been framed as ungrievable (149-151)?
view in ways that marginalize already-marginalized philosophical methods.\textsuperscript{20} My thinking goes something like, \textit{well, if charity isn’t going anywhere any time soon, I am not giving it up. I will demand charity if it means making the charitability gap just a bit smaller.}

Although I cannot know whether it was intended as strategic, I was interested to see that in the preface to \textit{Subjects of Desire}, Butler calls for something like charity from their reader. Explaining in the second edition that the book is largely comprised of their dissertation and that their thinking and writing have developed a lot since then, Butler says, “Although at the time of this writing I am not yet ancient, the book reads to me—to the extent that I can read it—as my juvenilia, which means that I ask the reader to approach it with abundant forgiveness and reserve” (Butler 1998, viii). Here, Butler makes a charity move in order to contextualize their writing and to explain that the book would look quite different had they published it at a different time, or continued work on Hegel (a central figure in \textit{Subjects of Desire}). This request for forgiveness from the reader does not, in my view, demand a particular affective or epistemological position. Instead, it offers an explanation for why some of the writing may be confusing, or omit sources or topics that have become important in Hegel scholarship.

There are many additional reasons that or context in which one might call for or practice charitability strategically: perhaps gaining uptake when giving a paper at a conference requires one to demonstrate charity in a particular way. Or perhaps requesting charity helps encourage students to be patient with a text that feels too complex, or that reads to them as unnecessarily vague or technical. Although I have used various charitability practices in my own life and work,

\textsuperscript{20} For example, I often describe Martha Nussbaum’s essay critiquing Judith Butler and calling their work “ponderous and obscure” (Nussbaum 1999) as uncharitable, (though my assessment of Nussbaum’s essay as uncharitable seems itself a bit \textit{too} charitable!).
I have, until now, not attended in this dissertation to the ways in which charity might be an important tool or strategy for marginalized philosophers and philosophies to retain. Perhaps in order to get a clearer sense of charity’s problems, I have, as Ahmed does in her book on happiness, overemphasized the harms and risks of my object of analysis (Ahmed 2010, 20). This overemphasis is perhaps a strength of suspicious or paranoid analysis: Sedgwick points out that suspicion’s tautological structure can be important because “an insistence that everything means one thing somehow permits a sharpened sense of all the ways there are of meaning it” (Sedgwick 2003, 136). I have insisted that charity’s uses produce as many questions and problems as they do insights, and this insistence has allowed me to explore charity’s connections to pedagogy, epistemic injustice, hermeneutics, and purism. Still, I find myself, even after my years of suspicion toward charity, unwilling to dismiss uses of charity that aim to close the charitability gap, or make space for philosophy that works against the grain of the discipline’s methods, standards, and structures.

Charity and Purity Revisited

In my quest to reveal charity’s hidden risks and violences, I have also left aside some important considerations related to purity politics. By suspending some of my suspicions about charity in this chapter, I am better-able to explore the ways in which moments of charity are not pure; that is, they are not charity “all the way down.” I explain in chapter three that to refuse charitability risks participating in Shotwellian purity politics, or using what Lugones calls a logic of purity. I am far more concerned with the purity politics that motivates the holding on to charity than I am with the purism that might motivate a refusal to offer charity, because the former often resists confronting structural injustices and harms within academic philosophy. But to say that we should never perform or call for any kind of charitable interpretation because it
can reproduce epistemic and affective harms would, I suspect, commit me to the very purity politics of which I am critical in chapter 3.

Shotwell, as I described in more detail in chapter 3, begins from the assumption that we (and, I would add, the texts we read) are always already implicated in a mess that we cannot solve with our individual efforts (that we cannot solve at all, in fact). These “messes” arise not only from the systemic injustices of the social world—they are also the conditions upon which these social systems, and indeed, our very existence, depend. A Shotwellian approach to the “mess” of academic philosophy, I suggested, can help explain why we might not want to entirely reject, or entirely embrace, a charitable approach to philosophy. Either one would be a purity move—assuming that a text can be made to stand outside of its racism or sexism, or assuming that because it cannot, it must be of no use to us. The purity-driven rejection of charitability seems also to assume that flawed texts have nothing to say to us, or that the only way to recover from the harms they perpetuate is to leave them behind entirely. They seem also to view charity as a method or a position that is self-contained and neatly separable from other methods and critical tasks—this is an assumption that, to use Lugones’ framing, relies on a logic of purity and split/separation. These assumptions neglect the wide array of rich literature that works with—by simultaneously working against—“problematic” texts in various generative ways.

To close this dissertation, I want to offer an additional point about charity and purity: to characterize an interpretation or a critique as “charitable” may sometimes elide the ways in which that interpretation is also suspicious, reparative, stealing something, leaving something

---

21Interestingly, even when interpreters do not take purist approaches to problematic texts, we often risk being heard as doing so. I describe in chapter 4 that when I give talks about my critique of interpretive charity, I often receive questions that suggest my audience believes that I advocate abandoning or refusing to read or teach all problematic texts (even though I do not believe this and I do not say it).
aside, and so on. Sometimes, what looks like a charity move is actually something a bit more complicated. We should not take a purist view of charity, but I also want to suggest that charity itself is impure or curdled (or that it can be).

Felski emphasizes the connections between suspicious reading and what appears to me to be a form of charitability, reminding her reader that, “even the most severe of symptomatic critics is capable of offering generous gestures toward the work she is analyzing” (Felski 2015, 27). Indeed, the suspicious reader is typically paying very careful attention to the text of which she is suspicious. This on its own can perhaps be considered an act of hermeneutic generosity. Felski wonders if, “perhaps we can gain a better handle on suspicious reading by treating it with a degree of generosity, bestowing upon it some of the sympathy it is inclined to withhold from others” (107). I am somewhat sympathetic to her suggestion here, and I am particularly interested in the ways that charitability and suspicion exist in relation to one another. While suspicion might not always require charitability and charity might not always require suspicion, moments of charity are often produced (and sometimes necessitated) by moments of suspicion and vice versa. There is perhaps a more generative relationship between suspicion and charity (or generosity) than I have recognized.

Returning one final time to the example from chapter 2, I want to suggest that perhaps even here, charity and suspicion are already interacting: the student has already demonstrated, in my view, a form of generosity by reading Aristotle carefully enough to get angry at him (and at

---

22 I do worry that the commitment to charity in philosophy—an anxious desire to retain charity as a methodological and interpretive tool—is often rooted in its own sort of purity politics. Utilized uncritically or uncarefully, interpretive charity makes “purity moves” that falsely separate texts from their historical contexts and seek to pry apart, for instance, authors’ racism from what is then framed as their “real” philosophy (see Shotwell 2010, 122). And we need to take care not to draw false equivalences between purist defenses of charity and purist refusals of charity. See chapter 4 for more discussion of the important differences between how purity operates in calls for and refusals of charitability.
the class in which she is made to give Aristotle this attention). To get mad is perhaps already to perform a generous gesture: much interpretative work and affective labor have been poured into an assigned course reading. I also remember the first moment that I was asked whether I ought to read an author’s blasé claim about sexual harassment more charitably. I laughed and said no, but I also developed a conference paper (and now, of course, a dissertation) attending carefully to the ways that charity functions problematically in interpretation. I have to think, now, that this attention to charity was not solely suspicious. It required careful tracing of a concept’s past uses and its contemporary invocations. It required my attention to the many ways we navigate questions of charitability in philosophy. So on the one hand, charity and suspicion can coexist in a single interpretation: in my critique of charity, I am always also wondering if there is something about it that I can salvage. And in our student’s angry response to Aristotle, we see focused attention and a sharply honed sense of what is and is not philosophically relevant (and why). And even if charity and suspicion do not coexist exactly, maybe this suspicion will be what allows the student to offer charity elsewhere, to enter into feminist scholarship and activism, or to question conventional senses of just how much sexist, misogynistic bullshit she is expected to tolerate from the world.

In addition to thinking about how charity and suspicion can coexist within what appears to be only one interpretative move, we can also think about how charity and suspicion interact within an entire community of readers. It can be pedagogically generative, for instance, to have or cultivate a community of readers who take different positions toward a text, or who use
Imagine a class discussion about Aristotle in which some participants are fascinated by ancient Greek philosophy, some are deeply suspicious of it, and some are deeply confused by it. An interpretative community benefits from all kinds of positions, be they paranoid, suspicious, or something else altogether. On its own, the claim that interpretation is improved when interpreters approach a text from differing perspectives or positions is a bit banal. I do want to highlight, though, that it is not necessarily the presence of generosity that will make the class go well, or help us learn the most. It is the combination of generosity, suspicion, confusion, irritation, joy, curiosity, and more.

Charity can often feel like it is the only interpretative orientation by which philosophers can make progress or demonstrate expertise. Or if one manages to escape the flattening force of charitability, one is then offered a false choice between charity and suspicion. We can perhaps turn to impurely charitable spaces to see how practices of charitability can be important for those of us who are interested in reading and doing philosophy against the grain. A curdled or impure charitability is one in which charitable reading is called for and practiced, but not merely for the sake of protecting the canon or doing philosophy “properly.” And charitability is not required of interpreters; instead it is offered as one way into a text among many. In impurely charitable spaces, we are charitable not for the author or the text’s sake but for the sake of developing and caring for the community already reading. We are charitable, then, not because we are avoiding suspicion or because we have been taught that this is the correct way to do philosophy, but because our suspicions can be further-honed by our charitability, or vice versa. One’s reason for

23 I was thinking about this interaction between suspicious and generous reading during the first meeting of a seminar on Judith Butler’s work; I thank Eyo Ewara for pointing out that a course on Butler is enriched when it is comprised of those who love Butler’s work and those who do not love it, or who are skeptical of its methods.
practicing charitable interpretation, in other words, is different from the usual reasons given in favor of charitability, and the effects of charitability are related to a particular intellectual community rather than a universalized “best practice” of interpretation. In an impurely charitable interpretative practice, charity is offered and requested, but not put forth as the central method for philosophic inquiry. Instead, readers engage with a text in a way or ways that allow them to best make use of it. Charitability and suspicion, then, go hand-in-hand, and their uses emerge in response to a text rather than being assumed prior to engaging with it.

Sedgwick contends that a paranoid position toward a text is one that dooms the interpreter to only find what she already knows or assumes to be present in the text. She also suggests that the results of paranoid unmasking are not as politically useful as we might think or hope. These revelations do not do anything on their own, and they are not guaranteed to motivate action or social change. As Felski puts it when she engages with Sedgwick’s work on paranoid reading, paranoia, “pivots on a sense of prideful self-vindication, a trust in the inherent merits of critical exposure” (Felski 2015, 112). Does a rejection of charity reduce us to simply unmasking hidden violences that were never really all that hidden?

I wonder, though, whether the refusal to be charitable (or the suspicious attitude toward both interpretative charity and toward the texts we are asked to read charitably) are, in fact, having important effects. While charity does have some generative potential that a suspicion-driven critique may not be able to capture, there is also something about philosophic charitability that analyses of paranoid or suspicious reading fail, in my view, to capture: in moments of revealing or unmasking, sometimes we do not know anything new, but we are doing or performing something differently. And this matters. The question of whether Aristotle held sexist views, or whether these views affected his philosophizing, is not one whose answer should
surprise us. But the refusal to settle for reading him charitably, or to ask students and colleagues in our discipline to do the same, has important implications for how we read, the affects and energies we bring to us as we do philosophy, and for who is likely to feel welcome in the discipline.

Funnily enough, in the completion of my own uncharitable analysis of charitability, I have come to a clearer understanding of what it might mean to be impurely charitable. I came “backwards” (perhaps queerly) to an understanding of some of charitability’s importance and usefulness. It was only through my suspicion and my determination to discover and unmask charity’s problems that I was able to appreciate some of the ways that charitable or generous reading can also make academic philosophy livable for those on its margins. To acknowledge and appreciate impurely charitable practices is not to re-center charity as a foundational or default interpretative methodology. It is instead an acknowledgement that 1. Sometimes charity can be crucial not only for interpretation, but for surviving a discipline that too-often fails to make space for you and 2. Charity itself is infused with other-than charitable tools, methods, and positions. When we practice forms of charity in particular contexts and for particular reasons, we are sometimes already doing the work of de-centering it.

**Queer, Impure Charity**

In this chapter, I have reflected upon my own methodological commitments: what, I asked, has my “blunt tool” of de-centering charity been unable to account for? I have suggested that my project takes a suspicious position toward charity; that is, my project is a critical one that seeks to unmask and reveal charity’s risks and its imbrication with the disciplinary status quo. This suspicion about charity has allowed me to see many of the ways that charity can be harmful. And it has helped me see how this harmfulness is repeated under the guise of philosophical rigor
and best practices in argumentation, interpretation, and pedagogy. But although my commitment to this process of unmasking has allowed me to follow charity around and to linger with its harms, it has also left questions of strategy and impurity underexplored. In this chapter I have tried to show some ways in which suspending my own suspicion can paint a fuller picture of how charity functions.

There is so much more to say about impure or curdled charitability practices and about charity’s connection to suspicion. I leave it here for now, with my eye toward developing this analysis further in future work. To conclude, I return to Ahmed’s account of queer use. Perhaps this queer use is a helpful way to characterize impurely charitable practices. In her conclusion to What’s the Use? (with which I began this chapter) Ahmed explains that she has “been using queer use to refer to how things can be used in ways other than those for which they were intended or by those other than for whom they were intended” (199; emphasis in original). Charity practices can be reworked, applied in new ways, or offered to and withheld from different texts. Although some charity moves are, in my view, clearly problematic and exclusionary and others are useful only insofar as they offer one access to “philosophical legitimacy,” still others may allow philosophers to relate in new ways to texts that, as Sedgwick puts it, would not ordinarily sustain us (Sedgwick 2003, 151).
BIBLIOGRAPHY


*Feminist Interpretations of Gadamer*, edited by Lorraine Code, essay translated by 
University Press.

Oxford University Press.

Friedman, Lawrence J. and Mark K. McGarvie, editors. 2003. *Charity, Philanthropy, and 

Press.

Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, edited and translated by Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard 


Paradigm Press.


Modern Philosophy*, edited by Brice R. Wachterhauser, translated by Fred Dallmayr and 


Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals*. New York: W.W. Norton & 
Company.


Tarantino, Giancarlo. *Forthcoming.* “What are Hermeneutic Character Virtues and Vices? Four Ambiguous Tendencies in Gadamer’s Hermeneutic Retrieval of *Phrōnesis.*” Forthcoming in *Epoche.*


VITA

Dr. Claire Lockard is originally from Louisville, Kentucky. She studied philosophy at Elon University in Burlington, North Carolina, where she graduated with a Bachelors degree in 2016. She received a Master of Arts in philosophy from Loyola University Chicago in 2019 and her Doctorate in philosophy in 2022. In the fall of 2022, she will begin a position as an assistant professor of philosophy at Mount Mary University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Her research interests lie primarily in feminist philosophy, critical philosophy of race, and the scholarship of teaching and learning.