Rude Inquiry: Should Philosophy Be More Polite?

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INTRODUCTION

Should philosophers be more polite to one another? The topic of good manners—or, more grandly, civility—has enjoyed a recent renaissance in philosophical circles (Buss 1999; Calhoun 2000; Burrow 2010; Westacott 2011; Stohr 2012; Reiheld 2013; Zerilli 2014; Olberding 2019), but little of the formal discussion has been self-directed: that is, it has not examined the virtues and vices of polite and impolite philosophizing, in particular. This is an oversight; practices of *rudeness* do rather a lot of work in enacting distinctly (analytic) philosophical modes of engagement, in ways that both shape and detract from the aims of our discipline. If we fail to recognize practices of rudeness, we become vulnerable to some of their conflating effects, and we miss their capacity to chill and exclude. Despite these dangers, there are reasons not to embrace the abolition of rudeness, both on its own merits and for the risks inherent in any abolitionist project.

My argument proceeds in four stages. First, I provide an analysis of rudeness, detailing its complex relationship to disrespect. Second, I identify three varieties of philosophical rudeness, and consider the extent to which they are intrinsic or extrinsic to philosophical practices. In the final two sections, I provide the case for and against philosophical rudeness, highlighting its variable value—and I conclude with some modest proposals for its regulation.[1]

1. WHAT'S WRONG WITH RUDENESS?

In ordinary discourse, to be rude is often understood to be uncouth and unmannered, either ignorant of or unmoved by the finer social graces— that is, to flout or fail the way things *ought to be* done, which is so often

understood as the way *we* and not *they* do them. Even the etymology of "rude" is heavy with elitism; its origins trace back to the Latin words *rudis*, meaning unwrought or unrefined, and *rudus*, a lump of broken stone. To be polite, on the other hand, is to be polished, made smooth (*politus*). A rude person is a boor, a term which originates in the 16ᵗʰ century Dutch and low German words for peasant. Other synonyms for "rude"—e.g. uncouth, uncivilized, barbaric—are basically different ways for describing the outsider: someone who is not one of us. The Oxford English Dictionary prioritizes "lack of knowledge or education" and "lack of culture or refinement; roughness of life or habit; uncouthness" as definitions of rudeness, while "a discourtesy; an ill-mannered act or utterance" and "lack of civility or courtesy; bad manners" are listed fourth and fifth, respectively ("Rudeness, n" 2019). While polite people know and employ social niceties, the rude speak frankly, act directly, and flout convention. If politeness is merely attention to etiquette, and etiquette merely a system of norms for maintaining insider and outsider status in a given context, then rudeness is at worst morally neutral and, potentially, praiseworthy from an egalitarian perspective.

Yet understanding rudeness as simple violations of social convention—call this the Faux Pas account—risks undermoralizing the costs of rudeness. There are times when someone's behavior is morally wrong—that is, it is harmful, disrespectful, or unkind; it hurts another person's feelings and leaves them feeling excluded and uncared for—and we best describe its wrongfulness by noting that the perpetrator behaved rudely. When "etiquette" is mentioned, most people's minds go to immediately to formal dinners and the complicated ordering of forks and knives: conventions that test whether a given dinner guest has the appropriate social upbringing. But daily life is full of subtler conventions of etiquette whose purposes include social cooperation and coordination, as well as the expression of respect and goodwill: attitudes and actions that make our shared life easier and more agreeable. We nod hello, use the right pronouns, and offer our seat. Some conventions of politeness are designed explicitly to *include* rather than exclude: for example, social norms that discourage social smoking without first checking, "do you mind if I smoke?" and those that rule out racist and sexist jokes. Ronni Gura Sadovsky's work identifies the sub-genre of political etiquette, whose primary aim is to express respect for (often vulnerable) social groups (Sadovsky 2020).

Karen Stohr draws on the following distinction, articulated by Judith Martin and her alter ego, Miss Manners: while "etiquette" refers to

the particular rules and conventions of a given cultural context, talk of "manners" identifies the principles from which particular rules of etiquette derive their authority (Stohr 2012, 23). Local rules of etiquette vary widely and may contradict one another, but they nevertheless express consistent principles of manners. When deciding whether or not to remove one's shoes when entering another person's home, a polite person might follow different rules in different countries, and still appeal to a single principle of manners in doing so: show respect and appreciation for the hospitality of others. Principles of manners may even require that the polite person *break* her own rule of etiquette in order to accommodate cultural and social difference, as in the apocryphal story of Queen Victoria drinking from her finger bowl to avoid embarrassing her guest, the Shah of Persia, who, presumably, had rather sensibly assumed the cups on the table were for drinking (Stohr 2012, 35).

According to Stohr, principles of manners express moral ideals and aims. By adjusting our behavior according to symbolic conventions, we are able to display respect, good will, and other moral attitudes. Amy Olberding's account of manners is similar; civility and manners are "behaviors that symbolically demonstrate prosocial values" (Olberding 2019, 9). Sarah Buss puts it this way: "When we treat one another politely… we are, in effect, saying: 'I respect you,' 'I acknowledge your dignity'"(Buss 1999, 802).[2]

These three philosophers provide a very different reading of rudeness than the Faux Pas account. Stohr defines rudeness in explicitly moral terms: "I will take for granted that rude behavior is behavior that reflects bad moral principles or an inconsistency with good moral principles that we think a person should be able to recognize" (Stohr 2012, 34). Olberding frames it in terms of the temptation to be inattentive, thoughtless, and inconsiderate (Olberding 2019, 30–34). Similarly, Buss remarks: "If we treat someone rudely, then we fail to treat her with respect" (Buss 1999, 797), and are "inconsiderate, offensive, insulting" (Buss 1999, 796). This understanding of rudeness—call it the Disrespect Account—allows us to distinguish between breaches of etiquette in general and lapses that are *rude*, and thus doesn't penalize cultural difference or social ignorance. Not all breaches of etiquette are rude, but disrespectful breaches are.

The Disrespect Account captures the distinctly *social* harms of rudeness. As Amy Olberding argues, "rudeness is often a failure to cooperate and collaborate with others" in a way that places the cost of that failure on the object of rudeness (Olberding 2014, 290). The object of someone's

rudeness may experience the rude behavior as both an insult and a threat; a sign that they cannot trust that basic moral norms will hold for this person in future interactions. Even if the level of threat is low, responding to rudeness makes social engagement significantly more effortful and eventually exhausting, as we lose access to social tools designed to smooth and facilitate interactions. Rudeness may provoke defensiveness and anxiety. I might continue to speak up but brace myself to be ignored or interrupted; I still wave and nod to you, but do so tentatively, worrying you will ignore me and I will look silly; I send out party invitations all the while fretting I won't receive RSVPs. My interactions with others become unreliable and unpredictable and, over time, my default social trust is eroded.

Rude gestures create underlying distrust, a tendency to "cut one's emotional losses" and withdraw. They can also compromise the expressive and communicative power of other, morally appropriate, actions. If my actions are of a kind that would typically respect and acknowledge your dignity—I help you with a grad application, or endorse your candidacy, or sign your petition—but my manner toward you refuses to acknowledge that dignity, then our interactions will be confusing and conflicted, arousing your suspicion. Olberding refers to these as "micromessages" that accompany explicit communication (Olberding 2014, 289): for example, an apology uttered through gritted teeth or a rushed and reluctant invitation. Moreover, the typical direction of rudeness is not random; as Olberding and others argue, rudeness often tracks the fault lines of social power. Those with power have more license to be rude to their subordinates, while members of subjugated minorities are more likely to receive explicit and implicit messages of disrespect in the wider world: "human beings more reliably enact courtesy with their bosses than with store clerks, waitstaff, or housekeepers" (Olberding 2019, 46).

How far should this condemnation of rudeness go? Recall that, for Buss, rude behavior *always* expresses disrespect for others. Sometimes, of course, an apparent expression of disrespect is in fact an excusable or even necessary lapse of etiquette: it is perfectly reasonable to intentionally interrupt someone to tell her that her dinner is close to catching on fire. I should not shake your hand if my household has the stomach flu (or, indeed, if we are in a global pandemic), even where it is expected. Whatever obligation we have to communicate respect is overridden by our obligation to save lives or avoid significant harm. If there were an equally expedient way to attend to the urgent demand without being rude, there might be

some small argument in favor of doing so (leaving a seminar quietly rather than shouting "my partner is in labor!" and slamming the door) but even then, the disparity between moral demands may excuse any lapse. At most, I have an obligation to explain myself at a later date. This is hardly unique to politeness; few moral demands come without ceteris paribus clauses.

What of those occasions when rudeness is not only excusable but warranted? What if rude action is morally required precisely because it is rude? Rudeness thwarts and disrupts conventions that are designed to be invisible (because their purpose is to smooth and facilitate everyday interaction). It thus brings those conventions into relief, making them prominent in their violation, in a way that is direct, immediate, and effective. This can be crucial if our aim is to demonstrate or educate others about the immorality of a particular convention, in this case or in general. In other words, we can be rude as a form of protest or pedagogy: refusing to shake hands with someone we consider morally reprehensible, turning our backs on a speaker we believe should not have been given a platform, interrupting a sexist or racist anecdote, or even overturning a dinner or a seminar table in outrage. If appropriately aimed and constrained, acts of rudeness can function as the interpersonal equivalent of political disobedience.

Are these examples a problem for the Disrespect Account? An advocate could certainly argue that, insofar as these acts are morally warranted, they are not rude. Acts and gestures are only rude if they reflect bad moral principles, and so if the protest or pedagogy has a legitimate purpose and the gesture is not excessive, it transforms the purportedly rude action into some other morally—if not socially—acceptable disruption. Put simply, proponents of this account might insist that if it's right, then it's not rude.

The difficulty with this response is it seems that sometimes a rude response is the morally correct response *precisely* because it was rude; rudeness is called for because it expresses exactly the disruptive moral message demanded of the situation. We would lose some of the moral impact if we chose an alternate, polite. mode. But, similarly, the impact is lessened if our chosen response no longer *counts* as rude. Something can be both right and rude, and it may *need* to be rude in order to be right.

We might also push back on the connection between rudeness and disrespect. When I am intentionally rude to someone, I deny them the consideration they expect, and instead express disregard, even contempt. But, arguably, I can be distinctly—even hurtfully—rude without being *disrespectful*, if the target of my rudeness has acted in such a way that

contempt is the only self-, other- and value-respecting response. As Macalester Bell notes, in describing Frederick Douglass' contemptuous responses to defenders of slavery, "being on the receiving end of contempt is often disorientating and highly disruptive, but disruption, in itself, is not always disrespectful" since contemptuous rudeness "helps put the target in a position to appreciate the reasons he has to change his ways" (Bell 2013, 225). Rudeness holds disruptive communicative power. In the right circumstances, this power is morally transformative. Insisting that morally transformative rudeness isn't rudeness seems to collapse the expressive value of politeness into the more familiar virtues of respect or consideration, ignoring its connection to social convention altogether (Calhoun 2000, 253–55). To deny that morally warranted incidents of rudeness are rude is to misunderstand something about the social disruption taking place. If the Faux Pas account undermoralizes rudeness, then there is reason to worry that the Disrespect Account overmoralizes it; rudeness is connected to the moral disvalue of disrespect, without being reducible to disrespect.

Is there middle ground to be found between the Faux Pas and the Disrespect Accounts of rudeness—one that captures both its moral significance and its variable moral standing? Emrys Westacott offers the following definition:

An act is rude if:

a) it violates a social convention; and
b) if the violation were deliberate this would indicate a lack of concern for another person's feelings (or, in other words, a willingness to cause someone pain). (Westacott 2011, 18)

Westacott's definition—the Counterfactual Account—ties rudeness to both social and moral norms, maintaining the connection to both conventional and moral orders, without insisting that an act of rudeness is always a moral violation (or an instance of disrespect). The first condition acknowledges the insight of the Faux Pas account; that what is or isn't rude will vary according to the rules of a particular group or culture. The second subtly diverges from the Disrespect Account, by tying rudeness to *prima facie* moral concerns but not necessarily to bad moral principles. In general, demonstrating a lack of concern for another person's feelings or a willingness to cause them pain does reflect bad moral principles, consistent with Stohr's definition, and does show disrespect, consistent with Buss's. But sometimes our respect for someone's agency may require

us to put their desires and feelings aside and address their actions, as Bell's defense of contempt reminds us. Respect may even require that we cause them (some) pain; rudeness is the communicative mechanism for doing so, *precisely because it is rude*.

The Counterfactual Account acknowledges that we may be rude inadvertently or unintentionally, without insisting that every social violation is rude. Even if I intentionally pick up the wrong fork, it is hard to argue this demonstrates a willingness to hurt someone else without including a great deal more background information about how my dinner companions feel about forks. If I show up drunk and disruptive to the table, however, this is a more plausible instance of rudeness. We can also employ Westacott's definition to distinguish instances of *excusable* rude violations of convention, e.g. those that are inadvertent, unavoidable, or emerge out of non-culpable ignorance, from *justifiable* rudeness, or what we might call rudeness for a higher purpose: emergency, protest, pedagogy, or the service of a suitably higher goal than the everyday expression and communication of basic respect. This account highlights the moral costs of rudeness—a willingness to risk harm or hurt feelings in others—while allowing that sometimes, circumstances will excuse and even justify that willingness. Rudeness straddles the boundary between social and moral violation; not all social violations are rude, and not all rude violations are immoral, yet rudeness is tied to both to social norms and to moral norms of respect, consideration, and concern for others.

2. VARIETIES OF PHILOSOPHICAL RUDENESS

Determining the relationship between rudeness and philosophical inquiry requires that we get clearer on, first, what kinds of rudeness are distinctively philosophical, and, second, the extent to which these are intrinsic to, or even necessary for, the practice of philosophy. My claim is not that philosophers are more likely than others to engage in everyday acts of rudeness, but that certain forms of rudeness emerge regularly and reliably in the course of distinctively philosophical activities: these include philosophy talks and Q&As, seminars, reading and discussion groups, workshops, peer review, and casual philosophical conversation. In considering these activities, I distinguish three candidates for familiar and specifically philosophical rudeness: Bad Behavior, Thoughtless Practices, and Socratic Trolling.

2.1 Bad Behavior

Consider the following anecdote, related by philosopher Nomy Arpaly in a blog post titled, "Is Polite Philosophical Conversation Possible?"

> I'll never forget the old guy who asked me, at an APA interview: "suppose I wanted to slap you, and suppose I wanted to slap you because I thought you were giving us really bad answers, and I mistakenly believed that by slapping you I'll bring out the best in you. Am I blameworthy?".
> When he said "suppose I wanted to slap you", his butt actually left his chair for a moment and his hand was mimicking a slap in the air.
> Since that event—which happened back when I was a frightened youngster with all the social skills of a large rock—I have thought many times about the connection between philosophy and rudeness—especially the connection between philosophical debating and rudeness. (Arpaly 2016)

Arpaly's interlocutor is rude (among other things). It is generally rude to threaten and mimic violence towards others. It is also rude to insult or intimidate a guest—and someone interviewing for a position in your department is your guest. Raising the possibility of violence *and* the possibility that Arpaly is giving bad answers is both insulting and intimidating, especially given their difference in age, gender, power, and experience.

At the same time, Arpaly's interlocutor is doing philosophy; he is attempting to get at a philosophical point—what is or is not blameworthy—that was (giving him the benefit of the doubt) relevant to the interview and to Arpaly's research project at the time. His rudeness is bound up with how he attempts to do philosophy with Arpaly. Contrast this with someone who, in his enthusiasm to get on with the business of philosophy, forgot to do proper introductions and leapt straight into discussion before identifying himself. In the second case, the rudeness would have preceded rather than implicated the philosophy.

2.2 Thoughtless Practices

Outright bad behavior—as Arpaly's example demonstrates—is fairly easy to spot, even if many of us find ourselves inured to it through familiarity and habit. But were Arpaly's interlocutor to have framed his question with a little more care, his utterance would be nothing more than a typical example of a more acceptable philosophical practice: namely, conceiving and describing imaginary scenarios in which people—including, potentially, people in the room or people relevantly like them—are

disvalued, hurt, insulted, threatened, maimed, or murdered, in order to make a philosophical distinction clearer to one's audience. Or, equally common, the scenario might take a very real and serious harm under discussion (e.g. systemic sexual violence) and compare it to something fairly trivial (e.g. the refusal to share one's hairbrush with a roommate), in order to highlight an abstract point of structural similarity. This imaginative exercise need not be accomplished with threats or explicitly directed at the interlocutor ("suppose I did X to you…")—as in Arpaly's case. It could be uttered hypothetically, voiced in the third person. And yet, it is normally considered rude to juxtapose the serious and the trivial in this manner without apology, or to speculate about significant harm to others.

Philosophical thought experiments are very often rude: they play on insulting tropes and stereotypes, they single out human frailties and "othering" features, they jestingly disvalue or trivialize the experiences of others, or they distort and even ignore very real experiences altogether (especially those of minority or subordinate groups not well represented among philosophers) in favor of a "cleaner" make-believe. But practices of speculative rudeness are not limited to thought experiments. Consider these reflections by Elizabeth Barnes:

> I have sat in philosophy seminars where it was asserted that I should be left to die on a desert island if the choice was between saving me and saving an arbitrary non-disabled person. I have been told it would be wrong for me to have my biological children because of my disability. I have been told that, while it isn't bad for me to exist, it would've been better if my mother could've had a non-disabled child instead. I've even been told that it would've been better, had she known, for my mother to have an abortion and try again in hopes of conceiving a non-disabled child. I have been told that it is obvious that my life is less valuable when compared to the lives of arbitrary non-disabled people. And these things weren't said as the conclusions of careful, extended argument. They were casual assertions. They were the kind of thing you skip over without pause because it's the uncontroversial part of your talk. (Barnes 2015)

Again, there are rather a lot of epithets that might apply to the remarks Barnes describes, but they are certainly rude. It is rude to say these things to or about someone; not only are these utterances violations of social convention but they express disrespect for Barnes as an individual and for disabled people as a group, and they demonstrate a lack of concern for others' feelings. Such remarks are sometimes uttered in philosophical classrooms and conferences by people who would never dream of being

similarly rude elsewhere. It is as if such individuals take philosophy to offer both a license and a justification for rudeness; i.e. presuming that precisely those rude-making features of these kinds of remarks and discussion make them philosophically useful, and that the philosophically useful gets a pass. How so? Well, they might argue, the philosophical imagination relies on jarring and disruptive juxtapositions and rearrangements of familiar concepts and scenarios; it requires an intellectual jolt best achieved by defying certain taboos, particularly those related to everyday moral and social norms (not that this practice is limited to moral and social philosophy).

Few think rudeness is the aim of philosophical discussion, but the preponderance of Thoughtless Practices suggests it is widely taken to be useful, even necessary, in order to achieve those aims. One hears echoes of this assumption in arguments about the importance of certain canonical thought experiments (e.g. Judith Jarvis Thompson's "Fat Man" variation of the Trolley Problem) in introductory philosophy courses: without the jolt of the taboo, it might be argued, one cannot do the imaginative work of intellectual abstraction away from everyday social and moral thinking, to get at the logical intricacies of various theories and principles in the appropriately *philosophical* way. We don't learn to do philosophy right unless we first let ourselves and others be rude.

There are certainly grounds for challenging either claim—i.e. that certain forms of abstraction are the only appropriately philosophical ways to approach crucial questions, or that the taboo of rudeness is the only, or even the most effective, way to achieve this abstraction—I return to them below. For now, it is worth nothing that this justification for Thoughtless Practices highlights close ties between the development of philosophical methods and the violation of ordinary conversational taboos. I turn to these ties in considering the third variation of philosophical rudeness, Socratic Trolling.

2.3 Socratic Trolling

These days, we have a word for someone who habitually barrels into good-natured conversations among friends, changes the topic and demands that others debate them on some abstract point, then repeats the same challenge over and over while rejecting all answers as unsatisfactory (referencing standards only they can set) and insults their interlocutors for being stupid and foolish, ultimately succeeding only in provoking and angering their victims (and, admittedly, proving to them that their grasp

of the topic is shakier than they formerly thought) while sowing general discord and discontent. Such a person is a troll. And, they are rude.

Of course, this is also a not-inaccurate description of Socrates.[3] True, there are a few crucial differences. Trolls often act out of animus and ill will and, subsequently, their arguments tend to reveal insincerity and bad faith. Socrates exemplified integrity (even and especially when his own life was on the line) and seems to have been motivated by a genuine desire to teach and learn. But that does not mean his engagements were always in good faith. His interrogations were often preceded by praise for exactly that quality he would reveal his opponent lacked, and his famed Socratic method has more than a hint of the trickster about it: guilelessly asking questions that secretly guide the respondent into contradiction, so that they will come, seemingly on their own, to exactly that conclusion the questioner has already worked out. Socrates was not *nice*, and he did not always play fair—even if his cause was noble and just (and his respondents typically unsympathetic characters who ended up hoisting themselves on their own petards). He was not above public humiliation as a teaching tool. He was *insistently* corrective, and he took the task of correction to be more important than the other social and moral norms governing conversation, including duties of care and concern to other participants.

What can be learned from this? Philosophy done in the Socratic tradition is corrective, oppositional, and while there are certain rules of engagement, it remains relatively indifferent to the ultimate comfort and dignity of its participants. Indeed, the ability to provoke, muster, and weather argumentative attacks are all taken to be signs of philosophical prowess. Even while decrying the rudeness of philosophy, Arpaly stops short of "philosophical pacifism," suggesting there is something importantly aggressive about the corrective nature of philosophical engagement (Arpaly 2016). Arpaly and Agnes Callard both note that even civil and productive philosophical conversation can look shockingly rude and aggressive from the outside, because philosophy *relies* on very different conversational norms than everyday (and much academic) interaction:

> I think arguing—including, naturally, correcting and being corrected—is something for which there is no substitute in philosophy… we humans are pretty bad at imagining what having the opposite view would be like (more on the badness of our imagination some other time), and thus there is no substitute for talking to someone who disagrees with you and who can "pressure" you hard to come up with answers to her arguments. (Arpaly 2016)

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…The five minutes of heated back and forth that followed are burned into my memory. Time seemed to slow down; the rest of the room faded from view; the sentences flew between us, each one carrying the weight of the world on it. What could be better than a good old-fashioned philosophy battle? (Callard 2019)

This depiction of the core of philosophy—forming arguments then subjecting them to external pressure to see how they stand up via discourse that is aggressive, even battle-like—raises an interesting complication for the claim that philosophers are rude. It now starts to look as though at least some practices normally considered rude might *constitute* rather than violate the social conventions of philosophy, which would mean that apparently rude philosophers are just… well, philosophers.

Sometimes, the more aggressive conventions of philosophy are described in terms of the Argument as War metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 5) or the Adversary Method/Paradigm (Moulton 1983). Janice Moulton and other feminist epistemologists have critiqued the adversariality of philosophy, both for its epistemic limitations and for its contributions to the low numbers of women in philosophy (Burrow 2010; Rooney 2010; Arpaly 2016). Among their concerns are gendered differences in politeness norms: women are judged more harshly for how they respond to the rudeness of others, and may face a double bind (if polite, they seem week and intimidated; if rude, they appear shrewish and shrill). Yet feminist philosophers are neither united in their opposition to corrective adversariality nor uniformly convinced of its detrimental effect on women in philosophy. Tempest Henning, for example, offers a compelling and detailed analysis of how the non-adversarial alternatives advocated by Moulton, Phyllis Rooney, and others, tend to centre the social norms and communicative styles typical of white women, excluding and even silencing the communicative styles and expression of other non-white, and especially Black, women (Henning 2018; unpublished). Moreover, my concern is not with adversariality itself but with rudeness; not all disagreement—however forceful, corrective, and adversarial—is impolite.

Arpaly separates philosophical rigor from philosophical rudeness. The former requires the direct, even aggressive, correction that is often *mistaken* for rudeness by outsiders; the latter describes the practices and habits of diminishing one's interlocutor that tend to slip in (i.e. bad behavior), once we've let ourselves experience the adrenaline rush of unfettered opposition.

Following Arpaly, we might conclude that the *manner* in which philosophers address and attend to others is extrinsic to philosophical

practice, while Socratic Trolling, as a core method of opposition (including a variety of tactics and strategies, both explicit and implicit) is intrinsic to it, once appropriately restrained. Then the difficulty becomes determining the boundary that both Govier and Arpaly presume—namely the line between those interactions that only outsiders take to be rude, and those that competent, well-trained, philosophers also experience as rude and disrespectful. Yet it seems clear, at the least, that the kind of jovial threat that Arpaly describes sits outside the conventions of rational philosophical argumentation (at least as Govier, Daniel Dennett and David Chalmers describe them) and, moreover, certainly meets the second condition of the Counterfactual account, in that it "indicate[s] a lack of concern for another person's feelings" (Westacott 2011, 18).

Interestingly, Thoughtless Practices seem to occupy an uncertain middle ground here, as they involve both the methods and the manner of professional philosophy. On the one hand, taboo-breaking, extreme or violent thought experiments and devil's advocate claims are well established—if increasingly criticized—tools of our trade; it is hard to argue they violate pre-existing social conventions internal to philosophy. On the other, an unwillingness to reflect on the expressive effects on others (particularly members of underrepresented social groups in philosophy) of applying particular tools in particular situations is a manner or mode of engagement with the world and with our own practices that is increasingly challenged within as well as beyond the discipline of philosophy.

To allow one practice normally considered rude (explicit challenge; direct, insistent, correction) as an accepted social convention is not to open the door to every conversational taboo. Certainly, there are eminent and unquestionably rigorous philosophers who offer methodologies and procedures aimed at achieving corrective rigor without rudeness and intended to encourage civil philosophical conversation. Examples include David Chalmers' "guidelines for respectful, constructive, and inclusive philosophical discussion" and Daniel Dennett's invocation of Rappaport's Rules, as a checklist for appropriately charitable and therefore more incisive critique (Chalmers 2017; Dennett 2013). These stand as counterexamples to the idea that philosophical conversation is necessarily constituted by norms of rudeness. But this tidy division into intrinsic and extrinsic is perhaps too quick. Arpaly describes the shift from the corrective methods of Socratic Trolling to Bad Behavior as "inhibition loss", similar to a soldier's loss of inhibitions in war; once the initial prohibition (no correcting/no killing) is lifted, others seem less authoritative and more

tempting. In other words, engaging in scholarship that consists in methods like Socratic Trolling may carry with it a psychological tendency to become comfortable with, and even reliant on, the further aggressions of Thoughtless Practices and Bad Behavior. If the rudeness of philosophers is damaging to the aims of philosophy, then the inhibition loss that allows practitioners to slide from rigor to rudeness may require deeper reform.

3. RUDE SCHOLARS: A THREAT TO INQUIRY?

Do philosophers have reason to pursue the politer path? Does the rudeness of philosophy detract from either the scholarship that is produced, or the quality of the intellectual activities which produce it?

Let us return to the case against rudeness, as put forward by Amy Olberding. First, recall the uneven impact of rudeness. Olberding notes that neither the subject nor the object of rudeness is accidental: both tend to align along the fault lines of social power. It is far easier for those with status and security to indulge in rudeness freely and without recrimination than for those without, and it is easier to be rude without recrimination to those who lack institutional or social power, or who are outsiders. Second, there is a social and emotional cost to rudeness, borne most immediately by the target. Expressions of rudeness can function like low-level threats—signalling disregard or even disrespect and ill will—causing some targets to feel anxious, defensive, and distrustful. If they do, then the energy that must be devoted to managing the effects of rudeness is redirected from other efforts (such as the intellectual activity of philosophizing), hindering the target's wholehearted engagement in the interaction. Consistently bearing the brunt of others' rudeness may cause the target to reassess their own participation in and contributions to a shared endeavour, holding back or withdrawing at conferences and Q&As. Moreover, rude treatment (especially by a dominant figure) sends out this message of disregard and disrespect to witnesses and third parties as well, flagging the target as someone who deserves *this and no more*, amplifying the likelihood that they will experience other exhausting and effortful interactions in a given space.

Practices of rudeness are thus doubly likely to reinforce hierarchy and exclusion in philosophy, both in who is given license to exercise rudeness, where it is directed and how it is received. For those more likely to bear the brunt of rudeness and for those more likely to experience it as threatening, rudeness creates a disincentive to participate in contexts of threat, like major academic conferences or prestigious departmental

colloquia, and thus encourages and exacerbates a shift to the margins of the profession—shutting people out of central and significant philosophical conversations. In other words, rudeness can have a chilling effect on the freedom to engage in philosophical scholarship and pursue philosophical inquiry. Over time, incessant rudeness becomes what Barrett Emerick identifies as covert interpersonal silencing, a form of epistemic violence (Emerick 2019, 35).

How worrying is this chilling effect? First, the loss of potential philosophers should always be of concern to those committed to philosophical inquiry. Insofar as philosophy is a collective endeavour, it worsens when capable people leave. Second, the loss is not random. Given the connection between social license to be rude and social power, we can reasonably speculate that those more likely to be marginalized by its effects are more likely to be new or junior philosophers, hold lower status positions, or to belong to members of underrepresented groups in the profession. Insofar as when we do philosophy, we have epistemic and philosophical reasons to value a diversity of methods, perspectives, archives, and subjectivities, then we have reasons to mourn the extent to which rudeness discourages outsiders. At worse, a set of practices that is most likely to discourage and alienate newcomers puts the discipline in danger of methodological conservatism, and even stagnation.[4]

Practices of rudeness may also invite intellectual and imaginative laziness. Rachel Cusk notes people confuse rudeness and truth-telling because of the "release" both provide (Cusk 2017). But we also tend to confuse the genuinely unorthodox and the merely taboo: both are shocking, unexpected, and disruptive, derailing a conversation from a familiar course and—so—seeming to open up new possibilities (though both may, in fact, shut the conversation down altogether). People will say rude things in philosophy contexts they would never dream of uttering outside of them—the implicit justification being that the demands of philosophical imagination require we shake loose from everyday thinking, and embrace the taboo: even invoking the absurd, the violent, the reprehensible. But of course, in an oppressive society, there are any number of things that are both taboo to utter and, at the same time, widely accepted *and* structurally and systematically reinforced as the status quo: racist stereotypes, sexist assumptions, the disvalue of disabled bodies, the list goes on. It may be taboo to talk about pushing a "Fat Man" in front of a moving train but discrediting the health and value of fat bodies is a widely accepted and oppressive social norm, one which this canonical thought experiment

subtly reinforces (Reiheld 2020). Practices that rely on a license to be rude as a shortcut to independent thinking both inure us against the pervasive harms of many forms of rudeness and teach us to mistake the shock of the taboo for the jolt of the truly new. They are, as described, *thoughtless*. I believe a similar point can be made about many of the aggressions of Bad Behavior. They are not expressions of minds so caught in profound philosophical content that they cannot redirect any attention to social conversational form; they are practices aimed at *appearing* that way. As Kieran Healy puts it, "…many of the standard forms of philosophical rudeness are less about content and more about asserting one's social position or trying to enact a specific model of 'being smart'" (Healy 2016).

Rudeness thus appears to have some negative impact on those doing philosophy and on the philosophy that is done. What, then, is the appeal of rude philosophy?

4. THE CASE FOR RUDE INQUIRY

In a provocative piece of public philosophy titled, "Is philosophy fight club?", Agnes Callard challenges the idea that philosophy ought to be nicer: "I say, more fighting, more biting" (Callard 2019). Callard's argument is not necessarily that fighting is the only or even the *better* way to reach the purported goals of philosophical inquiry, but that an aggressive, rude, and occasionally nasty approach brings forth the distinctive good of philosophy as an activity: namely, "knowledge of one's own mettle" qua thinker and qua arguer. Her argument, like Arpaly's, starts with a personal anecdote: an occasion on which an eminent philosopher was rude to her:

> He began by dismissing the value of the question I was asking, then disparaged the distinctions I drew as ill-conceived, then scorned my evident lack of technical competence, then brushed aside a number of my central claims as non-sequiturs and ended—by this point, his anger was apparent—by saying he couldn't see how there was anything of value in my talk. There was no missing the insinuation it had been a mistake for his department to invite me. (Callard 2019)

Just like Arpaly's interlocutor, Callard's is, among other things, rude. But Callard's interpretation of and reaction to her questioner's rudeness could not have been more different: she was delighted by it. Only the rude philosopher, she felt, had grasped both the weaknesses of her argument and the "animating spirit" of provocation that motivated it. Provocation functioned, for each of them, as inspiration, leading to an exhilarating exchange that Callard happily concludes she lost—concluding that only

losing such a battle allows us to understand the true nature and limits of a particular idea, the moment before and when it fails and gives out.

What point does Callard's personal essay serve to make? Certainly, it introduces an element of contingency into the likely psychological effects of rudeness I have described above: for some philosophers, rudeness is threatening and inhibiting, for others it is an inspiration and invitation. Moreover, Callard's implication is that only the latter represents the *properly* philosophical response to provocation. Callard is not without precedent here. In *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, Simone de Beauvoir describes how the transformative experience of having her views "demolished" by Sartre motivated her and provided new clarity: "my curiosity was greater than my pride; I preferred learning to showing off" (Beauvoir 1958, 344). For Beauvoir, the emotional and intellectual experience of being "beaten" in argument was part of the call to philosophy, her realization that "I wasn't the One and Only" and "nothing had been done: but everything was possible" (Beauvoir 1958, 345).

Callard is describing experiences beyond minimal adversariality (though not the threats of violence Arpaly faced); the philosophical rush both Callard and Beauvoir refer to seems to come as much from the aggression as from the actual argument. In Callard's case, the implication is clear; a more polite version of her critic would have *failed* to achieve what her hostile interlocutor succeeded in providing: a philosophical battle. Even if the objections were as strong, a milquetoast delivery might have failed to provoke in her the same spirit of engagement—and, with it, the same spirit of inquiry. An opportunity to do a particular kind of philosophy—one that was apparently satisfying for both parties and, presumably, provided some philosophical reward—would have been lost. Insisting on what Callard calls the "kindergarten morality" of politeness would prevent her from doing philosophy in exactly the way it brings her most value; among other things, it would take away the *fun*. Callard is invoking the philosophical method defense of rudeness.

Note that there are two separate points here: one is a claim about psychological diversity, and the second is a normative claim about the proper goods of philosophical activity. Both are relevant. If it were simply the case that some people like their rigorous philosophy rough and others prefer it gentle and philosophy can be done both ways then, presumably, both preferences could be accommodated with a little negotiation (perhaps by borrowing models of consent and partnering from best practices of sexuality). A speaker could indicate, before beginning a talk, which mode

of questioning they preferred; journals could establish which language of critique they follow; and so on. But the second point reveals why the first can't be so easily satisfied. The claim is not just that your mileage may vary, but that only some preferences enhance rather than detract from one's philosophical excellence. A speaker who reassures their audience that they welcome whatever is thrown at them will therefore appear to be—or is—*more* able to do the work of philosophy than one who requests that others refrain from Bad Behavior. The latter seems redirect attention away from the proper aims of inquiry, and toward their own wellbeing.

Is this anything more than a disciplinary prejudice? At its most extreme, the claim seems to be that any effort aimed at avoiding rudeness is effort taken from the cognitive feat of philosophical argumentation (or may even inhibit it) and is thus somehow *lesser* philosophy. But the picture of philosophical argumentation one must hold order to separate these two efforts is extraordinarily solitary and self-directed—leaving no room for philosophical "mettle" that emerges in the ability to build on and synthesize other's ideas, or to envision new applications and connections. Even straightforward rigorous critique need not be a zero-sum game. Good philosophical critique pushes an argument to the point it collapses, but battle is not the only or the most apt image for what we are doing: rigorous philosophers are more like engineers, stress-testing one another's systems for the friendly, collaborative purpose of ensuring their stability for common usage. In this metaphor, drawing on rudeness rather than rationality for strategic points is akin to dropping dynamite in order to claim a building's not up to code.

At the same time, philosophy isn't always comfortable and it isn't meant to be. There is a proud philosophical tradition of challenging both authority and custom, most recently in anti-oppressive philosophy. Ami Harbin has argued for the epistemic and agential value of disruption and disorientation (Harbin 2016); Similarly, José Medina has drawn our attention to the phenomenon of epistemic friction (Medina 2013). As discussed earlier, Macalester Bell has argued forcefully that expressions of contempt can valuable precisely because they function to disrupt another's complacency, putting them in a position to assess their reasons for doing or thinking differently (Bell 2013). Each of these provides a slightly different, if complementary, argument for the value of what we might describe as philosophical adrenaline—a challenge or provocation that genuinely leaves one off kilter, scrambling to put the pieces of an argument back together. But, presumably, genuinely world-shaking philosophy ought to achieve

this without rude delivery. Relying on the latter to achieve the sought-after disruption is a shortcut of kinds—one that must occasionally be taken to get one's interlocutor's attention but that, if habitual, becomes a kind of intellectual laziness, akin to the thoughtless practices I describe above. Moreover, the more commonplace philosophical rudeness is, the less likely it is to produce the desired intellectual disruption (rather than inhibition or defensiveness). If rudeness does have this value, that is all the more reason to preserve it for when one really needs it.

Yet, despite all these cautions, there is genuine reason to worry that, even if we reject the value of philosophical rudeness, some cures may be worse than the disease. Norms of politeness aim at making participants feel respected, considered, and secure. Often, on the ground, the test for rudeness is little more than a gut feeling that I have been snubbed—a whiff of disrespect, the sense that something in the other person's demeanor, tone, or words offered me less consideration than I believe I am due. And here, of course, is the rub; in a hierarchical context (like philosophy), some of us are far habituated to social messages that reaffirm our value and rightful place in that order than others—and so challenges to that order and our place in it are far more likely to sound threatening, disruptive, and even anti-social, i.e. rude. Those who consistently receive the opposite set of messages, on the other hand, are far more likely to hold disruptive, challenging, and "anti-social" attitudes as a result—and their expressions of such attitudes are far more likely to be read by others as inappropriate, hostile, or excessive (e.g. angry, bitter, out of control). Those with social power may hold more license to be rude, but those without it are more likely to be read as actually *being* rude (rather than merely eccentric, idiosyncratic, distracted, set in one's ways, an absent-minded professor-genius, etc.). This worry is exacerbated when we consider the connection between rudeness and violations of social convention. Newcomers and outsiders are less likely to *know* and fully inhabit the conventions in question, and more likely to be tripped up by the details; an additional burden is thus placed on them.

At the very least, this is a caution against explicit sanctions for rudeness in philosophy. Establishing norms of politeness—i.e. making a place feel "safe" for participants—entails naming some attitudes/actions/behaviours as *uncivil*, and this too easily slips into naming some *people* as uncivil and excluding them on that basis. Furthermore, social codes typically develop some kind of policing and enforcement, whether formal or informal, explicit or implicit; "for the individual [civility] is about not being an

asshole. But for the institution, invoking civility is about isolating and controlling those assholes" (Hsu 2014). The ability to police civility or "collegiality" becomes yet another exercise and concentration of social power, in ways that are not accountable to the needs and voices of everyone affected by that power. As Leigh M Johnson and Ed Kazarian put it, responding to a call for greater "collegiality" in philosophy in 2014:

> We're troubled that insistences on a certain set of normative standards for "collegiality" are regularly being forwarded *on behalf of people like us*—i.e., colleagues from underrepresented groups in the profession, those with provisional employment, and/or those whose status as stakeholders in the profession is undervalued—presumably in the interest of making the space of professional (philosophical) disagreement friendlier and "safer" for us. What seems to go largely unacknowledged, if not intentionally ignored, is the manner in which the right to police norms of professional collegiality is a *privilege* that attends only those for whom running afoul of those standards has no real consequences. And so, to those attempting to police these standards of collegiality, we want to say: Thanks, but no thanks. (Johnson and Kazarian 2014)

Johnson and Kazarian make a compelling point here: if the case against rudeness depends partly on the claim that rudeness actually entrenches hierarchies, then a solution that also concentrates social power in crucial ways is, frankly, no solution at all. Demands for a more polite, *nicer* mode of philosophizing risks becoming a subtle form of gatekeeping, one whose chilling effect may be greater than the rudeness at which it is aimed.

5. CONVENTION AND DISRUPTION IN PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY

Where does this leave the question of rude inquiry? For the most part, this paper has attempted to undermine and critique the role played by rudeness in philosophy: highlighting the social harms and epistemic costs of widespread Bad Behavior and Thoughtless Practices. In particular, I flagged the chilling effect both may have on vulnerable and outsider members of the profession (who are more likely to face regular rudeness from others *and* be perceived as rude by others) and the tendency of each form of rudeness to stand in for or replace more substantive forms of intellectual challenge and disruption, inviting intellectual and imaginative laziness. Finally, arguing that some kind of rudeness or hostility is required for genuinely philosophical engagement invokes a picture of the philosophical enterprise that is solitary, self-directed, and anti-collaborative to the extreme.

At the same time, I acknowledged the close connection between forms of engagement regularly perceived as rude (i.e. direct, insistent correction) and the central forms of philosophical engagement and argument, and I granted the need to allow for provocative forms of challenge and disruption we might dub Socratic. Moreover, I argued that the project of *curbing* philosophical rudeness also risks a chilling effect, potentially silencing those same vulnerable members most likely to be harmed by philosophical incivility. Ultimately, balancing all these concerns requires that we attend closely to the relationship between rudeness and social power—perhaps the best we can hope for, given the chilling effects of rudeness and its counter measures, is a kind of redistribution of inhibitions or a philosophical climate change, in which some areas of the discipline are chilled in order to warm up others.

For those of us unwilling to passively wait for a better climate, it is fortunate there are strategies that sit between top-down demands and acceptance of the status quo. The first and most obvious—to which I hope this paper makes a modest contribution—is awareness. For those of us raised and inculcated in the dominant culture of (analytic) professional philosophy, thoughtless practices and even a certain degree of bad behaviour may be so familiar as to be invisible. Drawing focus to them by naming and highlighting them is, in itself, an effective method for inviting self-reflection and critique about their use. Second, and relatedly, increasing awareness makes it possible to develop good practices of being active bystanders: calling out philosophical rudeness when it is excessive, intellectually lazy, or inappropriately directed and challenging others to do better while, at the same time, remaining vigilant about our own excesses. Finally, I believe that attention to the close connections between philosophical rudeness and core images and conceptions of what *doing philosophy* really is has another effect: it invites us to do conceptual work, creating new metaphors and paradigms for our most basic activities, such as the engineering stress-testing metaphor for argument critique (rather than combative warfare) I mentioned earlier. In other words, I think any efforts towards politeness in philosophy will fare better not with institutional enforcement, but peer review.

NOTES

1. Thanks to my exceedingly helpful and courteous anonymous reviewers for their comments on an early draft. I will endeavour to live up to them in future work, if not here. Thanks also to Steven Burns, Barrett Emerick, Daniel Groll,

Muhammad Ali Khalidi, and Susanne Sreedhar, as well as to the panelists and audience who participated in our session at the 2018 meeting of the Canadian Society for Women in Philosophy. This paper is dedicated both to the exemplars of polite and rigorous philosophy from whom I have learned, with gratitude, and—lest anyone suspect I write from a position of virtue—to all the many people I have interrupted, with my sincere apologies.

2. That is, as Stohr, Olberding, and Buss say explicitly, a little too quick. Codes of etiquette are open to manipulation and subversion; most of us have witnessed just how cutting perfectly correct manners can be, in the right context. Yet these subversive expressions depend on the more general, conventional expression of respect for their particular communication to succeed. Codes of manners have both a letter and a spirit, and one can be used to undermine the other.

3. Here I part ways with Rachel Barney's magnificent piece—er, 'translation'— "On Trolling" in which it is argued that while Socrates may appear to be troll-like, he is not a troll because trolls deceive and Socrates speaks the truth frankly (Barney 2016). See also Karen Frost-Arnold's work on trust and the epistemology of social media (Frost-Arnold 2014; 2016).

4. A reviewer helpfully notes that three are at least three categories of persons most likely to be affected: newcomers to the profession (i.e. graduate students, junior scholars, interdisciplinary researchers from other fields), "outsiders"— those who find themselves working against the grain, or unpopular, for thematic, methodological, or personal reasons—and those who are structurally more vulnerable for material and status-related reasons: unemployed philosophers, contract or contingent faculty, independent scholars and, to a lesser degree, those at community or two-year colleges, or less prestigious institutions. Members of underrepresented groups in philosophy (and academia more generally) may also be vulnerable, despite significant experience, security, and prestige.

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