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The Charitability Gap: Misuses of Interpretive Charity in Academic Philosophy

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Abstract

In this article, I explore some harms that emerge from the call for charity in academic philosophy. A charitability gap, I suggest, exists 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's 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 it functions as an orientation device (Ahmed 2006) designed to bring "unruly" philosophers back in line with disciplinary practices and traditions; and that it requires resistant philosophers to remain in oppressive worlds (Lugones 2003a; Pohlhaus 2011). Although charitability is risky—and charity is disproportionately demanded from already marginalized philosophers—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 2016).

I. The Charitability Gap

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?"

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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.”

In this article, I explore some problems with charity as an interpretive orientation in philosophy. I am interested in the methodological and political commitments that often underlie calls for interpretive charity or hermeneutic generosity. Which disciplinary structures and norms are upheld by a commitment to charity, 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?

My interest in questions of charitability² emerges from my suspicion that what I have come to call a charitability gap exists in academic philosophy, such that marginalized philosophers receive insufficient levels of charity while also being disproportionately expected to offer it.³ 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 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 regard to whom we grant charity and from whom we expect it, reinforces the disciplinary status quo and (re)produces epistemic oppression, which helps preserve philosophy’s status as a discipline that is, to use Charles Mills’s language, conceptually and demographically dominated by whiteness and maleness (Mills 1998, 2).

My goal in this article is to understand some of the charitability gap’s harms by exploring how the gap’s instantiation can affect philosophical communities and marginalized philosophers. I suggest that these harms become visible—and the charitability gap is reinforced and widened—when we call for interpretive 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. It performs this bringing back into line in two ways: first, the call for charity can produce conditions for testimonial smothering (Dotson 2011). When this happens, charity functions as what Sara Ahmed terms an “orientation device” (Ahmed 2006, 85) that directs readers back to already accepted philosophical practices and critiques. Second, the call can place unjust limits on an interlocutor’s agency by demanding her presence and participation in what Gaile Pohlhaus Jr., following María Lugones, describes as an oppressive world (Pohlhaus 2011, 231).

I am particularly concerned about the charitability gap because of the contributory role it likely plays in keeping academic philosophy’s demographics so persistently white and male.^{4,5} Many calls for interpretive charity reinforce the disciplinary norms that contribute to philosophy’s demographic homogeneity. Like Mills, my concerns are with the conceptual as well as the demographic—the disciplinary investment in charitability, in my view, too often hinders philosophers’ potential for rethinking the social, for enacting political change, and for taking seriously the experiences of those on the margins.

I begin by clarifying my understanding of interpretive charity and distinguishing it from notions of charitability in the hermeneutical tradition and in analytic philosophy of language. Next, I use Kristie Dotson’s account of testimonial smothering and

Ahmed's account of orientation devices to frame (some) calls for charitable interpretations as epistemically violent orientation devices. Third, I characterize (some) refusals to interpret charitably as examples of resistant practices that Pohlhaus describes in her account of justified refusals to understand (Pohlhaus 2011). I suggest that the call for charity can be a call to remain in an unjust world of sense, but the refusal to practice charitability can provide the opportunity to transform or exit this world. Fourth, I draw from Shotwell's critique of purity politics to offer some hesitations about abandoning the notion of charity in philosophy, despite the problems I identify (Shotwell 2016).

Two general remarks are important to emphasize before moving forward. First, I use "interpretation" fairly broadly in this article 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 questions about what it might mean to interpret a text generatively but not charitably are motivated by a commitment to remaining accountable to the experiences of oppressed and marginalized groups.⁶ 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.

II. Interpretive Charity in Philosophy

In order to interrupt the use of charity as a neutral methodological principle, I will first explain what I understand *charity* to mean in philosophy and identify what remains unclear about the term, despite its ubiquity. 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.⁷

In her book, *The Political is Political: Conformity and the Illusion of Dissent in Contemporary Political Philosophy*, Lorna Finlayson offers a sustained analysis and critique of what she terms "the informal norm of philosophic charity" (Finlayson 2015, 69). Although she acknowledges, in hermeneutics, a longstanding practice of charitable or generous interpretation and, in analytic philosophy of language, a formal account of "the principle of charity" (see, for example, Wilson 1959; Davidson 1984/2001; Medina 2003), for Finlayson the informal norm of charity is not straightforwardly connected to either of these particular traditions (Finlayson 2015, 69).⁸ In her view, the informal norm of charity, rather than being 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 philosophical 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). Although there is much more to be said about the conceptual history of *charity* (both within

and beyond academic philosophy), Finlayson's distinction between the informal norm and narrower philosophical uses of the term mirrors the distinction that philosophers often make implicitly when (in our teaching especially) we ask for or practice charity without historicizing or contextualizing our own understanding of the term.

Charity as Methodological Norm

Importantly, charity is not typically framed as one among other equally viable modes of philosophical interpretation or engagement.⁹ 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 and engaging with the texts we assign, as if it is the ground upon which students ought to build their critical thinking.¹⁰ Interpreting charitably is also a skill that many assume we ought to practice ourselves in almost every context. Our critiques can occur only after we have demonstrated a good-faith engagement with the text. 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 interpretive charity is a failure to engage with a text or author in a productive, rigorous, or generative way.

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) (although in my own experience, the assumption that a critique must meet some standard of charity is one that cuts across the continental/analytic divide in academic philosophy). Finlayson’s aim is to

correct any illusion that this norm [of charitable interpretation] is a neutral referee, regulating political-philosophical debate according to a methodological principle 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 a neutral methodological or interpretive principle. When charity dominates philosophical discourse, our conversations risk reproducing many of the harms that we might assume a charitable mode of engagement mitigates.

In Finlayson’s view, charity masks itself as a neutral and universally appropriate methodological principle. We might also think that charity is 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 enables us to recognize that a thinker has made a mistake by their own standards. In her analysis of the connection between philosophy’s whiteness and its methodologies, 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, 126–27). In these forms of philosophy (not exhaustive of the discipline’s methodology) charity appears to be what enables us to “get to the essence” of an argument.¹¹

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.¹² Further, when charity is framed as a tool for uncovering an argument’s underlying structure (purportedly separate from its content), it becomes a *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.

Charity's Ambiguity

The term *charity* has a long history in both hermeneutics (modern and contemporary) and in analytic philosophy of language.¹³ But 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; see also Spade 2020), 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 philosophical 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 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 sense-making method, and Finlayson's concern is that when philosophers treat it as though it is, we apply charitable readings in inequitable ways.

Stern, following Finlayson, agrees that charity is a “multiply ambiguous” concept (Stern 2016, 287). When we read charitably, are we to assume that an author's ambiguous meanings can be reconciled? Or are we being charitable about an altogether different aspect of the text (is it more important to be charitable regarding a text's consistency or its accuracy? What if these are in tension?)? And just how charitable ought we be? How much charity does a given text or interlocutor merit, and is this call for charity one to which we must always respond?

There is, as Finlayson points out, very little work in academic philosophy about the informal norm of charity (Finlayson 2015, 66). She offers an account of some political difficulties of charity, particularly as they relate to the kind of dissent that demands for charity to both enable and foreclose (66). Stern explores the conflicting hermeneutic commitments that make it unclear what it means to properly perform a charitable reading (Stern 2016, 289–91). And Yitzhak 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 impacts that the call for charity has on not only textual interpretations or argument analyses, but also upon philosophical 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.¹⁴ 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?

III. Problematizing Charitability

The call for charity can be a tool for bringing philosophers back into line with dominant ways of thinking, engaging with texts, and interacting with one another. Finlayson's claim is that the ambiguity of philosophical charity enables it to function as a tool for privileging certain forms of engagements and for punishing others. I am interested in moments of uncharitability—how else can they be characterized and understood?

In this section I connect Dotson's account of testimonial smothering to 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 enables us to recognize 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 brief summaries of Dotson's account of testimonial smothering and 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 insure 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.¹⁵ And third, the audience's testimonial incompetence follows from pernicious ignorance (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” (238). This violence need not be purposeful (240) and its harms almost always extend beyond “purely” epistemic matters (239).¹⁶ 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. Additionally, people must often spend time and energy “‘rebounding’ from such instances” (250) of testimonial smothering by, for instance, processing epistemically violent exchanges, seeking support from similarly marginalized knowers, or developing strategies for resisting them in the future.¹⁷

Ahmed’s Orientation Devices

Dotson’s notion of testimonial smothering can be put into generative dialogue with 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 reflect our values and our communities (Ahmed 2006, 85).

The objects that are near us (or that we bring and hold close to ourselves) make their way into our thinking and our writing—they situate, or orient, us in and toward the world. These objects become what Ahmed calls “orientation devices” that set us down some pathways and not others. 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).¹⁸ 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 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. 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 one—specifically, it creates the conditions for testimonial and affective smothering within philosophical 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.¹⁹

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—there is a rich and ongoing conversation, for example, about the centrality of Kant’s racism to his account of personhood and about how to teach Kant in light of this racism.²⁰

This example shows one way that the call for charity can be harmful: it can lead to testimonial smothering. 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. However, 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.²¹ 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.²²

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 about what it might mean to expand, disrupt, or undo philosophy's canon.²³ 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, though crowded out by calls for charity like the instructor's, are being published and discussed in the field.²⁴ 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 2017, 270).²⁵ In *Living a Feminist Life*, Ahmed recalls:

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.²⁶

In the introduction to *Living a Feminist Life*, Ahmed explains that 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 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),²⁷ 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) 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 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.”²⁸ Furthermore, this call for charity creates no space for taking seriously the role of sexism in Aristotle’s thought. Instead, the student is 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.²⁹ Furthermore, this example occurs in a classroom, where room for interpretation is more confined by the course goals and assigned texts (which are themselves sometimes beyond the instructor’s control). 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, 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 in which I have no interest in engaging further. Broader patterns of this appeal to charity direct marginalized philosophers across the discipline to canonical texts in this way—we are prevented from exploring other questions and methods if we must spend so much time demonstrating our capacity to be charitable.

The call for charitable interpretation of Aristotle produces conditions for testimonial smothering and, in so doing, reveals 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 modes of engagement. In “On Anger, Silence, and Epistemic Injustice,” Alison Bailey suggests that smothering can be affective as well as

testimonial—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).³⁰

Many feminists, particularly feminists of color, have articulated the importance of anger.³¹ 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; Lugones 2003a). In “Hard-to-Handle Anger,” Lugones explores some of the ways in which anger can be “cognitively rich” (Lugones 2003a, 104). On the one hand, anger can enable one to make demands from what Lugones called 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 risk 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; that is, not all anger 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’s approach to anger, we see that the student is expressing a cognitively rich anger that does indeed reveal knowledge of the world. This anger might be used to develop new or resistant interpretations of a problematic text, but the call for charity blocks her from using her anger as a resource for knowledge or resistance to oppression.³²

Importantly, differently situated marginalized subjects will experience the call for charitable interpretation in quite different ways; the anger or frustration of a white woman, for instance, will almost certainly be read differently from 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 model of argumentation 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; see also Bailey 2018). Whether and how philosophers identify a speaker’s anger or lack of perceived charitability, as well as the particularities of the resultant epistemic violence, depend upon the social identities and positions of those involved.

Although 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—testimonial incompetence from our audience.³³ Not every marginalized philosopher shares the same experiences with calls

for charitability, but I do worry that, on the whole, unevenly distributed calls for charity are tools for inducing testimonial smothering 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 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 philosophical context, be it a course, a department, or the discipline as a whole.

Marginalized philosophers must often undertake extra labor in order to prove 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.³⁴ 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.

In the example I offer, testimonial smothering does 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 merely occur due to 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.³⁵ 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. Although pernicious ignorance certainly plays a role in the perpetuation and widening of the charitability gap, the charitability gap is both a result of individual philosophers’ ignorance and a result of harmful disciplinary structures.

Thinking about the charitability gap structurally might benefit from a turn back to an earlier text in feminist philosophy. In their 1983 essay, “Have We Got a Theory for You! Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism and the Demand for ‘The Woman’s Voice,’” Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman characterize academia as an institution structured to keep individual theorists from feeling responsibility toward communities about which they theorize. They ask white feminists to consider what it might mean to theorize in a respectful, rather than a dominating or difference-flattening way. They ask several questions:

When we speak, write, and publish our theories, to whom do we think we are accountable? Are the concerns we have in being accountable to “the profession” at odds with the concerns we have in being accountable to those about whom we theorize? Do commitments to “the profession,” method, getting something

published, getting tenure, lead us to talk and act in ways at odds with what we ourselves (let alone others) would regard as ordinary, decent behavior? (Lugones and Spelman 1983, 579–80)

Here Lugones and Spelman identify the role that “the profession” plays in structuring academics’ desires and intellectual practices. Individual philosophers are certainly practitioners of (and more worryingly, enforcers of) charitability, but disciplinary methods and practices—as well as the structure of academia itself—also work to structure our habits and encourage our protectiveness of exclusionary methodological principles that can sometimes (perhaps often) be left aside or refigured in ways that work against epistemic violence.

IV. 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 for testimonial smothering. The charitability gap can also perform this disciplining function by preventing the interruption of unjust worlds. In her essay, “Wrongful Requests and Strategic Refusals to Understand,” Pohlhaus uses Lugones’s account of worlds to defend the practice of refusing to understand certain positions or ways of thinking. Attempting to understand others is usually important for meaning-making and for treating one another as epistemic subjects (Pohlhaus 2011, 224), but there are cases when refusing to perform this understanding can be “ethically and epistemically productive” (223). Pohlhaus contends that some requests for understanding are demands for subjects to remain in an unjust world of sense.

Pohlhaus uses Lugones’s account of worlds to show how practices of understanding are relational, contextual, and political. On Pohlhaus’s 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, remade, and unmade; 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).³⁶ Medina describes Lugones’s “world” as “a shared horizon of meaning and interpretation that discloses possibilities for experience and action” (Medina 2020, 215).

Pohlhaus 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 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 is an epistemic violence (237), particularly because it is asymmetrically enacted—marginalized people are disproportionately asked to perform these acts of understanding. In cases like these, a refusal to understand is justified. These refusals protect one’s epistemic agency, they interrupt the unjust epistemic habits of others, and they gesture toward possible other (resistant) worlds (238–39).

For Pohlhaus, 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 emerge only when marginalized subjects refuse the terms and worlds that have been set out by dominant structures of sense-making.

Lugones's 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). Without taking Lugones's notion of worlds too far from the context in which it emerged and remains embedded, I find Pohlhaus's connection between refusal and world-traveling 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's discussion of worlds captures that the problem is even more thoroughgoing, operating "beneath" the level of epistemic agency. The structures 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 dialogical practices 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 2011, 235).³⁷ A smothering-inducing call for charity can be a call to remain in a hostile or oppressive world. The student 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).

V. Decentering Charitability

The call for charitable interpretation in philosophy is never made on a level epistemic, social, or political playing field; whether and how charitability is deployed as a methodological tool is informed by structural racism, sexism, queerphobia, transphobia, and ableism. Indeed, the language of charitability is already imbued with a sense of colonial "benevolence" that has been used historically to justify violence and epistemicide (Ahmed 2004; Shaikh 2007). The resultant charitability gap produces testimonial smothering and traps marginalized knowers in oppressive worlds. But are the problems I have identified with charity simply misuses of a methodological tool that, although flawed, is in our best interest to retain? Perhaps we can abandon assumptions about charity's neutrality or universal usefulness without abandoning charity altogether.

I suggest that philosophers decenter but not abandon charity as an interpretive practice.³⁸ Despite the violent ways that the call for charity—and to a degree, the practice of

interpreting charitably—circulate in academic philosophy, I am not yet ready to leave charity behind altogether. I have two main reasons for this: first, abandoning charity may be an example of what Shotwell describes as “purity politics” (Shotwell 2016, 6), and second, abandoning charity ignores important ways that the practice has been evoked strategically or in service of closing the charitability gap.

To say that we should never perform or call for any kind of charitable interpretation because it can reproduce epistemic violence would commit me, I fear, to a kind of purity politics that, according to Shotwell, assumes we (or the texts we read) could ever stand above the fray of unjust power systems. In *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times*, Shotwell worries about a “purism” or “purity politics” (Shotwell 2016, 6) approach toward the suffering and injustice of the world. This purity approach assumes that one can exist and remain outside of systemic suffering and injustice by making good ethical choices on an individual level (8).

Shotwell begins from the assumption that we 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 central problem with purity politics is that it assumes we can make choices as individuals that do not in some way contribute to suffering (6–7). For Shotwell, though, “however the bounds of the ‘we’ are drawn, we are not, ever, pure. We’re complicit, implicated, tied in to things we abjure” (7). If we begin from this complicity, Shotwell argues, new normative formulations emerge (13).

A Shotwellian approach to the “mess” of academic philosophy 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.³⁹ 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.⁴⁰ This neglects the wide array of rich literature that works with—by simultaneously working against—these texts in various generative ways.⁴¹

At the same time that we resist taking a purist approach to charitability, we can attend to interpretive practices that do not frame themselves as charitable but that develop creative strategies and methods for engaging with texts. For instance, in her essay “Radical Love: Black Philosophy as Deliberate Acts of Inheritance,” Dotson claims that doing black philosophy—particularly black feminist philosophy—requires that philosophers demonstrate “radical love for black people” (Dotson 2013b, 38).⁴² 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). Dotson discusses the importance not only of citing black feminist theorists, but also of trusting that these citations will be generative for her philosophy. Her account of radical love is specific to traditions and texts within black and black feminist philosophy, so I am not suggesting that philosophers who are not working in black feminism simply adopt or appropriate this practice. I describe it here to show that there are already ways of engaging texts and theories without relying on charitability as a method.

My second reason for wanting to retain charity is a strategic one. 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 benefited 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 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 nondominant 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.⁴³

In her essay “The Episteme, Epistemic Injustice, and the Limits of White Sensibility,” Lissa Skitolsky challenges the claim 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)

Skitolsky’s claim suggests that Medina’s recommended process—of on some level recognizing, and then correcting for, prejudices that reproduce the charity gap—is already imbued with oppressive structures of perception. We are likely, it seems, to be overly charitable to our assessments of our own charity; that is, we interpret our practices of charity 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 faculties we use to make these judgements.⁴⁴

Medina mentions charity only briefly in his book but his work on epistemic activism (Medina 2020) and social imagination (Medina 2013) explains that, while we develop strategies to become more epistemically virtuous knowers and community members, we must change the structures of sense-making and knowledge practices that produce the very conceptual and perceptual resources we then use to address epistemic injustice. His “rule of thumb” is not meant as a solution to all questions of charity, but it is perhaps a place to start. Even though the charity gap is systemic and resistant to our individual efforts to close it, some increased level of awareness and concern for how we allocate charity might be helpful, especially when combined with other communal efforts at transforming the discipline.

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 toward which levels of charitability have been historically and unjustly low. 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 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 2011, 236). Perhaps I am concerned only about misuses of charity, or perhaps some cases are inappropriate for a reason(s) that philosophers could identify and guard against.

Although 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. The misuse, then, may not be a case of charity "going wrong"—it would be a case of charity functioning precisely as it is meant to. 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 dialogical exchange, or in the attempt to gain or develop knowledge; perhaps they rest within the concept of charity itself. 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 decenter charitability in favor of other modes of engaging texts and one another.

The call for and practice of charitable interpretation is what Dotson might call risky; it can widen the charitability gap, induce testimonial smothering, 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 important strategic, epistemic, and hermeneutic reasons to retain charitability. Any interpretive or dialogical practice will perform some acts of exclusion—pluralizing and making space for more ways of reading and engaging in the discipline may not require an abandonment of charity altogether; it might instead require a decentering of charitability.

VI. Reorienting Charity

In this article I have explored some problems that emerge from philosophy's charitability gap. I suggested that interpretive charity is a risky philosophical practice that can produce testimonial smothering 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 also explored what these problems with charity might be calling us to rethink: ought we give up the call for or practice of charitable interpretation or engagement? Is there a way to practice charity without perpetuating harm? I suggested that though

there is no “risk-free” call for or practice of charitability, there are important strategic reasons to retain charitability, particularly when we can use charity to work against the charitability gap. I have not provided an account of exactly when and how we should be charitable—this account would need to be far more contextually specific than I could develop here. My hope is that I have highlighted some problems with interpretive charity and opened space for questioning a philosophical practice that we often take for granted.

In section III, “Problematizing Charitability,” I introduced charity as an orientation device in philosophy. I close my article by suggesting that charity can, perhaps, orient philosophers otherwise. Orientation devices, in Ahmed’s view, are not doomed to function only in confining or oppressing ways—sometimes, they lay out a queer or a feminist path (Ahmed 2006, 100; 2017, 15) or reveal expectations that can then be disrupted (Ahmed 2006, 22). I want to remain sharply critical of the colonial histories and presences that are evoked by language of charity and generosity (Shaikh 2007; Wilson 2014) and of the presumption that angry “uncharitability” will never result in generative philosophical insights, but I do not wish to entirely abandon charity as a tool for interpreting and teaching texts and authors that work against the philosophical status quo. However, for charity to perform this resistant function, philosophers should turn our attention toward our own methods of reading and engaging one another: we should not merely reflect on, but also work to transform, the ways we deploy calls for and practices of interpretive charity, hermeneutic generosity, open-mindedness, and respect or trust of a text when we introduce philosophy to our students and when we ourselves undertake philosophical inquiry. Considering charity as an orientation device is one way of identifying what we are actually doing when we turn to charity as a philosophical methodology, but it is also a way of imagining how we might turn differently.

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Notes

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 originalism).

2 I use “charity” and “charitability” interchangeably throughout this article.

3 I thank Stephen Bloch-Schulman for the term *charitability gap*.

4 See Dotson’s “How is this Paper Philosophy” for a discussion of how some disciplinary norms and expectations function to make philosophy an unappealing field for diverse practitioners (Dotson 2013a). The way we invoke charity, I suggest, may be one such norm. Mariam Matar is developing this connection in further detail (personal correspondence).

5 See Paxton, Figdor, and Tiberius 2012; Botts et al. 2014; and Thompson 2017 for recent demographic data of academic philosophy.

6 Of course, this commitment is central to feminist philosophy broadly; more specifically, this commitment appears in Dotson’s “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, 236–37).

7 Interestingly, this definition already assumes that the text does, in fact, have a sensible meaning that can be discovered by any sufficiently charitable interpreter.

8 See Petru Bejan’s “Trust as a Hermeneutic Principle” for a detailed historical account of charity’s role in both hermeneutics and philosophy of language (Bejan 2010).

9 Joel Weinsheimer argues that there is no interpretation at all (and thus no meaning-making or communication) without charity (Weinsheimer 2000, 409).

10 Indeed, we find discussions of charitable interpretation in several pedagogical texts designed for introductory-level philosophy students. For example, in his widely used handout for first-time philosophy students, “How to Read Philosophy,” David 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 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). Again, we see the idea that the reader should assume the argument’s strength. 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).

11 I thank an anonymous reviewer for this particular phrase and for suggesting that I explore charity’s role in identifying an argument’s structure.

12 A number of interpretive methodologies exist that would enable us to ascertain an argument’s structure, some of which would not make the mistake that charitable approaches do: that is, bracketing supposedly contingent aspects of an argument’s structure. The very claim that some aspects of an argument are contingent (or that *this* or *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.

13 Although philosophers regularly invoke charitable interpretation or the principle of charity, the genealogies of the concept of interpretive charity are rarely recognized. It is beyond the scope of this article to offer a genealogical account of notions of interpretive charity and generosity, but I do want to briefly gesture toward the term’s history. Bejan claims that Plato’s *Republic* prefigures the practice of interpretive charity (Bejan 2010, 41). We see, for example, a call for pity functioning similarly to contemporary calls for philosophical charity when Socrates grapples with Thrasymachus’s anger in Book 1: one should, Socrates suggests, understand that philosophy is difficult, and that one should treat fellow philosophers well and not become angry with them when they make mistakes or fail to be as clear as we’d like them to be (336e2). Much later, in Christian theological hermeneutics, charity (or the Latin *caritas*) was framed an affective orientation toward a text—*caritas* was a sacred practice, a way to see God in a text. In Gadamerian hermeneutics, trust and openness (which Gadamer does not explicitly frame as charity but which some Gadamer scholars do [see Weinsheimer 2000; Holtzen and Hill 2016]) were framed as conditions for the possibility of interpretation. Without this openness, there is nothing about which interpreters can disagree (Gadamer 1975/1989, 271; Holtzen and Hill 2016, 89–90). And even as conversations about faith and suspicion emerged in hermeneutics and queer theory (see Ricoeur 1970; Sedgwick 2003, respectively), analytic philosophers developed their own notion of charity, which is not concerned with affectivity or historical consciousness, but instead frames charity as a set of assumptions about truth conditions and language (Davidson 1984/2001) that bridges conceptual difference (or, in José Medina’s view, erases it [Medina 2003]). Today, I see charity evoked in the more general way that Finlayson describes—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.

14 There is a difference between calling for charity and practicing charitable interpretation, but I do not understand these practices as neatly extricable from each other—we risk misunderstanding a text when we take charity 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.

- 15 For more on testimonial competence and incompetence, see Dotson 2011, 245–46.
- 16 I limit my discussion of epistemic violence to the one Dotson offers in her article. For other scholarly perspectives on epistemic and hermeneutical violence, see Spivak 1988; Berenstain 2020; and Ruiz 2020 (see especially note 1, where Ruiz cites accounts of epistemic violence that emerge from women of color feminisms and those that emerge from epistemic injustice literatures).
- 17 Indeed, I sometimes wonder whether this article is my own attempt to “rebound” from conditions of testimonial smothering.
- 18 I thank Theodra Bane for offering feedback about my characterization of orientation devices.
- 19 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. See also Pohlhaus 2012.
- 20 See Mills’s chapter “Kant’s Untermenschen” for one example of the former (in Mills 2017); see Abundez-Guerra 2018 and McCabe 2019 for two quite different approaches to teaching Kant in light of his racism.
- 21 See part V, “Decentering Charity,” for a discussion of how this process of recognition can itself be undermined by active investments in dominant epistemic frameworks and power structures.
- 22 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 canonical philosophy.
- 23 See Anderson and Erlenbusch 2017 for an analysis of how one’s view of the canon’s role in philosophy might affect their views on inclusive pedagogy. See Mills 1998 and Shotwell 2010 for analyses of philosophy’s whiteness and its canon as co-constitutive.
- 24 See, for example, Deslauriers 2009; Bianchi 2014; Sharkey 2016. I am grateful to Carlo Tarantino for suggesting these texts.
- 25 For Ahmed’s discussions of disciplinary paths, lines, inheritances, and citational politics, see Ahmed 2006, 22; 2016, 13–18.
- 26 See note 10 of this article for a brief discussion of *charity*’s etymology.
- 27 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/>.
- 28 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/>
- 29 See the “Reorienting Charity” section of this article for more on how charity might direct us otherwise.
- 30 Relatedly, Shiloh Whitney uses affect theory, phenomenology, and women of color feminisms to explore the ways in which having one’s anger unjustly dismissed can result in what she terms “affective injustice” (Whitney 2018). Whitney’s account of affective injustice runs parallel to Bailey’s discussion of affective smothering, though Whitney’s focus is on the affective burden that one incurs when their affects are refused uptake, rather than on the ways in which anger can serve as an epistemic resource. I am grateful to Magnus Ferguson for thinking with me about Whitney’s work and its connection to literature on epistemic injustice.
- 31 See, for example, Audre Lorde’s “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism” and “Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger” (in Lorde 2007/1984). See also Lugones 2003a; Cherry 2017. Also see Bailey 2018 for a thorough engagement with feminist approaches to anger.
- 32 She might, however, use her anger to build solidarity with her classmates, or to fuel her research for her final paper. Perhaps her first-order anger receives no uptake, but its second-order expression flourishes.
- 33 I use the rather awkward “they/we” construction to convey my position as someone who holds both marginalized and privileged identities.

34 There are, of course a great number of reasons that 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 cisgender, white men.

35 I am grateful to Nora Berenstain for encouraging me to explore the connection between disciplinary structures and the charitability gap. See also Shotwell's analysis of "whiteness as method" and its operation in academic philosophy (Shotwell 2010, 119) and Berenstain's discussion of motivated ignorance in "White Feminist Gaslighting" (Berenstain 2020, 8).

36 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's conception of worlds (Chang et al, 2018). I am grateful to Emma Velez for showing me this resource.

37 It is beyond the scope of this article to make more than a brief mention, but this might be understood as an instance of what Whitney calls "affective oppression" (Whitney 2018). In the future I hope to explore the connections among Whitney, Pohlhaus, and Bailey on the affective elements of epistemic violence.

38 In my view, the charitability gap is a structural *and* an individual/interpersonal problem within our discipline. Since it is often the case that individual actors reinforce/enforce the "charitable structure" of philosophy, here I explore how we might interact with charitability in transformative ways.

39 Interestingly, even when interpreters do *not* take purist approaches to problematic texts, we often risk being heard as doing so. 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).

40 Note, however, that the commitment to charity—an anxious desire to retain charity as a methodological and interpretive tool—is 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 authors' racism from what is then framed as their "real" philosophy (see Shotwell 2010, 122).

41 I am thinking, for example, of Mariana Ortega's work connecting Heideggerian phenomenology to Latinx feminisms (Ortega 2016) and of Adriana Cavarero's feminist rereading of ancient Greek myths and philosophies (Cavarero 1995). A charitable orientation toward Heidegger's work, or toward ancient Greek philosophy, may have been necessary for these theoretical moves to be made.

42 I have followed Dotson's use of the lowercase "b" in this paragraph.

43 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.

44 I take Skitolsky's claims regarding perception to hold for our account of both perception and interpretation, since perceptive and interpretive processes mutually reinforce one another. When we take perception and interpretation to be co-constituted in this way, we also see charitability operating at both a perceptive and an interpretive level.

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