

Editorial

## Editorial

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We are delighted to present the third issue of the Journal of Controversial Ideas. The six articles published in this issue tackle diverse issues, and we hope our readers will find them as interesting and thought-provoking as we did.

In “The Limits of Identity: Running Tuvel’s Argument the Other Way”, K. Whittaker (a pseudonym) discusses a paper published in 2017 by Rebecca Tuvel, which argued that if we have good reasons to accept that people can change their gender simply by identifying as a certain gender, then we also have good reasons to accept that people can change their race by identifying as being of a certain race<sup>1</sup>. Whittaker discusses the reactions and overreactions to Tuvel’s paper and the criticisms it received.

Whittaker’s argument is based on a *reductio ad absurdum* of the view that trans women are women purely because they identify as women. Whittaker believes we shouldn’t accept self-identification as the most important element when assessing an individual’s identity. There are individuals who identify themselves as “otherkin” (elves, animals, dragons, plants etc.), as well as people who identify themselves as physically disabled (“transabled”) even though they have no physical impairment. Whittaker argues that, since it would be absurd to accept someone’s self-identification as a dragon or as an elf, then self-identification can’t, by itself, be the only relevant criterion for assessing one’s membership in a certain kind.

The second paper published in this issue also deals with issues related to gender and self-identification. In “Who is a Woman: Sex, Gender and Policy Making” Daphna Joel and Cordelia Fine try to bring some clarity to the debate with the aim of helping policy makers to make better decisions.

According to Joel and Fine, two recent developments have contributed to the current disagreement about who counts as a woman. First, the term “trans” is no longer used

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<sup>1</sup> Tuvel, Rebecca. (2017). “In defense of transracialism,” *Hypatia* 32(2): 263–78.

as a shortening of “transsexual” – meaning someone who suffers from gender dysphoria and therefore seeks medical treatments in order to change their appearance (“gender reassignment” or “gender affirming” treatments). “Trans” is now used as an umbrella term that includes people who don’t necessarily suffer from gender dysphoria and who are not seeking gender affirming treatments, and who consider themselves gender fluid, agender, genderqueer, etc.

The second development has to do with legal changes that in some countries allow sex change without any body modification or a statement by medical professionals. These legal developments have implications for everyday life, for instance in the use of segregated bathrooms, in sports competition, and in the distribution of scholarships via affirmative action. After clarifying the meaning of terms such as “sex”, “gender”, “masculinity” and “femininity”, the authors outline the kind of problems that can arise when legislators take into account the interests of both transgender and cisgender women. They conclude that in cases of conflicting interests, legislators must consider how members of these different groups are going to be affected by a certain policy, and identify which interests are at stake.

The issue of self-identification and gender has been discussed in a few other papers previously published in this journal. We are pleased to be able to publish well-argued and non-polemical papers discussing these issues from different perspectives. These are important questions that need to be discussed and analysed in detail, not suppressed, and when a topic affects many people personally, we have a special obligation to promote a constructive debate about it.

In the paper “Will Moralization of Science Lead to “Better” Science?”, Yves Gingras examines the various attempts, over the past century, to punish scientists for their (supposed or real) moral misconduct, whether real or merely alleged. Such attempts have largely failed, most likely because science was recognized as a system based on certain key norms, first identified by the American sociologist Robert Merton in the 40s: “communalism (knowledge is a public good), disinterestedness (scientists pursue truth and not just their personal interests), organized skepticism (results must be scrutinized by other scientists before being accepted) and universalism (scrutiny of scientific results should not be influenced by the particular characteristics – religion, race, gender, etc. – of the scientists)”<sup>2</sup>.

At the present time, however, there is considerable pressure towards the moralization of science (as well as art and literature), and Gingras wonders if abandoning the four norms of good science in favour of a more moralized approach will bring about better or worse outcomes. He concludes that if the past is any guide, we should not be optimistic about the moralization of science.

The fourth paper published in this issue discusses challenges to the commonly held intuition that we have a “duty of easy rescue”, that is, that we have a duty to save another person when doing so comes at a reasonably low cost to ourselves. The reason why we might not have a duty to save the life of another person, argues Michael Plant in “The Meat Eater Problem”, is that most people consume large amounts of meat produced through factory farming, and thus cause immense pain to many animals. Plant concludes there is a tension between two commonly held duties: the duty to save another person when doing so comes at a small or moderate cost, and the duty to prevent suffering to animals caused by factory farming. In sum, he argues that perhaps we shouldn’t save a person

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<sup>2</sup> Merton, Robert K. (1973). *The Sociology of Science*. University of Chicago Press.

who would otherwise die, unless that person happens to be a vegetarian (or we could trust them to become a vegetarian after being saved).

David Benatar's paper the "Uphill Battle of Controversial Ideas" consists of two short pieces. The author had originally written an op-ed on discrimination against men in times of war, and in particular in the present conflict in Ukraine, in which men have been prohibited from leaving the country and have been forced to fight against Russia. He argues that one cannot consistently claim that certain differences between women and men justify exempting women but not men from compulsory military service in Ukraine and yet also claim that these same differences provide no basis for treating women differently from men for any other purposes. Benatar sent this op-ed to a dozen outlets, but they all refused to publish it, probably because the argument was perceived as too controversial. In the second piece, which is published in our journal as an introduction to the article about sex discrimination, Benatar shares his thoughts on how difficult it can be to publish controversial ideas, in part because of internal factors (such as fear and self-censorship) and in part because of external ones (editors refusing to publish such articles). He argues that hostility towards controversial ideas is a form of epistemic injustice that goes unnoticed. The only way to resist this form of injustice is to allow the publication of unorthodox and controversial ideas – when they are well argued and well defended, of course. As editors of the *Journal of Controversial Ideas*, we agree with this claim, and hope that our journal can be a forum for such ideas to be aired, analyzed, and criticized.

The sixth and final paper published in this issue raises a puzzle for Christian opponents of abortion. In "The Afterlife Dilemma: A Problem for the Christian Pro-Life Movement", Marlowe Kerring (pseudonym) argues that anti-abortion Christians usually believe either that all aborted embryos and fetuses go to hell, or that they all go to heaven. If all embryos and fetuses are sent to hell, then it is hard to believe that God is an omnipotent and benevolent being. On the other hand, if all aborted embryos and fetuses go directly to Heaven, there is no particular reason for opposing abortion. In sum, it seems that pro-life Christians cannot easily justify their strong anti-abortion claims.

We believe that these six papers make valuable contributions to important debates. As always, we welcome responses to them.