

University of Groningen

'Summer News: Controversies in Academic Journals'

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Published in:
The Philosophers' Magazine

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2017

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Knowles, C. (2017). 'Summer News: Controversies in Academic Journals'. *The Philosophers' Magazine*, 78(3), 6-9.

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Summer News

Charlotte Knowles on controversies in academic journals

In contrast to last issue's roundup which was all light-hearted philosophy fun, this quarter's news – much like the weather – has been rather more turbulent. One of the biggest stories of the last few months has been the controversy at the feminist philosophy journal *Hypatia* over the publication of Rebecca Tuvel's article "In defence of Transracialism".

The article starts from the case of Rachel Dolezal – former head of the Spokane chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), who made international news in 2015 when it was revealed by her parents that she was a white woman passing as black. Tuvel's article, published in the spring edition of *Hypatia*, sought to explore parallels between transracialism and the literature on transgender individuals, suggesting that "considerations that support transgenderism seem to apply equally to transracialism". Shortly after its publication, an open letter with 830 signatures was published calling for the retraction of Tuvel's article. The letter pointed out a number of problems with the article including its use of non-standard vocabulary such as "transgenderism" in its discussion of trans people, misattributions of various theories and the failure to "to seek out and sufficiently engage with scholarly work by those who are most vulnerable to the intersection of racial and gender oppres-

sions (women of color) in its discussion of 'transracialism'".

The letter argued that "these failures of scholarship do harm to the communities who might expect better from *Hypatia*" and went on to question the review process. In addition to calling for a retraction of the article, the letter asked *Hypatia* to "[i]ssue a statement taking responsibility for the failures of judgment associated with publishing this article"; "[o]pen its general editorial norms and procedures to scrutiny moving forward"; and "[r]elease a statement about its review practices and a plan for improvement". The letter also asked the journal to "avoid the practice of deadnaming (that is, referring to trans people by former names) and commit to developing best practices for naming trans individuals as authors and subjects of scholarly discussions". (Tuvel revised her article on 4th May to remove the parenthetical reference to Caitlyn Jenner's birth name).

Following this open letter – but two days prior to its delivery to the editor, the associate editorial board, and the advisory board of *Hypatia* – the associate editors of *Hypatia* issued a statement, which was widely disseminated online and ultimately posted on *Hypatia*'s Facebook page at the request of the associate editors. The post apologised for the harm caused by Tuvel's article and went on to state that "[c]learly, the article

should not have been published, and we believe that the fault for this lies in the review process”. This statement was not endorsed by the journal’s editor or board of directors, however, who went on to issue their own statement, which acknowledged the outrage the article had caused, but stated that “[t]he [editorial] Board stands behind the judgment of *Hypatia*’s Editor, Sally Scholz” to publish Tuvel’s paper, a decision Scholz had reiterated in a statement in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, stating that: “I firmly believe, and this belief will not waver, that it is utterly inappropriate for editors to repudiate an article they have accepted for publication ... Editors must stand behind the authors of accepted papers. This is where I stand. Professor Tuvel’s paper went through the peer review process and was accepted by the reviewers and me”. The article has not been retracted and remains available online.

The controversy has split the philosophical community with, on the one side, those agreeing with the open letter that Tuvel’s article was harmful and an example of bad scholarship that should not have been published; and those on the other side defending *Hypatia*’s review process and decision to publish. People also lamented the, in some cases, vicious attacks that were launched against Tuvel as a result of her article, and worried not only about the impact of this on the early career researcher herself, but

also on any future early career researchers working on sensitive and controversial topics. However, one of the overarching concerns seemed to be for the future of *Hypatia* itself. As one of the leading journals of feminist philosophy, such controversy could do much to damage its reputation and, as the Editorial Board said in the conclusion to their statement, one of their regrets was “the harms to current and prospective authors, editors and peer reviewers of *Hypatia* that were created by this controversy”.



Turning towards the future of philosophy more generally, in Hungary we find de-

pressing news with the ongoing attempt by the country's president to shut down the Central European University (CEU) in Budapest. CEU is a well-regarded university, founded in 1991, primarily offering graduate courses in the social sciences. The university has American and Hungarian accreditation, but, as *Inside Higher Education* reported, "a law passed in Hungary in April has endangered the university by requiring that it offer programs in New York State, where it is chartered but does not offer programs".

*The controversy has
split the philosophical
community*

The law has been widely regarded as an attack on the university, with Jan-Werner Müller, arguing in the *New York Review of Books* that it "is clearly part of a larger culture war against liberal values as well as a very concrete attempt to bring any independent institutions remaining in Hungary under Orbán's control." Müller reported that "[b]oth the European Parliament and the US State Department have called for the suspension of the new law. But it is not clear they can stop him." However, some solace can be taken in the news recently announced that CEU will remain in Budapest for the 2017-18 academic year, but more needs to be done to ensure that the university is able to continue operating in Hungary in the years to come. As reported in *Inside Higher Education* "New York Governor Andrew Cuomo has authorized negotiations with

the Hungarian government on ways that the university might be able to comply with the law through some arrangement with New York State, while maintaining its mission of operating in Hungary". CEU's president and rector, Michael Ignatieff, supported this move, commenting that "we want the negotiations in New York to come to a speedy and successful conclusion that removes the obstacles to our remaining in Budapest".



In slightly lighter news, an attempt to pierce "the moral orthodoxy in gender studies" has spectacularly failed. Assistant professor of philosophy at Portland State, Peter Boghossian, and his friend James Lindsay, who "writes about atheism", attempted to pull off a "Sokal Hoax" which, as *The Daily Nous* states, refers to the time "physicist Alan Sokal successfully published, in the journal *Social Text*, a nonsense article parodying postmodern writing about science."

Boghossian and Lindsay sought to do the same with gender studies, penning a piece, which, in their own words, argued that “[t]he penis vis-à-vis maleness is an incoherent construct. We argue that the conceptual penis is better understood not as an anatomical organ but as a gender-performative, highly fluid social construct.” They summarised the paper as “stuffed ... full of jargon” and commented that after completing it they “read it carefully to ensure it didn’t say anything meaningful, and as neither one of us could determine what it is actually about, we deemed it a success.” They went on to proclaim, *The Daily Nous* reported, that our “paper should never have been published ... We made no attempt to find out what ‘post-structuralist discursive gender theory’ actually means. We assumed that if we were merely clear in our moral implications that maleness is intrinsically bad and that the penis is somehow at the root of it, we could get the paper published in a respectable journal...”

However, the joke was ultimately on them. The paper was rejected by *NORMA: International Journal for Masculinity Studies*, a Taylor & Francis gender studies journal, which then pointed Boghossian and Lindsay to another Taylor & Francis journal, *Cogent Social Sciences*, which bills itself as “a multidisciplinary open access journal offering high quality peer review across the social sciences”. Rather than this being a top-flight gender studies journal, thereby “proving” with the publication of the hoax paper that “gender studies is crippled academically by an overriding almost-religious belief that maleness is the root of all evil”, it turns out that *Cogent Social Sciences* requires authors to pay to have their work published,

and their publishing standards appear to be pretty low – anyway, no one on their editorial team claims to have expertise in gender studies. As Phil Torres concludes at *Salon*, “So where do we go from here? There is a way out: The authors could acknowledge that their hoax implies absolutely nothing about gender studies. It merely demonstrates that pay-to-publish journals will accept low-quality articles – a point that ... is boringly unoriginal.” What a cock up!



Charlotte Knowles is an associate research fellow at Birkbeck College, University of London where she lectures on ethics and feminist philosophy. Her primary research interests lie in feminist philosophy, modern European philosophy (especially Heidegger), and social and political philosophy. She is also on the executive committee for the Society for Women in Philosophy UK.

Illustrations by Jack Oliver Coles.