

Title: Why it is important that people like me read people like them and talk about it with people like you.

Key words: standpoint theory, history of aesthetics, vulgar

Abstract:

I have always been humoured by the irony that I am an expert reader of the Third Earl of Shaftesbury. For as both the weak, fair sex and the epitome of the vulgar, Shaftesbury would doubly deem me incapable of the true height of the philosophical life. In fact, my ironic humour extends across my entire field of expertise in early modern theories of the sublime, beauty, and taste that commonly build their arguments upon the exclusion of people based predominantly, on sex and social class, but also other political identities. Of course, I—indeed, we—live in different times, and while it would aggravate Shaftesbury and his ilk, I suspect none of you would take much notice let alone be bothered by this irony, other than, perhaps, to be in on the joke. However, I propose that, as historians of philosophy, we would benefit from taking this irony seriously; in particular, in the study of early modern Europe, where historical and cultural ideas of sexism, nationalism, and elitism (for good or ill) are formalised into modern theories of gender, race, and class. Here I argue that there are important, and yet to be explored, advantages of people like me reading people like them, which would benefit the collective conversation of people like you.

By ‘people like me’ I mean anyone now who would count as a member of a social class or political identity that is directly or indirectly oppressed or excluded by the historical theories of ‘people like them’ that is, the historical figures being studied. While, by ‘people like you’ I mean anyone who conforms to and advances the existing conventions of the history of philosophy, making them members of the currently accepted or dominant group. Significantly, in real terms, it might be the case that near every participating member of this dominant group (i.e., people like you) can rightly claim to counting as a member of an oppressed or excluded group (i.e., people like me). Nevertheless, my point is that this dominant group assumes the methodological view that these historical modes of oppression and exclusion (i.e., people like them) be observed from a singular, common vantage point of the now. Instead, I suggest that, like the growing trend in philosophy more broadly, historians of philosophy consider, and potentially exploit, their own social standpoints in the interpretation and analysis of historical theories that on their own terms would exclude or oppress us. I do not deny that there are already ‘people like me’ performing analysis on ‘people like them’ (evidently, I am an example). Rather I want to motivate incorporating standpoints beyond those of ‘people like you.’

The initial advantages are two-fold, and can be seen as new ways of approaching or extending (not competing with) the existing aims of the history of philosophy, including, those of rational reconstruction, contextualism, and the various sorts of recovery or rejection of canon. One-fold is that different standpoints offer genuinely new and unexpected interpretations; and second-fold, is that they offer a broader perspective on what we have inherited, and even ought to inherit, from these historical accounts. To illustrate my point, and its subtleties, I explore the example of the ‘vulgar’ that underpins the early modern English theories of taste, and relatedly, the sublime genius. Specifically, I demonstrate that from the current, common vantage point the readings of these theories, might acknowledge and address the sexism, even the elitism, but they either overlook or only give cursory glances at the role of the ‘vulgar’. In contrast, from my standpoint as one of the ‘vulgar’, I am able to offer a novel perspectives on: aesthetics’ conceptual inheritance that unreflectively perpetuates a necessary exclusion of a vulgar (rational reconstruction); the historical context of the early modern conceptual development of the sublime genius (contextualism); and how to philosophically read diverse texts from the period (canon).