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Dialogues on Disability: Shelley Tremain interviews Maeve O'Donovan

Hello, I'm Shelley Tremain and I'd like to welcome you to the fourth installment of Dialogues on Disability, a series of interviews that I am conducting with disabled philosophers and post here on the third Wednesday of each month. The series is designed to provide a public venue for discussion with disabled philosophers about a range of topics, including their philosophical work on disability, the place of philosophy of disability vis-à-vis the discipline and profession, their experiences of institutional discrimination and personal prejudice in philosophy, in particular, and in academia, more generally, resistance to ableism, accessibility, and anti-oppressive pedagogy.

My guest today is Maeve O'Donovan. Maeve is associate professor and chair of the philosophy department at Notre Dame of Maryland University and a former executive secretary of the Eastern Division of the Society for Women in Philosophy. Maeve is deeply committed to women's education and empowerment and uses her roles as teacher, researcher, and department chair to promote an inclusive and diverse feminist space in philosophy that encompasses everyone who identifies a woman or as a supporter of women. As she describes it, her research examines the fruitful and error-prone intersection of disability, feminism, and philosophy, with her current projects putting race at the center of that discussion. In recent years, she happily spent a great deal of her time caring for her terminally-ill father.

Welcome to Dialogues on Disability, Maeve! Let's start things off with your philosophical background and career path. Why, given the low numbers of women in philosophy, did you pursue a career in philosophy?

Shelley, thank you, again, for the opportunity to contribute to the invaluable work that you are doing. Readers and listeners of this interview should know that you, Shelley, have been a constant support and role model for me as I undertake my own work on disability.

My interest in philosophy began early, with a required course during my very first semester at the University of Notre Dame. Although I'm the opposite of a morning person, I couldn't wait to be in my seat in the lecture hall every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday for my 9 a.m. philosophy class that semester. My

professor for the course, Tom Morris, who has since left the academy to bring philosophy to the business world, was phenomenal. I entertained the idea of majoring in philosophy only because he told the students who got A's in the course that we should seriously consider going on in philosophy. I now make a point of doing the same thing in my own classes; and I recommend this practice to other faculty.

In my third year of college, I took a course on existentialism, taught by a woman graduate student, in which we read excerpts from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. For the first time, I began to imagine myself as a philosophy professor. It quite literally had not occurred to me before then, although many of my male study partners had such a career plan and were quite supportive of my efforts. I realized then that in order to become a philosophy professor, that is, in order for people to know that it is possible for them to be philosophy professors, they must be able to see themselves up in front of the class and be able to imagine themselves as the authors of philosophical works. At a school which, at that time, had only two women professors—only one of whom was tenure-track—in a department with about forty faculty members, a department in which I had read only works by philosophers who were men, I simply hadn't had that experience before. It was only then, when I was taught by that woman instructor, that my current life appeared on the horizon. That, by the way, is one of the reasons why I love teaching at a women's college, that is, I love that 70% of our faculty are women because every student, in every major at my college, can see herself in the role of professor, from the very first day on campus. Our students read lots of women authors, too. Of course, at present, most women professors are white and few identify as disabled, so there is still much work to do.

You recently co-edited a groundbreaking collection with Namita Goswami and Lisa Yount on the continued relevance of work on gender and race for philosophy. You've also published articles on why it's important to incorporate disability into feminist analyses of intersectionality. Tell us how you define intersectionality and what you regard as the explanatory power of this concept.

As Namita, Lisa, and I say in our introduction to *Why Race and Gender Still Matter: An Intersectional Approach*, there is no single or singular definition of intersectionality. The term *intersectionality* is, by its very nature, contestable and contested; and, in my opinion, it always should be. For us—that is, for me and my co-editors—intersectionality is an approach and an awareness; it is a methodology, but not in the traditional philosophical sense of the term. Philosophers love to develop methodologies, leaving the actual application of the methodology to so-called "larger" or "future" projects. Intersectionality is a caution

against that, as well as a commitment *not* to do that. As a methodology, intersectionality must involve a commitment to transformation, a commitment to reveal and undo injustice, to the degree that this is possible in writing and research. As I use it, intersectionality is a recognition of the need for, and the intellectual value of, taking into account as many of the concrete particulars of a situation as possible when I engage in philosophical reflection.

For example, in my work on Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder—ADHD—I emphasize the radical difference in the experience, treatment, and psycho-social consequences of ADHD for women as compared to men. There are (what get called) "biological differences" that matter: estrogen operates on the same parts of the nervous system as the parts on which ADHD drugs operate; thus, fluctuations in estrogen require fluctuations in dosage in order for the outcome of a drug-treatment regimen to remain constant. Such fluctuations aren't recognized by medical providers, nor are drugs prescribed with these fluctuations in mind. Thus, cismales, whose relative estrogen levels vary less and the variation of which takes place over longer periods of time, benefit far more from current medical intervention than most cisfemales for whom estrogen levels vary on an almost daily basis and vary dramatically over the lifespan.

To give you another example—an example with respect to psycho-social gender differences—many women ADHD researchers have pointed out that the tasks that are traditionally assigned to women, and, of course, are frequently left to women to do, are the kinds of tasks with which ADHD interferes to the greatest degree: tasks such as keeping track of birthdays and other important dates; making phone calls; writing thank-you notes and organizing social events; cleaning, shopping, cooking, and decorating; serving as a spouse's domestic support system, regardless of one's own career and support needs; and so on. Dealing with the minutiae of daily life is exhausting enough on its own: doing so on your own, or for multiple people, when you have ADHD, can be completely overwhelming. So, women with ADHD become perceived as "bad" mothers and failed women.

Experience of ADHD differs on the basis of gender in other ways too. A performance artist whom I met at a feminist conference in Idaho created a great piece that she's performed in New York's Times Square in which she deals with what she calls "gender-maintenance techniques": shaving, plucking, dyeing, drying and styling hair, dressing, applying make-up, and so on. Every time I think of that performance piece, I say to myself: "That's it. I fail at being (that kind of) a woman." Thank God, few people in my daily life require me to meet those standards or want me to meet them. If my job came to depend on me meeting them, as is the case for many women, I don't know what I would do.

In the introduction to our anthology, Namita, Lisa, and I note that when Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term *intersectionality* in 1989, she intended it as "a heuristic term," emphasizing the experimental and situation-dependent nature of intersectional work. Part one of our book provides more history of the term, as well as early uses of what Kathryn Gines calls "proto-intersectionality," alongside challenges to current uses and definitions of the term *intersectionality* itself. The essays in part two are offered as examples of what intersectional analyses look like in discussions of issues that too often are seen as exclusively about race or exclusively about gender, rather than as about both of them simultaneously. Janine Jones's essay on Caster Semenya in the second part of the book is an excellent example of this kind of intersectional analysis. In the book, I and my co-editors encourage readers to think about what intersectionality has been, what it could become, and why it matters, rather than to seek a single definition or methodology. We were disappointed to see one review of our book that takes us to task on precisely this point, namely, the fact that we don't provide a single, all-inclusive definition or methodology of intersectionality. However, we regard our refusal to provide such a definition as a strength: that is, a strength of both the collection and of our introduction to it. We were also disheartened that the reviewer criticized many of the black authors in the collection, praising only a white author's work. This is, in fact, one way in which the theoretical and other work of black women is undervalued, something that is underscored and explicitly addressed in the book.

So, what, generally speaking, does intersectionality mean for my own work on ADHD and women? It means that it's not enough to talk about sex and/or gender. Race matters: there are huge disparities in diagnosis and treatment relative to race, though not in the ways many people expect. Social class matters: can you hire help? Or are you "the help"? Are you homeless? Family status matters: how important is it that you remember birthdays and other events? Can someone else do that for you? What happens to your relationships when you don't? Ethnicity and religion matter. Age matters. Co-morbidities matter. All of it matters, in that no two people living with ADHD will experience it in the same way. At the same time, recognizing patterns (in Marilyn Frye's sense of the word) in our experiences along these lines of difference is crucial to empowerment, to self-understanding and self-care, and to survival: rates for divorce, unemployment, eating disorders, and depression are significantly higher for the ADHD population.

In psychology, an intersectional analysis of ADHD recognizes the existence and importance of differences such as gender, race, class, and age, while simultaneously generating a working framework with which to understand, treat, and make recommendations for persons living with ADHD. To be truly intersectional, the emergent framework would need to be persistently contested

and regularly revised, as well as build in variation and responsiveness to individual differences. In philosophy, at least in my own work, an intersectional approach means integrating the experiences of and research on persons with cognitive disabilities into work on the nature of cognition, into cognitive science, into epistemology, and so on. And—and this is critical—there needs to be a recognition and acknowledgement by the profession that there are philosophers within professional philosophy who are cognitively disabled and who have succeeded in the profession. That's the project I am beginning work on now.

You contributed an article on disability and evolutionary psychology to the special issue of Disability Studies Quarterly *that I guest edited whose theme was* Improving Feminist Philosophy and Theory by Taking Account of Disability*. What was your motivation for this research? And does your current project develop the arguments that you made in the article?*

I'm very fortunate, and grateful to you again, Shelley, because a publisher reached out to me after reading my article in *DSQ*, asking me for a book proposal on the subject. That is what I am working on now and I have a sabbatical next spring to give the book my full attention. By the way, I say "fortunate" because to be an educated white person is to be privileged. Many academics would say that their work earned a given publisher's attention. I say that the work had to be good enough to merit publication and a response; but, the fact that it was published in the first place and then read by someone in a publishing house who wants to see more of it was not up to me. I happened to be in a place, personally and professionally, where the opportunity arose *and* I am able to take advantage of that opportunity. Many non-white philosophers, for instance, are not presented with such opportunities; many disabled philosophers who are presented with such opportunities can't take advantage of them because the unsupported demands of their daily lives don't allow them to take advantage of opportunities that open up for them. In this regard, I'm thinking of Zara Bain's interview with you and the issues about inaccessibility to which she drew attention.

I've been interested in disability for a while, for a number of personal reasons: first, my mother died of a neurological disease that impacted her ability to walk, then her ability to talk, then to eat; second, I worked in brain-injury rehabilitation for a while, helping people recreate their lives after significant "losses" of function; and, third, in graduate school, I was diagnosed with ADHD and an auditory processing disorder, both of which impair my short-term memory. My original interest in philosophy was in feminism and the work of Simone de Beauvoir—she kind of became my hero after the class that I've mentioned. Once the dissertation was done and I had a tenure-track job, however, that interest

began to wane, with feminist epistemology the one area that still fascinated me. As I was looking for new projects, a friend, who is now my partner, suggested that I consider—in a philosophical sense—how disability might be affecting me as a philosopher. That's when I began to work on an epistemology of disability. I now have a nephew who has been diagnosed as moderate-to-severe on the autism spectrum, so work on autism and theory of mind has also become really important to me.

I got interested in the topic of my *DSQ* essay—the failure of feminist philosophers and theorists to take disability into account in their critiques of evolutionary psychology and the failure of disability theorists to address evolutionary psychology—when I realized just how popular and unchallenged evolutionary justifications for contemporary behavior have become. Readers and listeners of this interview are no doubt familiar with the following claims which exemplify how evolutionary psychology has embedded itself in popular thinking: (1) rape and violence are functional evolutionary developments that have served humans well; (2) women hate it when men cheat because they need men's financial and other resources to raise their children; (3) gay animals don't contribute to the survival of the species; etc. As it turns out, evolutionary justifications are, in addition, used in philosophy of mind, that is, in discussions about modularity of mind. While there are variations between accounts of modularity, a dominant account of modularity claims that mental modules (functional modules, not physical modules, although they have neural correlates) developed in humans in response to evolutionary pressures to carry out various, to some degree isolatable, functions. In other words, mental modules are adaptations evolved through natural selection. Behaviors are the output of these mental modules and should be understood as such, according to many evolutionary psychologists.

This explanation oversimplifies the problem, of course, but it matters that, once again, in philosophy, current uncritical beliefs and biases about how thinking works and why certain behaviors occur have been given a seemingly neutral and objective biological origin. It's as if disability theory, critical race theory, feminist philosophy, and queer theory never existed. Or, at least, it seems that way because no mention is made of these critical lenses through which we must read origin stories. What surprised me, the more I looked into this research, was how little feminist philosophers and theorists and disability theorists had to say about the implications of evolutionary psychology for people living with disability. So this neglect itself also became part of my new project, that is, the project came to comprise both understanding why this neglect has occurred and finding ways in which to rectify it. In short, my new book will be an extended discussion of these philosophical and meta-philosophical issues.

As you've noted, your DSQ *article concentrated, in part, on how critical analysis of disability is left out of feminist philosophical and other theoretical considerations of evolutionary psychology. What about feminist and other philosophical work, in general? Do you think that feminist philosophers and other philosophers adequately incorporate disability into their intersectional analyses?*

The short answer is: no, they do not, and they still do not see that they are not. Of course, there are indications that this state of affairs may be changing. For example, the very existence of this blog and its attention to disability and the increasing frequency with which disability is included in lists of important characteristics alongside race, gender, sexuality, and class indicates change. These developments are worth noting; at the same time, however, we still don't have enough philosophers who work on disability and who recognize that some of their colleagues and co-workers are disabled, that the social group "disabled people" is not compromised solely of kids in so-called "special needs" classrooms and people in group homes. Philosophers continue to "other" disabled people and treat us as flawed, in need of "accommodations." Sometimes, philosophers (like uninformed members of the general population) perceive disabled people to have superpowers, a sixth sense. That disability serves to produce normality, that it doesn't exist outside of such a power structure, that neurotypicality is an epistemological framework through which theories and justificatory frameworks are upheld—these things are not yet recognized. I am not saying that disability, as it currently exists as a concept, is an illusion, but rather that the understanding of disability that currently prevails in philosophy serves a certain set of interests and generates obstacles for many people. I think it's great that your *Foucault and the Government of Disability* collection has been re-issued and expanded; and I hope that its re-release motivates a growing interest in critical analyses of disability and awareness along these lines.

I think that a key reason why feminist philosophers continue to do so little about disability is that disabilities make people deeply uncomfortable, even people who otherwise recognize the dependency that we have on each other. I think too that there is a tension that many women academics feel between, on the one hand, arguing for relational models of selfhood and the polity and, on the other, wanting to feel proud of and responsible for their successes, especially in a world that says women aren't capable of such successes. Unfortunately, this understandable desire for recognition, on the part of feminist academics, is often given expression in criticisms of learning-disabled students who need accommodations. Often such requests are treated as excuses, as efforts to get out of doing required work, or as burdens on the faculty. That the academic world in which a certain group of feminists have managed to succeed, despite obstacles that they know and write about, has other obstacles that they can't see

or won't see is somehow hard for many of them to grasp. As many think-pieces on race in America point out, membership in a marginalized group doesn't mean that you have not also internalized discriminatory attitudes. In the United States, where I currently live and work, accommodating disabilities requires acknowledgement of the fact that the story of how economic and industrial success happens, as it is told by the people and groups of people who profit from it, is a lie. There must be acknowledgement of the fact that the way in which society, education, and industry are structured is itself a form of accommodation. This, then, is where anti-racism, anti-sexism, and anti-ableism meet and why analyses of one are never as productive as analyses of their intersections, their convergences, and their divergences.

How do you bring your convictions about disability, race, gender, class, and intersectionality into your pedagogy and into your classroom practices, more generally?

I am always thinking about this—how to do it, how to do it well, what to emphasize, and what knowledges I can assume are already present in the classroom, as the very conditions of my students' lives. In keeping with what I said about intersectionality, I don't think there is any one way, or any one right way to do this. It's an ongoing project, awareness, and experiment, every day and every semester. But I'll give you three examples of ways in which I've recently incorporated intersectional thinking into my practices: first, in a campus lecture; second, in my philosophy courses; and third, as a department chair.

As recent recipient of the distinguished teaching award for my university, I was asked to give a lecture on a topic of my choosing at the start of the fall 2014 semester. With the combination of three things foremost in my mind—namely, the events in Ferguson, Missouri, Ta-Nehisi Coates's well-known article on reparations, and a talk that I attended by H. Samy Alim—I gave a lecture on how I, as a feminist philosopher and professor, still have a lot of work to do in order to fully integrate race and anti-racism into my academic work, especially in the classroom. Scholarship on intersectionality and code-switching was the foundation for my analysis in the lecture and my main example was the messages that faculty send—but do not realize that they send—when they grade written work according to standards of "good" or "academic" grammar, which really amounts to white, upper-class grammar.

As a white person speaking to an almost exclusively white audience, at a school where discrimination against women is discussed in almost every course, I felt that it was important to communicate the fact that changes in our thinking as

faculty and teachers are still necessary in other areas and, furthermore, that such changes are possible. Because I am well known as a defender of students with disabilities and as a feminist, people in the audience were pleasantly surprised that the focus of my talk was racism. And because I was already an accepted and valued member of the community in which I was speaking, I knew talking about my own development as a teacher would be a relatable and non-antagonistic way in which to communicate the conviction that thinking about gender, disability, or race in isolation produces insufficiently transformative educational practices. We all need to become intentionally intersectional in our approaches to research and teaching.

In my classes, I constantly revise and update syllabi in search of a list of readings and assignments that speak to the philosophical subject matter, the students' backgrounds and interests, and to the needs of the marginalized and hurting in our world. I reference blogs about disabled philosophers, women in philosophy, race and philosophy, and the philosophy profession as much as possible and sometimes make these things required reading. In my daily teaching, I usually provide outlines of the readings, on the board and sometimes electronically, and review these outlines before we begin discussion. I prefer it if students copy them, rather than download them, as it adds a kinesthetic dimension to learning; but, for students with certain disabilities, this is too much to ask, so I also post them. The outline helps students with short-term memory and attention problems like mine.

There isn't a class that I teach in which I won't disclose my ADHD. I explain my ADHD as it comes up, either in the way I am functioning on a given day, in describing the way that I prefer to teach, or when it is relevant to an assigned reading. I do these things because I think that pedagogy should include teaching students about how they are taught and why a teacher has chosen a certain style of teaching. Talking about pedagogy in this way helps students think about how and when they learn best. I also do it because there is so much misinformation out there about ADHD, some of which may be keeping a student in the class from seeking out help or diagnosis. Finally, I believe that it's important for students with disabilities to know that my classroom is a disability-friendly classroom, rather than a classroom where they need to worry that I'll judge them as less capable if they disclose to me. What better way is there to do that than to say: I'm one of you; I understand the struggle?

Last, but not least, as department chair, I've made it a priority to update our philosophy major and our course offerings, as well as to make more evident across the campus the role that philosophy can play in addressing injustice. We've recently added courses on suicide, disability, and Islamic philosophy and we continue to get high enrollments in existing courses on feminist philosophy

and philosophy of race. In the fall, we are introducing a course about the state of professional philosophy today that will be co-taught at the Renaissance Institute, an educational institute for retired and senior members of the local Baltimore community. We have an active philosophy club that frequently discusses issues of race, gender, and disability, alongside discussions of non-human life and the morality of lying to children about Santa Claus. The club's range of programming is another way that the department—in this case, the students in our department—sends the message that to be a thinking person is to be thinking about all of these issues, not just one of them, or none of them. Since Ferguson, the philosophy club and the philosophy department have made a concerted effort to work with the Black Student Union to develop and market extra-curricular programming. We've also made it our official department mission to diversify the field and the professoriate in general. We take mentoring very seriously, especially because all of our students are members of groups currently marginalized in philosophy, many of them are marginalized in multiple ways.

Maeve, the pedagogical and other practices that you've described throughout this interview seem important and should give other philosophers ideas about the transformative possibilities of pedagogy and intersectional analyses: about what can be done and what should be done. What specific resources—books, articles, or films—would you recommend to colleagues who wish to develop an intersectional approach to teaching about oppression and privilege?

So many articles and books have influenced my thinking on intersectionality and my teaching about oppression and privilege; but, I'll try to give an idea of some of the things that have played a major role in my thinking on these matters.

On what it's like to be black women in academia—both as students and as faculty—I have learned a great deal from Patricia Hill Collins, "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought," in *Signs*, vol. 14, no. 4, 1989; bell hooks's, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," in *Framework: The Journal of Cinema & Media*, vol. 36, 1989; as well as "Feminists We Love: Dr. Kristie Dotson," an interview with Kristie Dotson from earlier this year.

For a detailed discussion of unrecognized and harmful ways that privilege impacts the classroom and what to do about it, I recommend H. Samy Alim and Geneva Smitherman, *Articulate While Black: Barack Obama, Language, and Race in the U.S.* (Oxford University Press, 2012), especially chapters 2 and 6; and José Medina's book, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

For an article on what works for students with disabilities in higher-education classrooms, I recommend Sally M. Reis, Joan M. McGuire, and Terry W. Neu, "Compensation Strategies Used by High-Ability Students With Learning Disabilities Who Succeed In College," which appeared in the journal *Gifted Child Quarterly*, vol. 44, Spring 2000.

Excellent recommendations, Maeve. Thanks for providing them. Thank you also for taking the time to be interviewed for Dialogues on Disability. You've been a terrific guest, offering valuable critical observations upon which everyone who reads or listens to this interview should reflect.

Readers/listeners of this interview are invited to use the Comments section below to respond to Maeve O'Donovan's remarks, ask questions, and so on. Comments will be moderated. As always, although signed comments are encouraged and preferred, anonymous comments will be permitted. Finally, I'd like to thank Bryce Huebner for the generous technical support that he enthusiastically provided as I prepared this interview.

Please join me here again on Wednesday, August 19th at 8 a.m. EST for the fifth installment of the Dialogues on Disability series and, indeed, on every third Wednesday of the months ahead. I have a fabulous line-up of interviews planned. If you would like to nominate someone to be interviewed (self-nominations are welcomed), please feel free to write me at s.tremain@yahoo.ca. I prioritize diversity with respect to disability, class, race, gender, institutional status, culture, age, and sexuality in my selection of interviewees and my scheduling of interviews.