

A Philosopher Gets Pilloried

By Jillian Kay Melchior

Usually, when junior professors publish scholarly articles, they are lucky to elicit more than a yawn. But last week the philosophical musings of Rebecca Tuvel, an associate professor at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tenn., provoked a spasm of fury.

Ms. Tuvel's paper, published in the feminist philosophy journal *Hypatia*, takes on one of the weakest points of the left's mania for identity politics. Ms. Tuvel asks why society is increasingly willing to embrace people who identify as "transgender," even as it rejects those who identify as "transracial." Why laud Caitlyn Jenner while vilifying Rachel Dolezal?

Ms. Tuvel weighs several arguments that seek to "justify transgenderism and delegitimize transracialism." She concludes: "Considerations that support transgenderism seem to apply equally to transracialism," and therefore society "should also accept transracial individuals' decisions to change races."

Where to draw the line on self-identification is an obvious question, and a fundamental one, Ms. Tuvel suggests in her paper. Think transracialism is tricky? It only gets more complicated from there. Her paper briefly considers other exotic forms of self-identification. How do progressives reckon with people who say they're really "otherkins," identifying as nonhuman animals? Are we morally required to accept "transabled" people, who are born physically normal but feel one of their limbs transgresses on their identity?

As with gender, Ms. Tuvel writes, "we need an account of race that does not collapse into a position according to which all forms of self-identification are socially recognized, such as one's self-identification as a wolf."

Instead of taking on Ms. Tuvel's arguments, the professoriate attacked her for asking questions to begin with. More than 500 academics signed a letter denouncing the paper. One of their main complaints was that Ms. Tuvel didn't lace it with references to scholars "who are most vulnerable to the intersection of racial and gender oppressions (women of color)." Absent such citations, they said, her paper "painfully reflects a lack of engagement beyond white and cisgender privilege."

When academics would rather anathematize a critic than argue back, it's a sure sign that they've departed from the realm of philosophy and rational discourse. "Calls for intellectual engagement are also being shut down because they 'dignify' the article," Ms. Tuvel said in a written statement about the saga. "If this is considered beyond the pale as a response to a controversial piece of writing, then critical thought is in danger."

Some of Ms. Tuvel's foes are employing the fashionable trope that criticism is a form of violence. On Twitter, a student at the University of California, San Francisco accused Ms. Tuvel of "epistemic violence." The hundreds of academics who signed the petition asserted it was "dangerous" for *Hypatia* to leave the article up, given that "its continued availability causes further harm."

Within days *Hypatia* predictably buckled, posting an obsequious 1,000-word mea culpa on Facebook. Its editors promised to revamp their procedures: "A better review process would have both anticipated the criticisms that quickly followed the publication, and required that revisions be made to improve the argument in light of those criticisms." The journal also pledged to give more editorial attention and advisory oversight to trans feminists and people of color. Both changes seem likely to result in the censorship of ideas or arguments deemed taboo or offensive.

This liberal pile-on has rattled Ms. Tuvel, who burst into tears before declining my request for an interview. She fears, legitimately, that she'll be blacklisted in academia.

But it's her *opponents on the progressive left* that this saga should really frighten. Their reaction suggests their ideas can't withstand even the most basic critical scrutiny. Such fragile principles aren't persuasive or enduring.

The academic left accuses her of 'epistemic violence' for asking scholarly questions about identity.