

Statement on Diversity

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Growing up white and middle-class in a Midwestern U.S. suburb, I did not have much experience with diversity; indeed, no one even talked about it. I knew very few non-white or very poor individuals and families. I was also too young to understand the gender dynamics that took place among adults. At the same time, I was always instinctively bothered by racism. I was fortunate to have had parents who did not tolerate racism, which unfortunately thrived among some of my other relatives. I was disturbed by images of African-Americans getting hosed and attacked by angry whites during riots. I avidly read books about Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr., Dick Gregory, and other civil rights leaders. I didn't understand why so many people were viscerally prejudiced against blacks. To me, the civil rights leaders were heroes. I have no clear idea why I identified with them. Maybe it was because I felt a bit of an outsider myself, someone who didn't quite fit in, who got teased and judged for the length of his hair, an external quality that should make no difference to one's true worth. Prejudice can cause a great deal of harm. So it just seemed wrong to me.

It wasn't until I moved to the New York City area that I really came to experience and appreciate the value of living among so many different types of people. I lived and worked closely with young African-American men from Harlem and Brooklyn, with West Indian, Latino, and Asian-Indian laborers. I saw first hand how many of them were treated unfairly, more harshly, more apt to be watched and suspected by whites and by the police. Yet I saw how their backgrounds afforded them strengths, as well. They believed, more than I did, in family sticking together. They were much less individualistic than I.

When I started teaching in graduate school, at SUNY on Long Island, I saw how many students struggled, due to having to work to keep their families afloat economically. I saw how it affected their schoolwork. I saw how most women seemed reluctant to speak in class and tended to get shouted down or interrupted. I noticed, even in myself, the tendency to prejudge, to suspect that a student doing poorly was just not trying hard enough—when the real issue was she had several mouths to feed and a dream that often appeared out of reach. I read books and articles that helped me understand how being a white male gave me a sense of confidence and privilege I simply took for granted. To see things from another's point of view, you have to see that they often do not possess such a sense of privilege.

Before moving to Lebanon to teach at the American University of Beirut I had had little contact with or knowledge of Muslims. I knew, or I thought I knew, that the place was dangerous; that Muslims hated Americans, that Muslim women were oppressed, that the area is full of religious extremists. Well, to say the least, the real situation is complicated. These prejudices are not without truth, but they are mostly untrue and harmful. I think there is no region on Earth more diverse and complicated, in terms of ethnicity, class, politics and religion, nor more troubled in terms of gender. One of the first things I learned was that students do not share my "natural" sense of justice. When the question arose in the context of Plato's *Euthyphro*, whether you would turn in your father for suspicion of murder, or rather protect and defend him whether he is guilty or not, most students said they would protect the father. "Even if you *knew* he was guilty?" I asked, incredulously. "Yes," most of them said, "because you can't trust the justice system to be fair; and you have to protect your family at all costs." Hmm, I thought. This didn't square with my "universalist" conception of justice. But I saw this discrepancy as an opportunity. Does this not suggest that "the law of the father," the patriarchy, can itself be unjust? What do I mean?

I used to think that if a woman were wearing the hijab, the headscarf, it meant she was a religious fundamentalist, or sadly oppressed. There is truth to that in many cases. But women wear it for a variety of reasons; while others stop wearing it for a variety of reasons. You cannot assume anything. To understand another requires patience and imagination, but primarily listening to what the other has to say. It requires understanding the history of the person and knowing something of the culture. But it also

requires understanding that many women are indeed oppressed—that they do not have a choice, that they want desperately to remove the veil and the oppression that it represents—but cannot. Some manage to remove it, but often at great cost to themselves—the cost of being punished by parents and shunned by friends. This is when “the law of the father” becomes a problem. It cannot be defended. Nor can it be dismantled, easily.

I consider the classroom an important place to teach diversity. I do not tell students to appreciate it; I try to get them to see the value of other viewpoints, to see how we can learn from them. I do this by drawing attention to issues that concern them directly. I assign articles on the causes of poverty in their region (war, sectarianism, imperialism, colonialism). I point out the historical devaluation of women in Western Philosophy, and I introduce non-canonical writers, such as Princess Elizabeth (who critiqued Descartes) and Christine de Pezan, who exposed the negative effects of male idealizations of women. I point out how these idealizations are harmful to men, as well. I teach the Ethics of Care as a critique of universalist ethics. I draw attention to injustices today in the Middle East: to the abuses committed against domestic laborers, most of whom tend to be women from India, Somalia, and the Philippines. I hold discussions about the prejudices and divisions among Christian, Sunni, and Shia religious sects, among different regional nationalities, and prejudices against Syrian and Palestinian refugees. The cross-section of subject positions in this region is truly staggering. I discuss honor killings and the general low-esteem that most men in this region hold against women—the lax and backwards attitudes regarding domestic abuse and rape, the lack of awareness of human trafficking, and the lack of civil rights. We contemplate passages such as this from J.S. Mill: “Women cannot be expected to devote themselves to the emancipation of women, until men in considerable number are prepared to join with them in the undertaking.”

In this way, I hope to impart the idea that “the law of the father” can often be unjust—but that a more inclusive notion of justice must be developed and fought for. There are a lot of problems here. I do my best to give everyone in the class a voice, a chance to speak out, a chance to be heard, a chance to overcome fear and deficiency of understanding. Fear of the other is a fault in ourselves. Without a diverse academic environment, overcoming the injustices of patriarchy is not really possible.