

## Communication From One Feminist

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In James P. Sterba's new collection of papers on justice, one of the contributions comes from Professor Alison Jaggar.<sup>1</sup> It is an essay written in the tradition of socio-linguistic theorizing, whereby a major problem with the relationship between men and women concerns their different uses of language, their distinctive ways of communicating, arguing and talking.

One of the crucial features of Jaggar's paper is the clarion call it issues for addressing philosophical issues differently from how she takes men to have addressed them and from what they have managed to establish as the norms or standards of such discourse. Indeed, what she seems to want is not "addressing" philosophical problems at all, not advancing arguments, not trying to defend theses, not pointing out critical flaws, etc.

In this paper I plan to deal with Jaggar's paper in what I take to be her own terms. I want to react to it as I felt when I read it.<sup>2</sup> Or something along those lines. I am not sure how this will come out—let's call it an experiment in Jaggarian/feminist philosophical expression.

The first thing about reading Allison Jaggar's essay is that I felt insulted, badgered, harangued, demeaned, scared, betrayed as well as somewhat challenged by it. In addition, I felt that the piece is sly, inauthentic and circumspect. These feelings occurred intermittently, as I was reading the piece, without much thought having been given to its substance outside my simple understanding of what was being said.

I wouldn't ordinarily say such things at the outset of a discussion of someone's input in a philosophical exchange but Jaggar implicitly asks for this by means of her championing the sort of discussions in which people mostly express their feelings and leave aside criticism, scoring logical points, doing battle with words and undertaking similar traditional tasks. Admittedly some of my emotional reactions were confused and I am not even certain to whose ideas I was reacting since Jaggar didn't speak only in her own voice but kept quoting many others and mixing their and her own views in a way that made it im-

possible to know who is speaking. Perhaps this is deliberate, given the emphasis many feminists put on collective action and responsibility.<sup>3</sup> I don't believe anyone could be clear about who was actually addressing the reader. I felt hurt indignant about being unjustly accused, caricatured, stereotyped, demeaned, misunderstood, and derided because, well, I am a male. It made no difference that I also considered that Jaggar probably believes, however confusedly, that this is a kind of pay-back for how many men have treated and are still treating many women. I didn't appreciate being lumped with some unspecified group regardless of my own particular attitudes and conduct. And I didn't need to be taught any lessons, either. My own history gave me ample experience in being victimized by people with prejudices.

The question kept popping into my mind, "Why are Jaggar and, it seems, many women who work in the discipline of philosophy and other academic fields treating me and my fellow males with such measure of insensitivity, suggesting that we personally engaged in some kind of oppression of them, as if I and my fellow males went about aiming to downgrade women for the last several millennia and still found it impossible to let go of our intensely guarded powers?" I couldn't fathom the answer—I felt as if some mendacious conspiracy had been concocted against me and there is no one I can talk with among the conspirators who will give me a sympathetic hearing. I have heard similar outcries from fellow males? both those who have tried to approach Jaggar and others, and those who just cut off all communication with different but apparently still similarly radical feminists? in the face of their bafflement as to what they could do to precipitate some sane discourse about these matters with those most vocal about them. The thought that we are some kind of conveniently located target, never mind what we actually think, feel or do, has certainly crossed my mind. Unloading pent up resentment does occur, obviously, but it is difficult to tolerate it when it occurs in a deliberately prepared philosophical essay—not the same as when someone spontaneously lashes out, from sheer frustration or some other powerful emotion that requires time to deal with.

I certainly felt, not only when reading Jaggar but also when I have attended sessions dealing with feminist philosophical concerns at APA meetings and have read letters in APA publications, as the

target of irrational discrimination, unjustly accused of crimes I not only wasn't guilty of but hadn't even imagined. The generalized language suggested this, as when someone lashes out at another with "You *never* listen to me" or "You *always* walk away when I try to talk with you." This sort of talk is just what I had always disassociated from philosophical discussions. In the light of this, even the possibility of my guilt seemed to me unreal, so I felt like some evil, Kafkaesque malicious force were unleashed at me, thus far only verbally but soon to be followed with actual damaging conduct. If I tried to think, perhaps this is just what is being intended, a sort of "pay back" tactic, again I thought: "Why would anyone of scholarly philosophical bent want to just spread this around, indiscriminately, never mind whether or not the targets are guilty?"

I feel on these occasions, encountering these harangues, echoes from my childhood when my mother and father, both rather brutal people in a culture where the idea of child abuse had not been conceptualized, kept hitting, beating, kicking and deriding me and I felt utterly baffled as to what on earth was happening, why they did all this, given that I could not connect any of it to myself, to anything I did or thought. Reading Jaggar reminded me of this, what with her merciless and unceasing emotion-laden intellectual lashings. It was, indeed, difficult for me to keep myself disciplined from being fully consumed by rage at the injustice and perceive some of the kernels of truth about history, morals and politics that her essay contained. It reminded me, later, of nasty quarrels couples, friends and members of families sometimes engage in wherein hardly anything said can be taken seriously but, also, a lot of information is, sadly, lost.

Jaggar seems to me among those vocal women in the community of intellectuals who regard all men—and now and then white/Anglo women—as having perpetrated nothing less toward women than the devil's work. Yet it is simply false that I had any part in such a policy. Not only that, I didn't even tolerate it where it was evident on the part of some others, women and men included. That I do not share the philosophical reflections many feminists advance about how to respond to their plight does not warrant being classed with the perpetrators of the injustice they are decrying.

But perhaps they do believe I am guilty because throughout my adult life, especially in my professional work, I have, of course, been using arguments and reasoning and have tried to be logical and distinguish my feelings from my emotions as I tried to make sense of things; sure I attempted to first discern what is moral and only thereafter identify some of my emotions as morally appropriate while others as morally suspect. But none of this had anything to do with keeping women down, with dehumanizing them or me, with not listening to them and with similar improprieties of which Jaggar so cavalierly accuses me.

Never mind her mistakes—e.g., that consciousness raising was invented by feminists. What would she say to the claim that Hegel or Marx was the actual inventor? That men just don't get it, one may assume, since such a charge amounts to trying to score points, never mind about the objective of getting things right.

Consider, furthermore, the charge she discusses and shows much sympathy for, namely, that "You are not listening to us," or that "You are not hearing what we are saying." It has, of course, been thrown at me as at others—including many women with strong personalities and convictions—on and off. I have only now and then been able to verify it—e.g., when I had jumped back into the discussion in often justified anticipation of what would follow, thinking I could cut down on the verbiage. Most of the time I discovered that "listening" or "hearing" in these accusations meant something more along "accepting my side of the story," or "Complacently deferring to the philosophical or intellectual adversary or the accuser, not making any attempt at presenting them or other listeners with what seemed to [me] the more sensible outlook on the topic."

It isn't listening that Jaggar and other seem to be talking about but not offering critical assessment and then, perhaps, resisting, counter-asserting or protesting. When Jaggar and those she speaks for say, "You are not listening" it means, actually, "You are refusing to see and understand things as I do." Many of those being so addressed are, in fact, listening only too closely, understanding only too clearly just what is being said, and refusing to accept it because they honestly think it is false. Not that its being false is always the most important point—sometimes it is more important to simply grasp what

others say, how they feel, why they talk and act as they do, never mind justification and such. With children, for example, this is vital, as it may be on and off with spouses and friends who are distressed. But not with mature intellectual interlocutors!

It seems, however, to be futile to make note of such matters to Jaggar because not bowing to her line of thinking about these matters seems to condemn someone right off—nothing else needs to be said, guilty as charged for simply not lying down and playing dead or shouting "mea culpa" to every accusation. Furthermore, the very idea of presenting some alternative approach is nearly foreclosed in Jaggar's approach—by her and her sisters' characterization of the nature of argument and rational discourse. Unless one accepts, unquestioningly, the style of discourse she advocates—for I don't for a moment even believe that most women accept it as the sensible approach to discovering what's what about their lives, let alone about the nature of the world the surrounds us—one has simply failed to get it, one is again dead in the water.

Still, it might help to speak about these matters—if not in the hope of reaching Jaggar & Co., then at least others who show interest in these matters but haven't already signed up for Jaggar's team—both the traditional analytical (or argumentative or dialogical) fashion and in something like the mode that characterizes FPD (involving expressing one's feelings, seeking cooperation, etc.).

For starters, Jaggar unjustly lumps all while/Anglo women into one group, as if these people all had some kind of collective identity, mind, even body, as if they didn't have different attitudes about various other people in their community. This constant, relentless collectivization of men and women and blacks and others is a central failing in Jaggar's writing here and elsewhere. I empathize with how some students who read this will feel, being perhaps scared to or less agile at expressing outrage at such indiscriminate, reckless and insulting grouping, being treated as if lacking any personal identity and responsibility for his or her thoughts.

It is amazing that someone, who claims to be concerned about discourse that is sensitive, that takes feelings into account, can just wield about her pen so callously, without the slightest regard for how it will make those feel who are left out except for being males or

white/Anglo women. Young persons are more vulnerable to being charged with crimes they did not commit and feeling badly about it—the experience of humankind with various religious efforts at perpetrating such injustice is legion. And young people are just now coming to make ideas their own, forming explanations as to who they are, why they have lived as they have, and adults can easily intimidate them with the kinds of verbal lashing Jaggar delivers. A modern feminist philosopher ought simply to be more aware of this and not advance reams of prose that lack any care and sensitivity about whether some members of the group she refers to share in the traits and histories she attributes to them. The perpetration of such unethical conduct in discourse belies, I believe, the best in the very thesis she is advocating.

The suggestion that somehow males just don't do the fine things women do as they relate to each other is another serious flaw in Jaggar's writing. As if "speaking women with other women" formed some kind of holier than thou assembly, with males simply not possessing the capacity or willingness to be intimate, understanding, caring, interested in wounds, willing to share words. But this is bunk—and there is, moreover, nothing but assertion to back it.

My own heterosexual, "white"/Central-European-turned-North American male bourgeois and mostly unique individual experiences do not confirm it. I have suffered all kinds of personal and political and related setbacks in my life and have always had wonderfully receptive males and females who would listen and share and console instead of just jump in a give instructions or try to "overwhelm each other by rational arguments." Such loose attributions are what make for hurt feelings and unnecessary animosities, whether perpetrated by women or men.

Indeed, nearly everything Jaggar writes is geared to antagonize men, if only subconsciously. She may not have intended it that way, although given her evident intelligence it is difficult to imagine that she hadn't thought of this very probable result and left in the passages having this impact despite that fact. "Men's discourse often takes on the quality of verbal tournament," she quotes from Schweickart, with no effort to give even a few examples, to see to it that such broad parodying of what men do does not go unchecked. In the other direc-

tion, the only time Jaggard deigns to put down women in general is when she speaks of white/Anglo women, evidently pandering to current P.C., whereby the scapegoats for the misfortunes and miseries of millions around the world happen not to be Jews or Arabs or some other unjustly but conveniently despised group but whites. Never mind that "whites" or even "white/Anglo" is just as uninformative a term when we are talking about human beings in their wholeness as "black" or "Jew" are. Yet Jaggard uses these left and right, to the point that one wonders what exactly she aims to achieve other than to irritate and annoy.

Then there is in this essay an effort to cross dress words so that by *sounding* different Jaggard makes it appear that something different is being said. Consider, for example, the following quote from Schweickart—whom Jaggard quotes as an unquestionable authority on innumerable topics: "[W]omen see questions as part of conversational maintenance while men see them as requests for information; (and) women explicitly acknowledge previous utterances and try to connect with them while men have no such rule and often ignore preceding comments." If not designed to simply antagonize, what is the point of such flagrant generalizations, especially when it is very doubtful that any differences are actually being captured? The point is, is it not, that men are not so nice as women? But in fact this point is not shown only hinted at by the use of words that sound more soothing. Conversational maintenance is really not that different from request for information—it is difficult to think how a conversation with any substance and emotional content would be maintained if it didn't possess the needed information. Sure, sometimes men and women seem to ignore preceding comments but, in fact, their comments presuppose them and thus give evidence of having been heeded, while other men and women like to have themselves pandered to by being reassured that their comments have been taken in and are the center of attention. We have different psychological needs, members of different sexes, age groups, nationalities, psychohistories, races, etc., and these group analysis restricted to women and men do little advance the cause of grasping the nuances needed to get along with each other successfully.

Jaggar's characterization of the conversations of men "as a continuation of war by other means" is mean and nasty and betrays a hypocrisy concerning how women see language. It also calls to mind a point from Hegel one that, despite the translator's use of "men" where perhaps human beings would have been proper, applies to men and women alike:

Since the man of common sense appeals to his feeling, to an oracle within his breast, he is done with any one who does not agree. He has just to explain that he has no more to say to any one who does not find and feel the same as himself. In other words, he tramples the roots of humanity underfoot. For the nature of humanity is to impel men to agree with one another, and its very existence lies simply in the explicit realization of a community of conscious life. What is anti-human, the condition of mere animals, consists in keeping within the sphere of feeling pure and simple, and in being able to communicate only by way of feeling-states.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, is it not the case that some women are perfectly willing to engage in war instead of solving problems by voluntary cooperation, as, for instance, in affirmative action policies that subject men to humiliating and demeaning experiences whether they have been party to such on their own or not, simply because some other men may in the past have been?

As a mere aside, it is interesting that in the Hungarian language there is no gender differentiation—one cannot refer to third persons in other but a gender neutral fashion and, unlike in many European languages, no prefixes exist that distinguish nouns by gender. Yet, as anyone who knows Hungary will attest, the culture within which this language is used embodies every bit of the gender differentiation we find elsewhere and would, indeed, be considered sexist by the standards of contemporary America. It appears, then, that whether a language embodies gender differentiation may by no means be the result of actual attitudes regarding gender differences or similarities.

To return to Jaggar's piece, distressingly, its impact on this commentator was mostly frustration and sadness. Leaving the navigation and survey of the often difficult terrain of male-female relations to someone of Jaggar's and her favored colleagues' approach and temperament would not appear, in my best judgment, to help matters

at all. One could continue here with nit-picking complaints about Jaggar's apparent hidden agenda—noting that what she is doing is not advancing feminism but anti-individualism and collectivism in politics, or that she unjustly recounts and focuses upon John Rawls' phrase "representative men" (as if this would demonstrate without a doubt that Rawls is but a crass promoter of male power), or recalling against many of her suggestions the recent book by Thomas Farrell<sup>5</sup> (who debunks the entire story about some kind of great male conspiracy against women in which men came off with great advantages and women did nothing but suffer—think of war, to start with). But all that is detail. What Jaggar's essay needs as a general response, perhaps even simply emotional reaction, in terms of which its injustice and emotional or psychological hurtfulness are stressed.

Even more importantly, I would like to urge readers of her piece to accept neither her characterization of men, nor her characterization of women but to embark upon their own investigation and trust their own perceptions and understanding. Not all women have it in for men as Jaggar clearly appears to, nor do all men comport themselves as she would have us believe. But most of all, young men should not accept that they share in some kind of collective guilt for being what they in part evidently are, namely, males in a Western culture. It would be sad if this piece would influence them to accept an unearned guilt.

Finally, let me just suggest that we all consider the often difficult and tense relations between women and men not the result of some kind of grand conspiracy or even negligence but of the combination of two universal human factors: (1) the great difficulty of casting off old habits that may have had some point at one time but now stand in the way of making headway within new circumstances, and (2) the proclivity of many human beings toward rationalizing the inability and unwillingness to make needed changes, thus leading to entrenched, no longer innocent traditionalism or reactionary behavior and institutions.

The earlier division of labors that had placed many women and men into certain reasonable roles are largely obsolete and as with all well entrenched practices and institutions, dislodging this is not a simple matter, especially where legally fixed. Both men and women suffer from this, probably equally over the long haul. Women do not get accepted into the world of commerce and government, men are sent

to wars to die and are expected to live their lives with their feelings nearly completely repressed. This needs to be changed. But it will not be if men decide all women are their accusers or enemies and women decide that men conspired to place them so far from their current aspirations.

I am something of an optimist in these matters, despite the specter of a rather discouraging prospect created by the likes of Alison Jaggar. But it would be unjust to generalize from her to other women; and men, especially, need to keep that firmly in mind as they address these problems in the community of scholars where, at present, outbursts of the sort Jaggar has produced are more prominent than voices of sensitivity and support.

## Endnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> Alison M. Jaggar, "Toward a Feminist Conception of Moral Reasoning," in James P. Sterba, *Morality and Social Justice: Point/Counterpoint* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995), pp. 115-46. All quotations, unless noted otherwise, are from this work.

<sup>2</sup> Initially Professor Sterba asked that all contributors to his volume, myself included, volunteer to respond to two others, and I selected Professor Jaggar's piece as one to which I wanted to respond. After reading my response, however, Professor Sterba asked me to select someone else; he didn't wish to publish the response I produced, on which the present discussion is based. He did say, though, that Professor Jaggar had urged him to do so anyway.

Of course, when one sits down to write a paper, one is likely to no longer feel exactly as one did while or shortly after reading what one is addressing with one's remarks. I am hoping, however, to capture in words, with adequate accuracy, what I felt when reading Jaggar's piece. Since I am no poet or literary artist, my capacity to give full verbal expression to these feelings will probably leave a lot to be desired. Yet, given Jaggar's call for the kind of communication she claims women are mainly capable of and concerned with, I thought it important to try to talk here about how I feel, mostly, not what I think.

<sup>3</sup> I discuss this in my criticism of Catherine MacKinnon's views in "The Right to Privacy vs. Uniformitarianism," *Journal of Social Philosophy*, Vol. 24 (1993), pp. 76-84.

<sup>4</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Mind*, tr. J. B. Baillie (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1985), p. 127

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Farrell, *The Myth of Male Power* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993).