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Engaging Vulnerabilities: An Outline for a Responsive and Responsible Theory*

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Abstract

This paper proposes that several methodological imperatives should guide *responsible* and *responsive* theorising in order for any form of solidarity between philosophers and the vulnerable people they theorise about to be possible. As purveyors of conceptualisations, principles and critique, social and political philosophers contribute to public debates, often oblivious of how they tap into a community's political imaginary, sometimes challenging, other times reinforcing it. I propose that philosophers need to assume responsibility for how they conceptually carve out "reality" and for the normative assessment thereof, often enunciated from a position of authority. Moreover, in theorising, philosophers must be responsive to and solicit the voices of the vulnerable. Building on feminist and critical race theory and social epistemology, I first outline a vision of responsible and responsive theory, centred on practices of *apprenticeship* and *playful world travelling*, which have an *affective dimension*. I then introduce a methodological ethos that enables philosophers to participate reflexively in debates over difficult issues, contributing illuminating (rather than obscuring) ideas to the public hermeneutical pool of interpretive resources. I conclude by discussing how irresponsible and irresponsive theory dealt with a specific case of vulnerable people – migrants and refugees – thus foreclosing the very possibility of solidarity.

Keywords: vulnerability, solidarity, political theory methodology, realism, refugees, David Miller

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Introduction

This paper tackles the question of solidarity with vulnerable groups and focuses on how social and political philosophers, a group who dedicate themselves to thinking rigorously about difficult political issues, should approach vulnerability for solidarity to be at all possible. Vulnerability is not assumed here to be a monolithic, uniform phenomenon, but one that is dynamic and situated at the intersection of various axes of marginalisation, depending on the context. This paper does not seek to provide a theory of vulnerability. Instead, it outlines a methodological ethos, motivated by the belief that methodological choices have ethical and political consequences and proposes several methodological principles for responsible and responsive theorising. Responsible theorising refers to reflective, self-critical conceptual practices and to the careful mobilisation and deployment of evidence from other disciplines to advance normative claims, whereas responsiveness is an ethical requirement that should inform philosophers' orientation to the vulnerable people they study. I argue that following these principles enhances the reliability of theoretical reflection and could nurture – though not guarantee – solidary relationships between philosophers and the vulnerable groups they theorise about. As I argue below, this methodological ethos is a pre-condition for even a minimal understanding of solidarity to be possible, but no guarantee thereof.

As purveyors of conceptualisations, principles and critique, philosophers contribute to the public conversation about what is to be done, though often oblivious to the subtler ways in which they tap into a community's political imaginary, sometimes challenging its presuppositions, often reinforcing them. This paper sees social and political philosophy as part of a society's horizon of meaning that influences, without determining, what thinkers and the public alike consider desirable and feasible. Therefore, the choice of epistemic standpoint and of the terms used to frame a problem must be subjected to scrutiny, as they have a constitutive effect on the object of study and influence one's prescriptive conclusions. I argue that philosophers must assume responsibility for how they conceptually carve out "reality", for the evidence they rely on, and for their normative assessment of that reality, often enunciated from a position of privileged epistemic authority,[†] which helps it reverberate in public discussions. Too often has social and political philosophy refused to engage with literatures that challenge its authority and blind spots, assuming the objectivity of its own standpoint. Moreover, to open the possibility of solidarity with vulnerable

[†] By this I mean that philosophers enjoy high levels of epistemic authority in the public space, due to institutionalised hierarchies of knowledge, in which philosophy occupies a privileged position. This position usually gives important symbolic weight to philosophers' interventions in public discussions, something that comes with important responsibilities.

groups, social and political philosophy must solicit and be responsive to their voices.[‡] Instead of assuming the obviousness and the transparency of their motivations, philosophers must instead try and see what the problem looks like from their position. This is not to put a didactical burden on the vulnerable, but to encourage listening to the voices that often struggle to make themselves heard.

The first section proposes a vision of responsible and responsive theory as a precondition for the very possibility of political solidarity with the vulnerable that make the object of its inquiry. In dialogue with social epistemologists, feminists[§] and critical race theorists, I outline a methodological orientation based on practices of *apprenticeship* (Spelman 1990) and *playful world travelling* (Lugones 1987), which presuppose a certain *affective openness* (Lee Bartky 2002; Gould 2007). This orientation is essential to overcoming social epistemic obstacles to responsibly and responsively theorising about the vulnerable. The second section introduces several methodological guidelines that can help the social and political philosopher participate reflexively and critically in debates surrounding difficult political issues, in ways that contribute illuminating (rather than obscuring) ideas to the hermeneutical pool within which these debates occur. To illustrate the salience of the methodological ethos today, I then discuss how irresponsible and irresponsive theory has dealt with a specific case – migrants and refugees – thus foreclosing the very possibility of solidarity. While other examples are easily available, I chose this group for its significance in current international politics.

Before moving forward analysis, several caveats are necessary. First, the paper is addressing here those contemporary social and political philosophers who explicitly profess a realist approach and aim to find solutions to pressing “real” problems.** As Matt Sleat put it, “one thing that unites realistic theories [...] is the sense that the reality of politics ought to play some significant role in directing the theorist’s activity.” (2018, 8). For realists

... political philosophy cannot simply help itself to a vision of politics that seems most amenable to the realization of the theorist’s preferred ideals but must rather be guided by the best accounts of actual political life available to us, even if that guidance comes at the expense of introducing what might be viewed as empirical “impurities” into the philosophical enterprise. (2018, 14)

[‡] For a complex account of the ethics and politics of listening to refugees’ voices, see Woods, in this issue.

[§] This paper follows into Frazer’s (2018) footsteps as it highlights the lessons that realists could learn from feminist methodologies.

** For a survey of historical sources and recent developments in realism, see (Rossi and Sleat 2014).

Ideal theorists, who see the constraints of world politics as shackles on the ability to think clearly and unencumbered through moral dilemmas, are not this piece's immediate audience.^{††} I address those who claim to start with the world as it is, with its imperfections, suffering and inequities, who confront, head on, the difficult constraints reality places on normative thinking and feasible solutions. In zooming in on the condition of migrants and refugees in western, affluent democracies, I engage with one of realism's important representatives – David Miller, and his most recent book, *Strangers in Our Midst* (2016a). I focus on this book for three reasons: Miller's avowed commitment to realism, which, I argue, either does not materialise or materialises in a problematic manner in the book; his dealing with one of the most pressing and complex issues in present politics, which currently attracts a lot of academic and political attention; his high levels of epistemic authority, which led to the book's high impact on philosophical and public debates about migration and the Mediterranean "crisis".^{‡‡} I suggest the book emblematically illustrates the pitfalls of irresponsible and irresponsible theory and severely curtails the very possibility of solidarity towards the vulnerable.

Second, I do not assume there is one single way of living up to this ethos. Theorists belonging to multiple intellectual traditions – critical theory, post-structuralism, feminism – have offered responsive and responsible theories of vulnerability. In this sense, it is not possible to read my proposal as a formula or blueprint, but merely as an ethos that has to be cultivated both institutionally and individually.

Third and relatedly, I do not offer a definition or comprehensive account of vulnerability here. My aim is not to tell readers what vulnerability is, but to propose a set of ideas about *how* we could study it responsibly and responsively. To the extent that this paper says anything positive about vulnerability is that it cannot be grasped theoretically in an ethical and empirically grounded manner outside the ethos I propose here. There is no shortage of reflexive accounts of vulnerability, many of which are compatible with the methodological ethos proposed here.^{§§}

^{††} They, too, display irresponsible and irresponsible theoretical propensities, but, unlike realists, they do not profess to remain fully anchored in political reality.

^{‡‡} For some of the many academic responses to the book see (Kukathas 2016; Angeli 2016; Owen 2016; Fine 2016; Parekh 2017; Piras 2017; Waldron 2016a; Parvin 2016; Owen 2017; McNicoll 2016; Bosniak 2017; Spring 2017; Thomassen et al. 2017; Baderin et al. 2017). For some of Miller's interventions in the media and responses to it, see Miller 2016; Sager 2016a; Ryerson 2016; Sanneh 2016; Williams 2016; Hoskins 2017; Sager 2016b. I use the word "crisis" in between inverted commas to gesture to the political instrumentalization of this concept to cover one specific interval in a long historical process.

^{§§} To list three such approaches: (Arendt 1973), Butler (2004) and (Albertson Fineman 2008).

Fourthly, following the minimal requirements I advocate for here in no way guarantees that the philosopher will act in solidarity with the vulnerable.^{***} As social and political philosophers have shown, solidarity implies – minimally – a relationship between the individual and a group, that entails duties and requires actions by those in the solidary relationship (Scholz 2008; Gaztambide-Fernández 2012). I suggest that for these minimal conditions to obtain between the philosopher and the vulnerable people (whoever they may be), the ethos is a *sine qua non* condition.^{††} Were it to obtain, solidarity would depend on the parameters of the context – including the type of vulnerability involved, the identity of the vulnerable people and of those who stand in solidarity with them, in this case, the philosopher’s commitments and worldview. However, the ethos is not on its own sufficient: there is no inevitable link between the methodological ethos and embarking on a project of supporting the vulnerable through normative or critical academic work and/or through a wider repertoire of political action, which could include, among others, writing opinion pieces for the mass media, teaching certain courses, petitioning, marching, voting for supportive parties, donating and collecting money or advocating for certain domestic or international policies. The philosopher might articulate a responsible and responsive view of the vulnerable and still prioritise other considerations or groups over the vulnerable – whoever they might be – abstaining from actions that would translate a sense of duty towards them. Solidarity is not only a matter of responsibly and responsively acquired knowledge, but also one of robust investment, sustained ideological commitments and actions that concretise these commitments.^{‡‡} What the ethos does guarantee, however, is research reliability, a more discriminate account of the tension between the different conflicting allegiances and interests in any particular case where solidarity is invoked, intellectual honesty and an ethical approach to academic work – all of which, I believe, should be unproblematic guiding principles for the philosophical profession in particular, and academia more generally.

^{***} I want to thank **XX** and an anonymous reviewer for asking me to clarify this point.

^{††} I am aware of the important and analytically illuminating distinctions philosophers made between various types of solidarity. Sally Scholz, for example, discerns between social solidarity (which characterises communities such as nations), civil solidarity (which obtains between citizens of the same state) and political solidarity (marked by a conscious commitment by individuals to collectively oppose an injustice). (2008) These categories are useful analytically. In this paper I illustrate my methodological arguments by analysing the case of political solidarity with people located outside the bounds of one’s social community. I suggest that the methodological ethos I advance here might preclude, first, a too quick and unwarranted framing of the “problem” refugees pose as an inexorable conflict between social solidarity (as the supposed base of the receiving society’s welfare state) and political solidarity with vulnerable people outside the boundaries of one’s immediate community. Second, I suggest that the very idea of social solidarity in western, affluent societies is more of a myth than reality, given the large inequalities and inequities – classed, gendered, racialised, ableist – that characterise them in late capitalism. Historically speaking, social solidarity with vulnerable groups within one’s own community is not natural, but the result of often controversial policies and legislation.

^{‡‡} Scholz makes conscious commitment a precondition for political solidarity. (2008) I suggest “ideological commitment” – which may or may not be as conscious as Scholz suggests – might be a better descriptor.

Towards a Responsive and Responsible Theory

As social epistemologists, sociologists, feminists and critical race theorists have convincingly shown, concepts and conceptualisations are never pure or free-standing, but always embedded in constellations of power that academic inquiry can never immunise itself against. (Foucault 1980; 2002; Alcoff and Kittay 2007; Alcoff 2015; Bourdieu and Passeron 1970; Bourdieu 1997; Dotson 2014; Spivak 2013; Hill Collins 2009; Mills 2017). This literature has amply theorised the methodological duties of diligence any scholar who engages with worldly problems in general – and with politically vulnerable groups in particular – bears, given the epistemic privilege she enjoys.^{§§§} By epistemic privilege I mean the position of authority and credibility tenured, political philosophers often enjoy, given their rich cultural capital, which often overlaps with political, social and economic capital. From post-colonial studies to gender theory, there is a consensus that the systems of knowledge we work with rely on and contribute to need to be subjected to critical scrutiny. (Pateman 1988; Yancy 2012; Mills 1998)

This vast literature constitutes an important, yet unexplored, resource for delineating a general methodological ethos for realist theory. Its main contributors have problematised the nature of knowledge, the role of language and the type of approaches that are conducive to non-reductionist engagements with vulnerability. Their work can help us identify the methodological practices that are necessary for overcoming *linguistic* and *emotional* epistemic obstacles to responsible and responsive theory-building and, implicitly, to the very possibility of solidarity with the vulnerable.^{****}

Elizabeth Spelman (1990), Sandra Lee Bartky (2002) and María Lugones (1987) have responded to Black feminists' critique of the myopic vision of women and women's problems put forth by white middle-class feminists from within the narrow confines of their own experience and language. These epistemically authoritative, self-appointed spokespersons for the feminist movement theorised oppression by substituting their particularistic ideas of gender oppression for an honest engagement with women's diverse experiences. They built political programmes around a simplistic concept of gender oppression, occluding the intersection of gender, racialisation, sexuality and class in many women's experience. The intersection of these axes of oppression endures temporally, across generations, in resilient patterns of exclusion. This blind spot (emerging

^{§§§} For an overview of liberatory epistemologies, see (Tuana 2017).

^{****} I discuss the insensitivity of the epistemically privileged in my **XXXXXX** (2018).

from historical and sociological ignorance) led white feminists to prescribe a problematic, limited idea of emancipation. By parsing “reality” in ways that excluded inconvenient yet relevant evidence, they failed to theorise *responsibly*. Moreover, they failed to theorise *responsively*. White, middle-class feminists’ omitting to problematise their own position of (epistemic, social, economic) privilege in western, affluent societies rendered Black women’s plight invisible to them, to theory and to the politics of the movement. As Black feminists so poignantly argued, white feminists did not turn the theorist’s gaze on their own position of authority and privilege when they spoke *for* – instead of *with* – Black women. Not including Black women’s perspectives and insights into their theoretical work led to a systemic practice of silencing and to an ethically dubious, theoretically impoverished and politically myopic vision of both the problem and the solution.

In response to criticisms, several proposals were formulated, outlining a careful orientation to the different, vulnerable others that theorists should adopt in their conceptual and normative *realist* work. It is by unpacking the dimensions of this orientation that we hope to identify resources for our methodological ethos.

The way to avoid the pitfall of white, privileged ignorance is, first and foremost, through education and information, about the other’s experience, now and historically. Spelman advises:

[...] read books, take classes, open your eyes and ears or whatever instruments of awareness you might be blessed with, go to conferences planned and produced by the people about whom you wish to learn and manage not to be intrusive [...] (1990, 178-179)

Learning about the different other amounts to a practice of *apprenticeship*, supported by the faculty of imagination, which enables both intellectual and emotional connections. Imagination – the capacity to make present what is absent – enables us to *think*, but also to *feel our way* into the reality of the vulnerable other. There is always a risk, however, that, in imagining them and their lives, the privileged would look for a confirmation of the simplistic and stereotypical image they already have of the vulnerable. Rigid ideas congealed in exclusionary categories can undermine reliable learning. Consequently, in trying to imagine experiences of vulnerability, we must first, remain sceptical of the *language* in which they are represented:

[...] given the history of racism and other forms of oppression, be careful about what books you buy, what classes you take; think about the limits there presently are on what you are prepared *to see* or *bear*; examine your own motivations for wanting to understand others” lives. (Spelman 1990, 179)^{†††}

Watchfulness over the use of *language* is a crucial precondition for interrogating its role in reproducing patterns of oppression. Being aware of the limits of what (and whom) I can *see* and *bear* from within my position presupposes an awareness of the limits of my concepts and categories and of the differential value I tend to ascribe to various forms of speech, some of which I may not even be in the habit of hearing. Most importantly, the limits of our concepts translate – at the macro level – into the limits of our pool of collective categories and meanings for making sense of reality. As Gatzambide-Fernández (2012) argues, practices of learning about the different other in view of forming relationships of solidarity with them have historically reproduced colonial logics of cultural hierarchy and subordination. Becoming aware of how philosophers tap into and simultaneously reproduce such logics constitutes a first step towards a responsible style of theorising.

Yet grappling intellectually, through language, with the other’s history and experience is only one side of the coin: what we need to do is explore the emotions that can make her history salient for us.^{‡‡‡} Solidarity presupposes a knowing that has an affective taste, a form of fellow-feeling. (Lee Bartky 2002, 71) In making the feelings of those marked for exclusion and violence the object of my interest, by making them salient to my theorising, I begin to playfully travel in their world. (Lugones 1987) A traveller into vulnerable worlds must be open to self-creation and recreation through the encounter with the vulnerable others, always seeking to avoid getting stuck in one particular “reality” or language that feels reassuring. Comfort leads to self-satisfaction and disables learning. Openness to surprises, humility and respectful curiosity are three crucial emotional features of playfulness, according to Lugones. Playfulness also requires the relativisation of one’s point of view and letting go of the “controlling images” (Hill Collins 2009) about the others’ experience, identity and intentionality. As Spivak writes, reading about the different others “can lead to self-aggrandization unless the habit of mind is produced at the same time” (2000, 112) that is, the habit of resisting the assimilation of the different others to reductive, hegemonic categories.

^{†††} My emphasis.

^{‡‡‡} Relying on different philosophical sources and adopting a different social ontology, Mazzola’s article in this issue problematises the emotional reactions and relations enabled by storytelling.

This form of affective openness is not, on its own, robust enough to generate solidarity, but it does ensure that the theorist conceives of the vulnerable other as a source of knowledge that needs to be taken into account – as opposed to assuming to know everything there is to know about them. For travelling or apprenticeship to be successful in stimulating responsible and responsive theory, the traveller/apprentice must fight her own temptation to project her own essentialising, objectifying image of the other – images solidified by a long history of projection in relation to the agency (or lack thereof) of this other. Imagining the vulnerable should not lead the philosopher believe that they can “possess her, make her into someone or something who *never talks back*, who poses no difficulties [...], who conforms to my [their] desires much more than the real person does.” (Spelman 1990, 181)

Maintaining the separateness of persons and ensuring that the privileged theorist’s language does not over-determine the reality of the vulnerable are two conditions for theorising responsibly and responsively, thus opening the path for non-oppressive relationships. The temptation to impose a pre-existing image onto the vulnerable (of her desires, motivations, character) – as opposed to entering their world open to changing one’s mind – must be counteracted by a readiness for both intellectual and emotional self-objectification. Thus, thinking about vulnerability comes with responsibilities: that of attempting to take hold of oneself and to examine the possibilities of change available in one’s own views and limited reality. Moreover, it comes with a readiness to trust the other and her capacity to make sense of her own reality, to offer reasons and make claims truthfully and sincerely. As Katherine Hawley poignantly writes:

Distrusting, or withholding trust, is also an exercise of social power: you may deny other people important opportunities when you fail to trust them, both through the practical consequences of your distrust and through its symbolic power. (Hawley 2017)

Denying credibility to the vulnerable is one of the most frequent and devastating mechanism of silencing their voices: whether by imputing ignorance or insincere motives, they are discounted as trustworthy knowers and honest persons.

Feminists and critical race theorists provide us with a wealth of ideas about how responsible and responsive theory can be forged by adopting a certain orientation to reality, one that engages it honestly, humbly and diligently. Maintaining a healthy dose of scepticism about one’s own *language* and allowing the other to *talk back* renders us responsible by protecting us against the unreflective reproduction of self-serving categories. Hearing and listening to those whose opinion I have not solicited and whose voices I have not heard before is crucial for responsive theorising. Travelling

emotionally presupposes leaving the comfort of my vision and aiming to understand why the other behaves and feels the way she does on her own terms.^{§§§§} That theorising has an emotional component might seem suspect to those who are still enthralled with the idea of philosophy as the domain of uncontaminated reason. And yet, withdrawing in the reductionist distinction between “rational theorising” and “unreliable sentimentalism” can only be understood as an escape from our human psychological and sociological reality and as a self-interested – but ultimately self-defeating – manoeuvre to maintain the privilege of epistemic authority by ignoring the existing formidable critiques of this vision of knowledge.^{****}

Methodological Preconditions for Solidarity with the Vulnerable

But what does apprenticeship, fellow-feeling and playful world-travelling amount to if translated methodologically?

A first basic element of the methodological ethos we propose here for philosophers claiming to engage with the world “as it is” and the vulnerable in particular is the duty of diligence and honesty in relation to how they parse that “reality” out. This means that engagement with the findings of social sciences and history must be done in good faith, not selectively to support pre-formulated, preferred proposals. As Gould succinctly put it, solidarity

...requires social critique and attention to institutional structures, as well as to the opportunities that changes in such structures might afford for improving the lot of others. If people are to be helpful to others and act to support them, it is useful for those involved in the solidarity relationships to have some idea of the causes of the oppression or suffering. (Gould 2007)

The paper does not expect philosophers to do primary research themselves, though they should feel encouraged to if trained in the relevant methodologies. The minimum necessary is for them to have sufficient social scientific literacy to assess existing research and select reliable data sources, thus avoiding harmful, reliable and pernicious ignorance (Dotson 2011b). Disciplinary trenches and the strong impulse for specialisation lead to the insularity of the disciplines, pushing scholars into the precipice of self-referentiality. In failing to engage with the most recent findings in bodies

^{§§§§} The orientation I am trying to outline here is nothing like religious conversion. It does not require a complete suspension of judgment and does not give absolute authority to the voices of the other. It only invites self-relativisation and openness to enhancing and rendering more complex one’s own perspective on reality, aware of the fallibility of one’s assessments. As I mentioned above, it does not, on its own, guarantee solidarity. Thanks to **XXX** for inviting me to clarify this.

^{****} For representative perspectives in the literature on emotions, see (Lloyd 1993; Haraway 1988; Jaggar 1989; Solomon 2003; Damasio 1994; Zhu and Thagard 2002; Plumwood 1991). For a recent realist take on realist psychology see (Galston 2018).

of work relevant to their normative proposals, philosophers' claims lose plausibility and socio-political relevance. Gestural references to strands of research in say, economics or sociology, are insufficient: only patient, rigorous yet critical attention to the existing knowledge produced by other fields fits the picture of responsible theory I advocate here.

Second, western affluent democracies tend to erase shameful episodes and certain “inconvenient” groups' voices from political memory, science, and art, i.e. history and science manuals, public museums, monuments, rituals, and inventories of scientific breakthroughs or philosophical traditions. Social and political philosophy can contribute to these erasures by treating vulnerability a-historically and by being unreflective of the limited time-slices of reality they select for theoretical inquiry.^{††††} The selection of a temporal horizon determines how much data one takes into account in defining a problem, be it climate change, racialisation, migration or refugee vulnerability.^{‡‡‡‡} To give an illuminating example related to migration and citizenship, sociologist Gurminder Bhambra has convincingly argued that we cannot disentangle debates about migration in the year 2017 from the history of colonialism and the subsequent regimes of citizenship that followed the unravelling of European empires. (2017) Tapping into the Brexit debates over migration and the invocation of the “(national) culture” to justify exclusions, Bhambra discusses Britain's being torn between its desire to maintain political-cultural dominance over the Commonwealth after decolonisation and its reluctance to recognise Brown and Black citizens' equality. The concepts of “culture” and “citizenship” that have historically structured policy and public and theoretical reflection are highly racialised. Britain deployed racialised legal categories to favour white migrants, cementing a problematic understanding of the nation as white.^{§§§§§} Acknowledging history should give pause to theorists and politicians alike in their invocation of the “nation” and their “culture” as “threatened” by migration. Moreover, to the extent that the philosopher's choice of temporal slices contributes to obscuring this racialised history of who “we” are, it fails to be responsible and, implicitly, responsive to the voices of the vulnerable, who tend to have a longer memory.

This brings us to the third imperative, that of careful vigilance over one's language use. Language is important in two ways. First, the theorist uses concepts and categories to capture “reality”. Acknowledging our concepts' historical baggage makes it imperative to display sufficient intellectual curiosity and openness to revisit them and problematise their political effect on reality.

†††† Mills calls the erasure of the structural sources of both privilege and disadvantage “white normativity”. (2007, 28)
‡‡‡‡ Souter and Hobbs's paper in this issue discuss the role that prior colonial relationships play in thinking through the justifications for asylum policies.

§§§§§ The racialisation of citizenship in the wake of empire is well-documented. See (Paul 1997; Webster 2005; Schwarz 2011)

As the vast literature on the interlocking of language and power shows, our categories do not merely describe: they constitute reality, including individuals' identities. ***** To quote Mills:

Concepts orient us to the world, and it is a rare individual who can resist this inherited orientation. Once established in the social mind-set, its influence is difficult to escape, since it is not a matter of seeing the phenomenon with the concept discretely attached but rather of seeing things *through* the concept itself. (Mills 2017, 63)

While political philosophers deal in concepts, they are surprisingly unaware of their effect on reality through the “doxastic architecture” they underpin (Mills 2017, 60). The deployment of a concept shapes perception, closes the rhetorical space where its scope and nature can be debated (Code 1995) and determines the course of action taken in response to a problem. (Butler 2004; Freedman 1998; Bourdieu 1991; Foucault 1971) In the public conversation on the Mediterranean “crisis”, calling migrants “strangers” and predicting “breaking points” shapes the way we think about migration (as a burden), the boundaries of the political community (fixed and closed) and our duties to the vulnerable others (charity).

Therefore, in response to Juliet’s question “what’s in a name?” a responsible political philosopher, who does not withdraw in the comfort of a chimeric narrowly defined, directly accessible “reality”, must answer: “a lot”. Anticipating the following section, whether one is labelled an “economic migrant” or a “refugee” makes a difference in terms of the legal and political effects, especially given that the boundaries between these concepts are porous. (Oberman 2016) How we define vulnerability influences the responses we envisage. Therefore, the responsible theorist must reflect and cultivate an awareness of the hefty weight her concepts have on the reality she helps constitute through her public interventions.

Second, we must be critical of internalist approaches to language – approaches that treat language a-historically, such as those proposed by Saussure, Chomsky or Habermas – for they neglect the socio-historical processes behind the consolidation of dominant languages and are oblivious to the different levels of authority associated with different modalities of speaking. ††††† Certain gendered, racialised and professional groups enjoy disproportionate epistemic authority in their public use of language. This is often combined with (usually white) epistemic arrogance and a lack of

***** Psycho-analytical, Foucauldian, critical theoretical theorists are among the many who have problematised the constitutive function of language.

††††† See Bourdieu’s contribution to the sociology of language (1993).

awareness about the limits of one's knowledge. (Medina 2013a; Yancy 2012; Fricker 2007; Dotson 2014; Mills 2017) This phenomenon is often at play in philosophising about vulnerable groups, who tend to be spoken *to* and spoken *about* – mostly as a problem – but seldom heard.#### The voices of the marginalised are frequently ignored because they are not presumed to say anything relevant, illuminating or honest. “Controlling images” (Hill Collins 2009) of them as insincere, lesser knowers, lesser rights-bearers, less grievable beings severely damage their credibility.##### Moreover, their voices are often thought to be unintelligible to the epistemically privileged. Their unintelligibility refers to content, i.e. what they say, but also form, i.e. they speak in a different “voice” or style, alien to the hearer. (Medina 2013b, 98). The philosopher thus remains entangled in “impoverished affective structures” (Medina 2013b, 81) that preclude any solidarity, wilfully ignorant of morally relevant facts and experiences and of the nature of the wrongs she purports to analyse.*****

Therefore, the responsive theorist must learn to listen to those she is not in the habit of hearing, making sure she familiarises herself with alternative narrative modalities, even if – especially if – they are at odds with her vision of reality. Learning to de-centre herself and render her own knowledge – principles, categories and concepts – revisable considering the knowledge she gets from the vulnerable amounts to a practice of apprenticeship: of listening, of rigorous contemplation of the choice of viewpoint, of what it reveals and what it obscures.

This paper does not embrace a romantic, naïve vision of the knowledge one can get by listening to different voices. With Schiff (2014), I am aware stories can translate thoughtlessness, false consciousness or bad faith. The point here is not to give the voices of the vulnerable unquestioned authority, but to hear them and engage in responsible, responsive judgments that grapple with – rather than side-line – vulnerability's complexities. Hearing these voices might give the philosopher access to aspects of vulnerability they may not have conceived of from their own limited positional horizon of experience. This requires the philosopher also not to wilfully ignore the data and the literatures that problematise or qualify her very claims to epistemic authority and insight or the possibility of objective knowledge. Self-objectification – understanding the influence the theorist's own positionality exerts over her theorising – is a *sine qua non* of responsible theorising. Indifference to positionality leads to the arrogant failure to confront one's limitations and

For sources on silencing the marginalised and their resistance to it, see (Lorde 1984; Fricker 2007; Bargu 2014; Dotson 2011a)

On hierarchies of grievability see (Butler 2004)

***** Mills makes this distinction to unpack the complexity of white ignorance. (2017)

emboldens active – though not always conscious – efforts *not* to acknowledge voices and data that question one’s authority. The failure to confront these limitations often emerges out of a *need not to know* (Medina, 2012, p. 215) by those occupying positions of authority in the academia and public debates: knowing would destabilise their privilege, their view of the world, their cultural-political identity and, finally, their sense of entitlement.

To conclude, an orientation to theory that is open to apprenticeship and world travelling requires the philosopher to reflect on how her inescapably selective framing of reality, choice of language and temporal span influence her moral compass and limit her political imagination. It is only by embracing this ethos that philosophers can reach an assessment of reality that could make solidarity with the vulnerable conceivable. A failure to cross disciplinary boundaries, ready to incorporate insights from social sciences and the social epistemology of philosophy in one’s methodological practice, as well as the failure to hear the voices of those one theorises about can contribute only to a form of irresponsible and unresponsive theory: irresponsible because it authoritatively yet unreflectively contributes concepts, principles and solutions to public debates, fuelling views that are inaccurate at best and dangerous at worst; unresponsive because, in silencing those she talks about, the theorist contributes to their vulnerability. †††††

Realist Cherry-Picking as Failure of Solidarity: Irresponsible and Unresponsive Theory

The publication of David Miller’s book (2016a) coincided with, and intervened in, virulent debates over migration. The “crisis” in the Mediterranean is his post-script’s topic. 2016 brought Donald Trump’s election and the toxic Brexit campaign that led to the victory of those who wanted to “take back control”. Trump’s racially inflected nationalism informed his promise to “make America great again” by building a wall between the US and Mexico and issuing a travel ban targeting several Muslim countries. In Miller’s UK, hostility towards migrants was fuelled by the tabloid media, the preposterous “data” peddled by the Leave campaign and UKIP, the extreme right party whose infamous poster “breaking point” attracted lots of attention. The hate crime rate against migrants increased after the referendum, targeting mostly white Eastern Europeans and

††††† Some might argue this ethos is too demanding. This claim reflects certain (gendered) myths about the nature of philosophical contemplation, entrenched via institutional training. Broadening the curricula taught in philosophy departments, exposing students to sociologically and historically informed ideas of what philosophy is and encouraging them to cross into other humanities and the social sciences are just some mechanisms for destabilizing such myths.

“visible minorities”. (Basnazak 2017; Bulman 2017; Sharman and Jones 2017; Travis 2016) In 2017, the German post-war consensus was shaken by the entry of an extreme right party (AfD) into the Bundestag. In their victory speech, AfD’s leader, Alexander Gauland, said: “We say we don’t want to lose Germany to an invasion of foreigners from a different culture. Very simple.” (Stone 2017). In turn, Italy, Hungary and Austria witnessed the rise of the anti-migration Right. It is in this context that *Strangers in Our Midst* came out. This section reconstructs Miller’s arguments while highlighting where he departs from the methodological orientation outlined above. I will particularly focus on his use of empirical data in his definition of the “problem” he seeks to offer practical guidance on, his departures from his own realist commitments, the limits of his analysis’s temporal horizon, his use of language, lack of reflexivity and refusal to take into account the voices of the people he theorises about.

Before delving into my criticisms, a clarification on Miller’s own avowed methodological commitments: he opposes armchair, ideal theorists on the ground that hypothetical worlds do not offer practical guidance. Criticising the distance between cosmopolitan philosophers and “the people”, Miller adopts a realist approach to tackle “real” problems and the inescapable decisions they involve. This “political approach”

... recognises that the problem is real and needs to be solved collectively, by a policy initiative or an institutional change. That solution could take different forms: it might involve reducing the rate of migration, cutting back on welfare, or finding practical ways of increasing interpersonal trust in culturally diverse societies. (p. 18)

The order in which Miller introduces his solutions is telling. Before considering them, however, one needs to ask: *What is the problem that is real?* In other words, how does Miller capture the reality he addresses? Two possible answers emerge.

First, the starting problem could be that citizens of the receiving society *perceive* migrants to be untrustworthy free riders, “benefit tourists”. This negatively affects trust, which in turn affects the willingness to participate in political deliberations and welfare schemes. It is unclear how a realist can avoid discussing these perceptions’ accuracy (p. 164). Racist, sexist, intolerant views can be genuinely felt, but are in no way worthy of vindication, especially not by a *realist*. If citizens’ perception of migrants is inaccurate, then surely, *if we want the solution to match the problem*, we need to work politically to change it, through public education programmes, by making available

statistically reliable data, and by including positive visions of diversity within the national culture.#####

Second, the “real problem” could be that migrants *actually* destroy the welfare state by undermining the social trust and cultural unity it depends on.##### The book does not demonstrate this reliably.##### As Miller admits, the data is far from conclusive (2016a, 28). The question one could ask the self-professed realist is this: if the data is far from conclusive, why not adopt an epistemically modest position and abstain from strong prescriptions about “taking back control”? If “reality” is ambiguous and not easily available to social scientific scrutiny, whence does the theorist derive the strength of his authoritative prescriptions? Miller uses some (limited and not always reliable) data to parse out a “reality” that is auspicious to his argument. Several examples are glaring in their unfoundedness: the direct and necessary link drawn between large migration and the development of “parallel societies” (2016a, 68); his preference for the national framework for tackling climate change and population growth (2016a, 66); East Asian’s states supposed unwillingness to receive refugees from different cultures (2016a, 88); the reasons migrants choose to leave their country##### (2016a, 100, 122, 171); and the appropriateness of Australia’s “detention centres.” (2016a, 171)#####

Crucially, no general conclusion about the influence of migration on the welfare state can be reached across societies. Moreover, the empirical research would have to consider other variables beyond migration. A government’s commitment (or lack thereof) to the values of social justice and its capacity to resist global economic pressures are conspicuously missing from Miller’s analysis. The impact of the last financial crisis and the means various governments used to address it – which affect public spending – is also absent from the “reality” carved out in the book. The

Several reviewers point to this problem, inherent in Miller’s unreflective conventionalism, without, however, problematising the epistemic factors that enable Miller’s own participation in the reproduction of conventional ideas. Song in Thomassen et al. 2017; Baderin 2017; Busen 2017; Ulaş 2017a; Kukathas 2016; Fine 2016; Schramme 2017). Ulaş comes closest to problematising the philosopher’s positionality (Baderin et al. 2017)

To deploy Scholz’s useful categories (2008), he sets up an irreducible conflict between social solidarity within the nation – as the underpinning of the welfare state – versus political solidarity with those located outside the boundaries of the social community (understood ethnically, racially, perennially and romantically). Following my methodological ethos might make Miller less inclined to see the tension between these solidarities as a zero-sum game and might find way to articulate a – however minimal – vision of realist solidarity. It is a failure of both academic inquiry and political imagination to assume a necessary and direct connection between the decline of the welfare state and being solidary with refugees, as it is to work with an unexamined – and hence implausible – idea of social solidarity.##### For a detailed engagement see (Sager 2016).

Put simply, Miller aligns himself with politicians who claimed, without any solid evidence, that rescuing migrants encourages them to risk their lives coming to Europe. (Travis 2014; Wintour 2017)

The inhumane conditions in these centres have been widely documented in the media. (Amnesty International n.d.; BBC News 2016; Doherty 2016; Cohen 2017).

longitudinal data on UK's shrinking welfare state – the case that kick-starts Miller's analysis – is easily available (Taylor-Gooby 2013; van Kersbergen, Vis, and Hemerijck 2014; Taylor-Gooby, Leruth, and Chung 2017; Hamnett 2014). It is difficult to resist the conclusion that this is a case of methodological cherry-picking in support of an independently reached conclusion: in parsing out reality in this way, Miller fails to theorise responsibly.

The problems associated with defining the “real” problem are compounded by the book's choice of temporal horizon – another aspect sociologists and social epistemologists problematised, as we saw in the previous section. From the start, we are simultaneously faced with an imagined, catastrophic future narrated authoritatively from the viewpoint of the “legitimate citizen” and a highly romanticised and heavily edited vision of the past. The present is the opportunity to take back control – that “we” may miss if not vigilant. The reader get induced into a panic over the imagined future (2016a, 3) because large numbers of people turn up “unannounced” (2016a, 76, 168) or “unauthorised” (2016a, 167) at the border in a “mixed flow” or “flood” (2016a, 169) that could easily lead to a “free-for-all” situation (2016a, 159).

The politics of naming and the re-enforcing of controlling images are at work throughout the entire book, particularly in relation to the haunting figure of the “stranger”, whose presence is constituted as dangerously looming over “us” and analogised with “an unwelcome intruder in my house” (2016a, 74). Miller appears to be completely unaware of the symbolic weight of the language he uses, subsuming a variety of distinctly positioned individuals to a unifying, pejorative vocabulary. Refugees' complex stories, however, are conspicuously absent from the book.^{§§§§§§§§} The reader's affective horizon is thus closed to anyone but Miller's compatriots, who share bonds of community, which they conceive of as “extended in time, indeed often as reaching back into antiquity.” (2016a, 27) Towards the intruders, distrust and the attribution of malevolent intentions is the default attitude. While Miller accepts that a national identity can be the product of a “mixture of cultures” (2016a, 28), his history is perennial and primordial, cleansed of any shameful and violent episodes:^{*****} affective openness is thus *ex ante* limited to a narrowly circumscribed set of persons.

Why is it important to analyse Miller's temporal horizons? His work intervenes in political processes of nation-building, which cannot escape the ideological context wherein they are

^{§§§§§§§§} To my knowledge, of all reviewers, it is only Rowan Williams, a theologian, who highlights the book's silencing of vulnerable voices (2016).

^{*****} For discussions of nationalist perennialism see (Smith 2013; Ozkirimli 2017).

formulated. The story he tells is a sanitised, essentialist story, readily deployable in support of the book's arguments. Because of how he thinks about history and culture, he is willingly and reliably ignorant to the historical reproduction of certain unsavoury elements in "our culture", elements that have underpinned past harms and that continue to reverberate today, including in migration policies.⁺⁺⁺⁺⁺ Instead, he effectively works with an assumption of the uniformity and goodness of this "culture" and restricts affective relationality to its members.

This goodness emerges at three levels, highlighting Miller's departure from his own realist commitments. First, there is a scheme of cooperation through which compatriots provide each other with the amenities of life, basically an economic system and an insurance system that "in principle, works to everyone's advantage" (2016a, 26). Second, they relate to each other as citizens, participants in a legal system and enjoying political rights of participation that "allows them to collectively control and shape of the scheme as a whole" (2016a, 26) "through free exchange of opinions in the media and political forums. People want to feel that they are in control of the future shape of their society." (2016a, 13) Third, they see each other as "fellow nationals, people who share a broadly similar set of cultural values and a sense of belonging to a particular place." (p. 26). This three-pronged association is "intrinsically valuable" (2016a, 27) because citizens "are able to ensure that the benefits and burdens of economic cooperation are fairly distributed among them ... they are able to exercise some degree of control over the future direction of their association." (2016a, 26) This intrinsic value underpins a sense of solidarity as "people feel emotionally attached to one another because they share this identity." (2016a, 27)

This idealised, schematised idea of a community is detached from the realities of late capitalist democracies and closer to ideal theoretical accounts.^{#####} These societies' economies never work to everyone's advantage; gendered, classed and racialised hierarchies of citizenship exist, and collective control over the "shape of the scheme as a whole" is chimeric.^{#####} Moreover, Miller neglects the erosion of the already deficient democratic processes. The idea that the national culture is the result of free dialogue is completely out-of-synch with history. At a time the phrase

⁺⁺⁺⁺⁺ The same limited vision of time is manifest in his remark that "historical guilt" cannot ground duties to refugees because military interventions "can go wrong" (2016a, 173), implying this is a matter of bad luck, not of preventable, poor decisions.

^{#####} Miller admits that his is a rosy picture, but nonetheless bases his argument on it. For a critique see (Spring 2017).

^{#####} See (Equality and Human Rights Commission n.d.; Mason 2017; France Culture 2017; Wagstyl 2017; Collins et al. 2017; Savage et al. 2013). Thus, to deploy Scholz's typology, Miller's implicit vision of social solidarity is pure phantasmagoria. This is probably nowhere clearer than in the UK, from where Miller writes and whose official political position on receiving refugees his work justifies.

“post-truth politics” has gained currency, it is irresponsible to assume equal democratic participation is shaping the community’s future.***** To believe that “public culture” amounts to “a shared (overlapping rather than identical) set of beliefs about the values the wider society should embody and pursue” (2016a, 67) is implausible as deep divisions structure the publics of so-called “consolidated democracies”.†††††††† The vision of culture proposed hardly qualifies as *realist* cherry-picking: heavy idealisation dominates.

Miller acknowledges the critics who indicate the fictitious character of nations but he misunderstands their criticism (Miller 2016a, 29). For a realist, the implication would be, first, to identify the mechanisms through which a certain fiction gets stabilised at a certain point in time.†††††††† These mechanisms are never exclusively internal to the community itself: communities define themselves politically in relation to other communities, often hierarchically.§§§§§§§§ This requires the realist to examine which contributions have been included and which excluded from the national “official story”.***** Second, it invites the realist to reckon normatively with how “things could have been otherwise” in a way that precludes assumption (explicit or implicit) of a static, historically continuous, monolithic identity. While Miller nods to the critic of this vision of identity, he *de facto* assumes it and defends the right to control the access of those who will “disturb” it.††††††††

At a deeper level, the account Miller offers is formal; its goodness is measured only in relation to those who have already been recognised as worthy and legitimate members. Thus, the answer to the realist question *cui bono?* is simple: to the existing citizens. Because Miller takes the community as it is, a migration policy is legitimate if justifiable to the public, whatever beliefs it may already endorse. In terms of who should pick up the “slack” (2011) of refugees, the demos is best positioned to judge their own case, i.e. whether they have done their “fair share” of refugee hosting (p. 162). This unreflective choice of standpoint has important implications that come into sharp relief at various points: Miller’s lack of reflexivity on these methodological decisions is another

***** Therefore, I fundamentally disagree with Parvin’s positive assessment of Miller’s methodology. (Parvin 2016).
†††††††† Ulaş foregrounds the fact of disagreement in his review of the book. (Ulaş 2017b)
†††††††† See (Anderson 1991; Bourdieu 1991; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Goldberg 2002)
§§§§§§§§ In dialogue with Anderson’s work, Waldron invites us to understand that there is “no reason for allowing the use of an imagined community argument to become self-certifying.” (Waldron 2016, 36)
***** To give an example, David Olusoga has documented Black people’s exclusion from the political, economic and cultural history of Britain, notwithstanding their documented existence and contribution to that history from the third century AD. (2016)
†††††††† For Miller, it is only migration and traumatic events (like the Holocaust) that cause ruptures in the public culture (2016a, 63). Emblematically, ruptures can never be positive and, by juxtaposing migration to the Holocaust, its radically negative impact is insinuated.

reason why his theory is irresponsible. For example, when he tries to make a climate-change/population overgrowth argument for limiting migration, he points to the negative effects of migrants adopting the energy-hungry, polluting western lifestyle: the problem lies with the migrants, not with the western lifestyle *per se*. In discussing the psychological underpinnings of sharing a national identity, he builds on data that shows how, if people believe they share an attribute, such as “a style of dress, a political ideology or a *skin colour*” (2016a, 145, my emphasis) they are more disposed to helping behaviour. That this should be so is left unquestioned. Given all this, it does not come as a surprise when, later on, in explaining the value of self-determination, Miller writes in terms that biologise the nation:

“But why does self-determination matter in the first place? A large part of its value is that it gives us, as citizens, some degree of control over what happens to our political community in the future. We can make long-term plans, such as creating protected areas for endangered species of plants or animals or investing in infrastructure whose benefits will mainly be reaped by *our children*. But this planning will be thwarted if changes in the composition of the citizen body means that these decisions are later reverted.” (2016a, 63, my emphasis)

It is unclear why Miller assumes that these plans would emerge (given the energy-thirsty lifestyle of the affluent west) or why they would be thwarted by migrants. It also begs the question: why couldn't migrants contribute meaningfully, fairly and in good faith to the advancement of the community? No evidence or argument is provided for the action-guiding arguments that the philosopher contributes to public discussions, buttressing the cause of already strong anti-immigration discourses.

The language of the book reveals the limited vision of “reality” enabled by the choice of standpoint and temporal horizon. The migrant is constitutively perceived through several controlling images: criminal (2016a, 113) greedy and self-interested, potentially terrorist and misogynist^{#####} (2016a, 137), unassimilated/-able (2016a, 3), abysmally ignorant “boat people”^{#####} (2016a, 127, 136–37, 144) and undemocratic and anti/non-deliberative (2016a, 64).^{*****} Immigration is presented

Miller appears oblivious to the massive literature on western racism masked as feminism. (Jaggar 2005; Al-Saji 2010; Terman 2016). For academics' role in constructing “Islamic terrorism” see (Jackson 2007).

In talks based on his Post-script, Miller used the term “boat people” – apparently unaware of its derogatory connotations and its stripping migrants of individuality, history and context. See https://www.humanities.utoronto.ca/event_details/id=1833

***** The discussion of “illegal” *v* “irregular” migrant in footnote 1 on p. 113 is emblematic.

only as a burden, as destroyer of trust and the welfare state (2016a, 10, 64–65), which reproduces the impoverished affective structure of current debates and closes the rhetorical space to any alternative visions. The title of the book – *Strangers in Our Midst* – precludes any possible encounter, to say nothing of world-travelling and apprenticeship.^{††††††††††} To those who find the title “provocative”, Miller responds that it “captures how migration is often experienced, at least on first encounter, in *settled societies* most of whose members have a sense that they and their ancestors are deeply rooted in a place.” (2016a, 18, my emphasis)

To conclude, the opportunities for apprenticeship and world-travelling are foreclosed by all these methodological choices. Assuming the standpoint of “settled societies” whose imperfections are swept under the historical carpet and refusing to listen to or solicit accounts of migrants’ experiences makes it impossible for Miller and his readers to develop the basic level of fellow-feeling that would enable them to see the vulnerable as worthy of being listened to. They can instead remain enclosed within a restricted and comfortable horizon of obligation. The theorist’s irresponsible view confounds itself with that of anti-migration campaigns and contributes to the closure of the public space of deliberation. In arguing that policy cannot be based on storytelling about migrants’ experience (2016a, 159), no matter how distressing, Miller bars the possibility of theoretical responsiveness and exercises his epistemic authority to silence the vulnerable. It is only thus that he can find himself defending the Australian detention camps, whose abuses have been consistently making headlines in recent years. Through his selective and unreliable use of data, unreflexive use of language, the deployment of a convenient temporal framework and refusal to hear narratives about the experience of the people he theorise about, Miller betrays his own realism and significantly departs from the ethos this paper advocates.

Conclusion

This paper delineated a methodological ethos for a responsive and responsible theory of vulnerability. Building on insights from critical literatures it offered some guidelines for nurturing solidary attitudes towards the vulnerable, whoever they may be. The last section provided an example of the pitfalls of tackling vulnerability irresponsibly and unresponsively, from a reliably ignorant and affectively entrenched position of authority. Crossing disciplinary boundaries to grasp

^{††††††††††} Miller references Plamenatz’s article by the same title (1965). There are many issues with Plamenatz’s article, which I cannot discuss here. It is important, however, to point out how, in contrast to Miller’s book, it displays scepticism towards “people’s grievances” and highlights their prejudice. Plamenatz does not assume the truth or rightness of people’s perceptions and does not allow theoretical arguments to leave unexamined the source of these perceptions.

reality in its complexity, becoming aware of the research on philosophy's controversial claims to knowledge and the consequences of epistemic ignorance, as well as learning to hear voices one is not in the habit of hearing are crucial imperatives this paper hopes to have defended, both for the sake of good philosophical work and for the possibility of ties of solidarity to develop.

The duty to cultivate this ethos does not exclusively lie with the individual.##### As feminists and social epistemologies have argued (Spivak 2013; Mills 1998; Medina 2013a), the responsibility for our epistemic environment is also collective since, as immersed in complex processes of knowledge production, we have the power to improve or worsen it. Collectively upholding the ethical and methodological standards of professional social and political philosophy via sustained practices of methodological vigilance, rigorous habits of intellectual accountability, institutionalised interdisciplinary training and the combating of academic patronage and privilege systems are essential. Only thus can professional philosophising be prevented from degenerating into echoing chambers of self-referentiality, ignorance and bad faith.

I thank one of the three anonymous reviewers for inviting me to clarify this crucial point.