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Says Who?
A Feminist Challenge of
Moral and Epistemic Authority in Advocacy

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements of Senior Independent Study

Advised by Dr. Lee McBride III

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Abstract

This Independent Study thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter, “The Challenge of Feminist Ethics,” describes the project of feminist ethics to respond to patterns of inclusion and exclusion within the dominant tradition of moral thought and practice. I then highlight several features of consideration in feminist ethics that are useful in its response and subsequent development of alternative representations of moral life. My second chapter, “The Moral and Epistemic Commitment of Advocacy,” discusses the field of advocacy as morally and epistemically engaged through practices of speaking for others. I give reasons to believe that the commitment underpinning these practices is worth challenging after consideration of what is at stake. In my final chapter, “The Feminist Challenge to Advocacy,” I evaluate what feminist ethics contributes to the critical evaluation of this commitment and consider what its revisions may entail. I conclude that practices of speaking-for in advocacy should reflect a revised commitment 1) to the salience of social location and 2) to attentiveness and responsiveness to the particular persons whom one speaks-for.

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Introduction

I undertook this project out of a desire to understand what is necessary in becoming a successful advocate. As an aspiring social worker, I am mindful of the diverse and demanding contexts in which I will represent the interests of others to advocate for their wellbeing. I am also mindful of how I may, in those contexts, encounter significant difficulty in representing the interests of persons from whom I am separated by some distance. That distance may be physical/geographic, cultural/historical, or social/political in nature. With this distance comes difficulty in understanding how to speak for others in a way that is authoritative yet unassuming. This project has been my way of making philosophical sense of that difficulty.

It is also a difficulty that is compounded by the fact of my privilege. Especially in the current political climate, I am reminded that those issues of most urgent importance to us are frequently represented in ways that are exclusionary and so incomplete. The platforms from which we claim authority over moral issues are defined by various socio-historical structures such as racism, colonialism, ethnocentrism, misogyny, and others that I cannot hope to address here exhaustively. The privilege to speak from these platforms is thus a reflection of these structures and, if left unexamined, may serve to reinforce them. This project has thus been for me a way of unpacking my own privilege and considering what that means for my aspirations to advocacy. Throughout this project, I hope to retain awareness as the author and accountability from my readers that my position is an exercise of this privilege and not freed from it by the end. While I aim to leave with a better idea of how I may successfully advocate for others, I am nonetheless

mindful that the challenge I lay out is one that will persist well beyond the conclusion of this project.

An interest in combining my personal aspirations with my philosophical background is what led me into the field of feminist ethics. I was inspired by its dedication to reimagining philosophical inquiry to be answerable to *other people*, not just to the most sophisticated theory. It is this dedication that motivates the enduring project of feminist ethics to reveal and resist patterns of exclusion within dominant traditions of moral thought and practice. I thus saw feminist ethics as an appropriate field within which to unpack the difficulty I have identified in practices of speaking for others in advocacy.

In Chapter I, I explore the task of feminist ethics to respond to patterns of exclusion in the dominant moral tradition for the purposes of developing more inclusive representation. Part of this response includes bringing into explicit consideration those features of moral life that have been philosophically undervalued. I first discuss the features of vulnerability and dependency, explaining how feminist ethics has a vested interest in representing experiences and perspectives that have been shaped by those features. I go on to describe how feminist ethics exercises attentiveness and responsiveness to particular persons, including their interests, experiences, and perspectives. Recognizing that such particularities are frequently obscured within the dominant moral tradition, feminist ethics takes care to include them more fully within moral consideration. This leads into a broader concern within feminist ethics of how to develop an alternative moral epistemology that does not operate within the same exclusionary framework to which it critically responds.

The second chapter considers the field of advocacy as one that is both morally and epistemically engaged. I describe this engagement in terms of advocacy's moral and epistemic commitment. The moral commitment of advocacy is a commitment to the wellbeing of those persons being spoken-for, as well as to the belief that speaking for them will yield the intended positive outcome. The epistemic commitment of advocacy is a commitment to the justification of this belief through the speaker's knowledge. It is from this commitment that I argue advocates derive the authority to speak for others. I also give reasons to believe that this is a commitment worth challenging if advocates wish to exercise appropriate and legitimate authority in speaking for others. Such a challenge is motivated by the salience of a speaker's social location in making representative claims for or about others. I attribute to this challenge some urgency after considering what is at stake in speaking for others.

In my final chapter, I consider what feminist ethics contributes to the evaluation of the moral and epistemic commitment in advocacy. I do this by bringing back into discussion those features of moral life that feminist ethics picks out as significant, including vulnerability, dependency, and particularity. I argue that these features are useful in 1) evaluating the salience of social location in practices of speaking-for and 2) exercising attentiveness and responsiveness to the particular persons whom one hopes to speak-for. In concluding Chapter III, I consider how the moral and epistemic commitment of advocacy may be revised to reflect incorporation of the features highlighted by feminist ethics.

While I do not claim to have solved the initial difficulty that motivated my project, I nonetheless aim to have made clear that it is one well worth wrestling with for

the future of advocacy. With due consideration of the insights I provide in this project, it is my hope that advocacy will be always motivated by a vision for greater inclusion of and better representation for all persons.

Chapter I: The Challenge of Feminist Ethics

Most broadly, feminist ethics is a comprehensive and critical response to patterns of inclusion and exclusion in the dominant moral tradition. I use “patterns” to refer to the systematic ways in which this tradition reinforces certain experiences and perspectives within its representations of moral life, enshrining some while subordinating others. Feminist ethics recognizes within this tradition that “philosophical and cultural figurations of moral agency, knowledge, and judgment portray the actual social positions and relations, or views from specific social locations, of some of us, but in abstract and idealized form.”¹ What is especially notable about the development of these figurations is that they are put forward as authoritative; that is, they do not just say what is true and what is false, they may also “uncritically reproduce the represented positions and locations as normative, i.e., as the central or standard (if not the only) case.”² When this happens, those positions and locations that fall outside of the normative representation may be excluded from moral consideration.

The socio-historical causes of patterns of exclusion within the dominant moral tradition are manifold, and it is beyond the scope of my project to analyze them fully. That said, I will pick out among these patterns certain features of moral life and representation with which feminist ethics has critically engaged. Feminist ethics starts from the conscious recognition that the subordination of these features and their subsequent exclusion from the dominant moral tradition is itself a reflection of the socio-historical contexts in which that tradition is embedded. This is largely because those who

¹ Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Understandings: A Feminist Study in Ethics*, 2nd ed., Studies in Feminist Philosophy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 60.

² Walker, *Moral Understandings*, 60.

have been afforded the authority to define moral life have been those with the socio-historical privilege to do so.

Margaret Urban Walker is one feminist ethicist who shares this view: “To have the social, intellectual, or moral authority to perform this feat, one must already be on the advantaged side of practices that distribute power, privilege, and responsibilities in the community in which one does it.”³ In other words, the authority to represent moral life is itself an exercise of privilege afforded by socio-historical structures of subordination and domination. To uncritically exercise this privilege within a moral tradition is also to reinforce it as the norm, thereby excluding those who are not afforded this privilege.⁴ Lorraine Code writes extensively on the task of feminist ethics to critically engage with the definitive conceptions within the dominant moral tradition on the grounds that “in practice, those conceptions mirror and replicate the experiences that their (usually white, male, prosperous, and educated) creators are positioned to regard as exemplary.”⁵ When these exemplary experiences are only exemplary by virtue of their being privileged, the conceptions that reflect them will also exclude those less-privileged experiences.

Features of consideration:

So understood, the task of feminist ethics has been not only to identify patterns of exclusion in the dominant moral tradition, but also to propose comprehensive ways of addressing them to develop more inclusive representations of moral life. Part of this endeavor thus entails explicit consideration of those features that are systematically

³ Walker, 60.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Lorraine Code, “Epistemology,” in *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 177.

excluded within the dominant moral tradition. Features of special interest to feminist ethics have been those traditionally associated with the experiences and perspectives of women. A unifying view among feminist ethicists is that the subordination and subsequent exclusion of these features from the dominant moral tradition is reflective of the socio-historical subordination of those experiences and perspectives. From recognition of this, feminist ethics works to identify those patterns of subordination while at the same time bringing into focus those features.

Some of the features commonly identified in this endeavor are those of vulnerability and dependency. These are features that have been of special interest to feminist ethics because of the significant recognition that women's experiences have been historically structured by relationships of inequality. The gendered division of labor, for example, leaves women dependent on hierarchical structures within the family and society for their survival, as well as vulnerable to exploitation through unpaid or underpaid labor. A common view within feminist ethics is that the dominant moral tradition has been unequipped to address relationships of inequality such as these and, as a consequence, has excluded the historical experiences and perspectives of women. Annette Baier is one such critic of the dominant tradition, arguing that it reinforces a false pretense of equality while excluding actual relations of inequality. "It is a typical feature of the dominant moral theories and traditions," she writes, "since Kant, or perhaps since Hobbes, that relationships between equals or those who are deemed equal in some important sense, have been the relations that morality is concerned primarily to

regulate.”⁶ Within this tradition, the thought goes, those pre-selected as moral agents are typically those who share equal membership within a clearly defined community. This pretense, however, ill-equips the dominant moral tradition to address those issues of moral significance that are structured by relationships of inequality. In Baier’s words, it “masks the question of what our moral relationships *are* to those who are our superiors or our inferiors in power.”⁷ Similarly, Walker finds a preoccupation with equality and impartiality within the dominant moral tradition to be exclusionary:

It ignores the often unchosen, discretionary responsibilities of those who care for particular others, often dependent and vulnerable, in intimate, domestic, or familial — “private” — contexts. It slights relations of interdependence centered on bonds of affection and loyalty whose specific histories set varying terms of obligation and responsibility.⁸

These are responsibilities and relations that have historically structured women’s experiences within a broader socio-historical context such that they do not share equal membership within certain communities with their more powerful and privileged (male) counterparts. Rather, these experiences have been shaped by relationships of dependency and vulnerability, which in turn are perceived as inferior to relationships of equality between independent individuals. Because the dominant moral tradition reflects and reinforces the context in which it is embedded, it has rendered those features historically characteristic of women’s experiences as less than significant.

Feminist ethics has thus taken up more explicit interest in revealing the patterns of exclusion within this tradition for the purposes of redressing them. While the dominant moral tradition presupposes an equal distribution of power and authority among those

⁶ Annette Baier, “The Need for More than Justice,” in *Justice and Care: Essential Readings in Feminist Ethics* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), 55.

⁷ Baier, “The Need for More than Justice,” 55.

⁸ Walker, 58.

acting within it, feminist ethics is deeply attentive and responsive to how actual persons are, more often than not, situated within relationships of inequality. One's situation within these relationships is also rarely chosen, despite the typical features within the dominant moral tradition that represent them as freely entered into by individuals. Some feminist ethicists have identified this as another shortcoming of representation of moral life within this tradition. Positing morally significant relationships as those freely entered into by independent individuals obscures the realities of dependency and vulnerability, particularly for disadvantaged members of communities. Baier writes that this follows directly from recognition that moral life cannot be adequately represented by presupposing equal membership within a clearly defined moral community:

Showing up the partial myth of equality among actual members of a community, and of the undesirability of trying to pretend that we are treating all of them as equals, tends to go along with an exposure of the companion myth that moral obligations arise from freely *chosen* associations between such equals.⁹

Carol Gilligan, whose work has been highly influential in the contemporary field of feminist ethics, has argued that a consequence of women's subordination and exclusion has been the development of understandings of moral life distinct from their male counterparts: "Since the reality of interconnexion is experienced by women as given rather than freely contracted, they arrive at an understanding of life that reflects the limits of autonomy and control."¹⁰ While many feminist ethicists have since resisted the idea that there is a singular moral understanding characteristic of women's experiences, they have nonetheless drawn from these and similar insights in challenging the various

⁹ Baier, 56.

¹⁰ Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1982), 172.

presuppositions underpinning the dominant moral tradition. These presuppositions not only obscure more salient features of moral life, but also restrict participation within it through excluding certain experiences and perspectives.

Part of feminist ethics' project of revealing these and other similar patterns of exclusion has thus been to exercise attentiveness and responsiveness to particular persons, their interests, their experiences, and their perspectives. This is from recognition that the dominant moral tradition "obscures the particularity of moral actors and relations by emphasizing universality, sameness, and repeatability, excluding or regimenting emotional experience."¹¹ As we have seen, obscuring particular experiences of moral life far from yields a full and satisfactory representation of it; in fact, it subordinates and excludes those actual features of moral life that — while they certainly complicate that representation — are no less significant. Feminist ethics acknowledges the attraction of devising what the dominant moral tradition takes to be an objective or universal representation of moral life. In devising this representation, Walker explains:

Superfluous detail must be cleared away so that cases can be sorted into broad types that figure in the formulas that unify the moral field. This guarantees uniformity in judgment and action both across cases and across agents, and gives priority to sameness and repeatability by regimenting moral consideration into fixed paths.¹²

But part of the problem that Walker sees in this process is that it loses fundamental recognition that these representations are themselves reflections of a unique situation within a socio-historical context. This should cast some doubt on the idea that matters of accurately representing moral life can be grasped from a purely objective standpoint. It should also make it less clear that these representations can be universally

¹¹ Walker, 58.

¹² Walker, 59.

encompassing, as we have learned that there is a relative authority to making them that privileges some and disadvantages others. In prioritizing objective or universal representations of moral life, the expectation is that “the specific, partial, and situated character of these views and positions disappears.”¹³ A significant difficulty with the creation of an objective or universal representation, however, is related to the problems of exclusion previously discussed. That is, “the experiences of those in other situations and positions appear as ‘different’ or problematic; often, perspectives from other social locations don’t appear at all.”¹⁴

Peta Bowden is another critic, arguing that the dominant moral tradition is plagued by “distortions of grand theory-making.” One of the associated pitfalls is in the assumption “that universal and impartial ethical codes in themselves give answers to particular, concrete questions of morality; and that the rightness of wrongness of specific judgments is entailed in their general rules and principles.”¹⁵ In the revised ethics that Bowden endorses, better representations of moral life come about through “consideration of the particularity of concrete situations and their complex interconnections in the fabric of their unique participants’ lives. Ethics is recognized as constitutively contextual and based in the actual experiences of actual persons.”¹⁶ Fiona Robinson proposes that this approach “is necessarily one that is attentive and responsive to the needs, claims, fears, and hopes of particular moral subjects.”¹⁷ In response to the exclusion of certain features

¹³ Walker, 60.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Peta Bowden, *Caring: Gender-Sensitive Ethics* (London, New York: Routledge, 1997), 4.

¹⁶ Bowden, *Caring*, 4.

¹⁷ Fiona Robinson, “Globalizing Care: Ethics, Feminist Theory, and International Relations,” *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 22, no. 1 (1997): 122.

or moral life by the dominant moral tradition, Walker suggests a more robust representation will identify significant features differently:

Practically, this means that individual embroideries and idiosyncrasies, as well as the learned codes of expression and response built up in particular relationships, and built up culturally around kinds of relationships, require of us very acute attention to the minute and specific, to history and incident, in grasping cases in a morally adequate way.¹⁸

Being attentive and responsive to particular persons, their interests, experiences, and perspectives for feminist ethics better reflects the reality that “styles of moral thinking are not primarily philosophical brain-teasers, data begging for the maximally elegant theoretical construction, but are ways of answering to *other people* in terms of some responsibilities that are commonly recognized or recognizable in some community.”¹⁹ In this way, feminist ethics sees itself as better equipped than the dominant moral tradition not only to develop fuller representations of moral life, but also to better accommodate those issues of real moral significance to actual persons. Virginia Held has written on her period of disillusionment with moral philosophy while under the impression that it was equipped only to deal metaethical questions and not those facing actual people in their everyday life.²⁰ The last few decades, however, has seen an increasing emergence within moral philosophy of applied ethics, or “engaged moral inquirers,” Held’s preferred term for thinkers in the field that she borrows from Michele Moody-Adams.²¹ These thinkers see their philosophical challenge as “offering new ideas

¹⁸ Margaret Urban Walker, “Moral Understandings: Alternative ‘Epistemology’ for a Feminist Ethics,” *Hypatia*, 4, no. 2 (1989): 18.

¹⁹ Walker, “Moral Understandings,” 18.

²⁰ Virginia Held, “Philosophy, Feminism, and Care,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the APA* 92 (November 2018): 133–57.

²¹ Held, “Philosophy, Feminism, and Care,” 137.

for how we ought to live and to remake our societies and our world.”²² What is especially notable about this challenge is that it is not reserved as a purely intellectual or academic endeavor — more so than ever, it seems a clearly *social* challenge, concerned explicitly with various and particular aspects of lived human experience. Many feminist ethics have thus taken up this challenge in becoming more attentive and responsive to those experiences. Code describes this endeavor in terms of responsiveness to particular persons as knowers:

Abandoning any goal of constructing idealized accounts of what abstract knowers should do, most feminists attempt to ground their normative conclusions in the epistemic demands that real, embodied, specifically located knowers face in endeavoring to construct responsible and reliable knowledge that can serve them well in real-world (and/or in real scientific/social scientific) circumstances.”²³

From this perspective, it is easier to see how moral issues should for their inquirers entail consideration of how particular persons experience them and how they are underpinned by various concepts or assumptions.

Epistemological concerns:

For many feminist ethicists, a more inclusive and thus more attentive and responsive moral inquiry will be guided by an revised moral epistemology. I use the term “moral epistemology” to refer to the concern among feminist ethicists that representations of moral life are themselves determined in part by the structures of power and privilege that assign authority to make these representations and reinforce them as authoritative. Code describes this concern as motivated by:

²² Held, 137.

²³ Code, “Epistemology,” 176.

[A] realization that epistemologies, in their trickle-down effects in the everyday world, play a part in sustaining patriarchal and other hierarchical social structures ... They achieve such efforts in consequence of the kinds of knowledge that they tacitly legitimate, the kinds of knowers to whom they — again often tacitly — accord epistemic authority, and the exclusions and credibility differentials that they consequently produce.²⁴

A feminist moral epistemology, then, will properly strive to deconstruct the concepts and assumptions that sustain oppressive and exclusionary structures. This epistemology will take an appropriately critical stance toward the authorities that are assigned and reinforced through dominant representations of moral life — that is, it will be critical of who is valued as a “knower” within these representations. Built into this stance will be a conscious consideration of those features that are typically subordinated and so excluded from the dominant moral tradition, including features of dependency, vulnerability, and particularity.

Though these features were initially regarded by feminist ethics as central to primarily women’s experiences, there has been growing recognition within the evolving tradition that not all women take the voice or experience theorized as their own. Code describes a necessary distinction to be made within consideration of a feminist epistemology:

A feminist standpoint is not to be confused with a “woman’s standpoint,” which would be theirs just by virtue of their femaleness; nor is it merely an interchangeable perspective which anyone could occupy just by deciding to do so. On the contrary, it is a hard-won product of consciousness-raising and social-political engagement that exposes the false presuppositions upon which patterns of domination and subordination are built and sustained.²⁵

²⁴ Code, 176.

²⁵ Code, 180.

I have discussed how the dominant moral tradition has been marked by such patterns. However, within the evolving tradition of feminist ethics itself, representations of moral life may themselves exercises of power and privilege, propping up certain positions as the norm while subordinating and excluding others. This may be the case particularly when those working within it are not appropriately critical of how their own authority may be an exercise of privilege. “This ought not to be surprising,” Walker insists, “in a society where gender always interacts with other powerful social divisions of labor, opportunity, and recognition that make women’s experiences differ in systematic ways.”²⁶ Similarly, Code argues that an alternative epistemology with feminist ethics ought to be always conscious that representations of moral life “are drawn from, bear the marks of, and perpetuate structures of power and privilege that are sustained as much by racial, class, religious, ethnic, age, and physical ability differentials as they are by a sex/gender system that could be discretely and univocally characterized.”²⁷

To avoid making the same mistakes as those it sees within the dominant moral tradition, an essential task for feminist ethicists has been “to struggle and negotiate over who is representing whom, why, and with what authority. Feminists continue to learn in hard ways that claims to represent are weighty and dangerous, often not only epistemically dubious but morally indefensible.”²⁸ The project of feminist ethics, therefore, is properly motivated by questions about authority, credibility, and representation in moral life both within and outside its own developing tradition. In the

²⁶ Walker, *Moral Understandings*, 63.

²⁷ Code, 174.

²⁸ Walker, 63.

next chapter, I will begin to explain how these questions are of indispensable importance to advocates in practices of speaking for others.

Chapter II: The Moral and Epistemic Commitment of Advocacy

Within this project, I will take advocacy to refer to the practice of speaking-for or on behalf of others with the intention of advancing those others' wellbeing. Though not all advocacy intends to advance the wellbeing of *human* others, such as in animal and environmental advocacy, I will be focusing in this project on advocacy that is responsive to the needs of human persons. It is also true that practices of speaking-for are not restricted to the context of advocacy; I will, however, limit my discussion to this context. I do this out of recognition that the distinction of speaking-for in this context has to do with the intentions with which advocates commit themselves to the practice. These intentions are definitive of the field of advocacy insofar as they connote a commitment — however developed — to the belief that their speaking-for will yield some positive outcome for those advocated for. Advocates will also typically recognize that this commitment is central to their work; without the belief that their speaking-for will yield a positive outcome, they should view their work as lacking its definitive commitment and, subsequently, lacking legitimacy.

We should see this as a kind of *moral* commitment, insofar as advocates identify a connection between themselves, their ability to speak, and another individual or group that needs spoken-for. Advocates then attach a moral significance to this connection, feeling themselves responsible for sustaining it. Whether it is working to build a just and equitable community near to home, or advocating for rights of those around the world, advocates do work that is meant to answer to other people, recognizing themselves as implicated and thus morally responsible in a network of relationships and connections with other persons. An appropriate philosophical question for advocates is thus how to

evaluate their moral commitment to the belief that their practices will yield the intended positive outcome, as well as to evaluate the actual outcome of those practices. As I will attempt to explain in full, these evaluations will include due consideration of a wealth of related though not always obvious factors.

While perhaps it is uncontroversial to assert that practices of advocacy entail a moral commitment, it may seem less obvious that they entail an epistemic commitment. Much of the contemporary rhetoric surrounding advocacy assumes well-founded knowledge of the needs that are worth speaking-for, those persons needing spoken-for, and the moral permissibility (or, in many cases, the moral *necessity*) of speaking-for. For example, Amnesty International, one of the most recognized international human rights organizations in the world, explicitly identifies as their vision and mission “a world in which every person enjoys all of the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights instruments.”²⁹ Advocates that subscribe to this mission may thus identify their responsibility to speak-for as defined by a commitment to the wellbeing of *all* persons, as well as a commitment to the belief that those rights will actually be protected by their speaking-for those persons. In other words, they view their work as justified by their knowledge of the situation and what it encompasses. In this way, we may describe this commitment as *epistemic* as well as moral.

It is from this commitment that advocates derive the moral and epistemic legitimacy of speaking for others. Therefore, philosophical evaluation of this commitment considers how this commitment may be justified. Notably, such evaluations

²⁹ “Amnesty’s International Statute,” Amnesty International, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/about-us/how-were-run/amnesty-internationals-statute/>.

must take place at an individual level, as all practices of speaking-for are defined not only by *what* is being said, but *who* is speaking. These evaluations are thus doubly concerned not only with the accuracy of claims, but also with the authority with which claims are made. This should be especially true for advocates, who, in addition to acting from the belief that what they say is justified, also act from the belief that they are in a legitimate position to speak. That is, they believe not only that there is a general necessity to the practice of speaking-for, but also that they are the one to do it.

Frequently, this is a position of privilege. Platforms from which to speak and to be heard are themselves structured by the socio-historical context in which they are embedded. Speaking from these platforms thus can reflect and reinforce the socio-historical structures that allow some speakers access and deny it to others. This should sound similar to the privileged authority with which one defines moral life: “To have the social, intellectual, or moral authority to perform this feat, one must already be on the advantaged side of practices that distribute power, privilege, and responsibilities in the community in which one does it.”³⁰ Critical evaluation of the moral and epistemic commitments that advocates have must also be a critical evaluation of how authority is assigned in practices of speaking for — that is, who speaks— and what this practically means for the effectiveness of those practices — that is, who listens and who is heard. Because advocates are also committed to beliefs about the outcome of their practices of speaking-for, appropriate evaluation will also be conscious of how that outcome does or does not obtain.

³⁰ Walker, 60.

It is crucial to additionally note that practices of speaking-for in advocacy are both founded on and are also themselves ways of representing moral life. The moral and epistemic commitment to advocacy work also comes from the belief that 1) one has adequately grasped the relevant aspects of moral life and 2) one has the authority to make these representations public by speaking. If I am an advocate for women's reproductive rights, for example, I believe myself to have an adequate understanding of what those rights are and who is deserving of them. I also believe myself to be in an authoritative position to speak from that understanding, expecting that it be shared with others and treated as normative. The practices of speaking-for in advocacy are thus themselves both reflections and reinforcements of representations of moral life. As I discussed in Chapter I, such representations lead to important questions about authority and credibility.

These will thus be similarly important questions in evaluating the moral and epistemic commitments of advocacy. Thus far, I have identified appropriate factors of evaluation as the relative authority with which an advocate speaks-for, the representations that are implicit or explicit within their practices, and the outcome of speaking-for for those who their practices implicate. While I will be considering these factors more constructively in Chapter III, I will for the remainder of this chapter aim to make more obvious that these are factors well worth considering in practices of speaking-for in advocacy.

The salience of social location:

In Chapter I, I discussed what is involved in making representations of moral life and treating them as authoritative. One of the salient factors identified was how the

authority to make these representations and have them treated as normative is assigned by socio-historical structures of power and privilege. In the above section, I explained how those structures also define access to the platforms of speaking-for in advocacy, as well as how practices of speaking-for are themselves reflections and reinforcements of such representations. The authority to make these representations is derived from the belief that one has a sufficient understanding of the relevant aspects of an issue to represent it. What I hope to make clear, however, is that where practices of speaking-for in advocacy are afforded by structures of power and privilege, there is a substantial risk of mistaking one's privileged access to a platform as legitimate authority to speak from it.

Alison Jaggar is one of many feminist philosophers to have explored this and other related risks, specifically with regard to contemporary practices of Western feminist discourse. In “‘Saving Amina’: Global Justice for Women and Intercultural Dialogue,” Jaggar discusses the dangers of representing issues of global injustice in ways that she ultimately argues are “incomplete.”³¹ Jaggar’s titular example is the 2002 campaign to “save” Amina Lawal, a divorced Nigerian woman convicted by an Islamic court of adultery, from her allegedly imminent sentence to death by stoning. This campaign — popularized by a London chapter of Amnesty International that circulated an electronic petition³² — employed various racialized, sexualized, and sensationalized strategies to rally support before it was met with resistance from a Nigerian human rights organization defending Lawal. The message from this organization explained that the petition circulated internationally had endangered Lawal and her case, due in part to its factual

³¹ Alison Jaggar, “‘Saving Amina’: Global Justice for Women and Intercultural Dialogue,” *Ethics & International Affairs*, 19 (2005): 55-75.

³² Libby Brooks. “Saving Amina,” *The Guardian* (2003).
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/may/08/gender.uk>.

inaccuracies. The message also read, “There is an unbecoming arrogance in assuming that international human rights organizations or others always know better than those directly involved, and therefore can take actions that fly in the face of their express wishes.”³³ Beyond failing to accurately represent the actual situation, the authors and circulators of the petition had also assumed that they had the legitimate authority to represent it at all. The consequence of this assumption was the physical endangerment of woman “represented” and the exclusion of her and other voices in the discourse that followed from it.

For Jaggar, this is an illustrative example of how many Western feminists act from incomplete understandings of global injustices in a way that has adverse effects on the very women they intend to help. Jaggar writes that such an incomplete understanding “distorts our comprehension of our moral relationship to women elsewhere in the world and impoverishes our assumptions about the intercultural dialogue necessary to promote global justice for women.”³⁴ Much of contemporary advocacy work suffers similarly incomplete understandings, acting on rudimentary and uninformed notions of how to speak for others against injustice. While the consequences may not always appear so direct as the physical endangerment of other persons, work that is founded on incomplete understandings of the conditions and persons involved can have a comparably harmful outcome.

Some thinkers have documented their firsthand experience with these kinds of problems. In one of her many acclaimed written works on feminism, race, and sexuality,

³³ Ayesha Imam and Sindi Medar-Gould, “Nigeria: Please stop the international Amina Lawal protest letter campaigns — for now,” BAOBAB for Women’s Human Rights (2003).

³⁴ Jaggar, “Saving Amina,” 56.

Angela Davis describes her formative encounters with Egyptian women during a trip to Cairo.³⁵ Explaining that the sponsors of her trip had intended for her to ultimately write on the sexual aspects of gender inequality in the region (namely, the practice of female circumcision), Davis carefully recounts the reality she confronted that challenged her authority to speak on these issues. This became particularly clear in a meeting with several women who vehemently rejected the premise of her visit. Once she had mentioned that the focus of her article would be “Women and Sex,” Davis characterizes the room’s response as “pandemonium.”³⁶ While she notes that she initially struggled to react appropriately to what she describes as “obvious hostility” from the room, she explains that she eventually resigned herself to a receptive rather than defensive position. “It soon became clear,” she writes: “that the very idea that sex might be the focus of an article on Egyptian women was so objectionable that I could not stem the tide waters of anger simply by qualifying my own position on the subject. I labored to convince myself to refrain from attempting to defend my own position.”³⁷

With this recognition, Davis explains that her role was to listen and learn from what the women present had to say on the subject. Though none of them explicitly disputed the moral indignity of female circumcision, several asserted that it had been wrongly isolated by Western feminists as “the pivotal issue in the quest for women’s liberation.”³⁸ This fixation had reduced women’s quest for equality in these regions to a sexualized dimension, operating with a sort of blind spot for the more deep-seated

³⁵ Angela Davis, “Women in Egypt: A Personal View,” in *Women, Culture, & Politics* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 116–54.

³⁶ Davis, “Women in Egypt,” 123.

³⁷ Davis, 124.

³⁸ Davis, 122.

structures of economic and political oppression. This shows not only a sweeping disregard for the dignity of the women in question, but also hinders the advancement of gender equality in these regions by isolating issues of sexual oppression from their larger social context. In fact, Davis learned from her firsthand interactions with Egyptian women that “the relationship between this salient sexual issue and the socioeconomic elements of women’s oppression is one in which the former is clearly conditioned by the latter.”³⁹ So understood, sexual inequality is one aspect of the bigger picture that many Western feminist efforts had failed to take into account — that is, they had failed to fully represent this issue.

Importantly, the objection Davis identifies to these efforts is not only about the accuracy of the representative claims made. In fact, it was the view of many women she spoke with that female circumcision was an immoral practice that ought to be eradicated. A more salient problem with Western feminist campaigns to represent this issue had to do with the arrogance of the assumption that Western feminists — and not the women actually involved — were the ones with the moral authority to do so. Davis cites a statement from Dr. Shehida Elbaz that well articulates this problem:

Women in the West should know ... that we have a stand in relation to them concerning our issues and our problems. We reject their patronizing attitude. It is connected with built-in mechanisms of colonialism and with their sense of superiority. Maybe some of them don’t do it consciously, but it is there. They decide what problems we have, how we should face them, without even possessing the tools to know our problems.⁴⁰

The suggestion here is that Western feminists had failed to adequately represent an issue by virtue of their position in relation to the women they spoke for. In this position, they

³⁹ Davis, 131.

⁴⁰ Davis, 121-122.

could not develop the understandings sufficient to represent the issue in speaking for these women. Yet, it was from that very position that they had been assigned the platform to speak from. From this platform, their representation of the issue was taken as authoritative.

We will recall, however, that access to platforms such as these is structured by the socio-historical context that allows some speakers access and denies it to others. A consequence is that speaking from this platform both reflects and reinforces those socio-historical structures. In the case discussed by Davis, speaking as a Western feminist meant being afforded a certain authority from a privilege that was not afforded to the women directly involved in the issue — women who arguably had legitimate authority to speak for themselves. Speaking from this position despite lacking legitimate authority thus also meant the exclusion of certain voices from an authoritative platform. Another woman Davis met, Dr. Latifa Zayat, explained the negative effect on Egyptian women that Western feminist practices of speaking-for has, despite these practices being for their benefit: “I know that through this research we are being turned into animals, into guinea pigs ... I know that we are being tested, we are being listed in catalogs, we are being defined in terms of sexuality for reasons which are not in our own interests.”⁴¹

These examples from Jaggar and Davis serve to illustrate the salience of a speaker’s location to assigning authority in practices of speaking-for. In “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” Linda Alcoff explains that this is related to a speaker’s ability to represent others, as well as the effects that those representations may have.⁴² In every

⁴¹ Davis, 124-125.

⁴² Linda Alcoff, “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” *Cultural Critique*, no. 20 (1991): 5–32.

instance where I speak for or about another, Alcoff contends, “I am engaging in the act of representing the other’s needs, goals, situation, and in fact, *who they are*. I am representing them *as* such and such, or in post-structuralist terms, I am participating in the construction of their subject-positions.”⁴³ Importantly, Alcoff argues that representations of others’ needs, goals, and situation are never simple acts of discovery; rather, they are mediated by their speaker’s social location:

[T]here is a growing recognition that where one speaks from affects the meaning and truth of what one says, and thus that one cannot assume an ability to transcend one’s location. In other words, a speaker’s location (which I take here to refer to their *social* location, or social identity) has an epistemically significant impact on that speaker’s claims and can serve either to authorize or disauthorize one’s speech.⁴⁴

Because such representations are mediated so heavily by the social location one occupies, advocates should take appropriate care to consider the legitimacy of making certain claims for others from their respective social locations.

This will also mean that advocacy may be limited by representation of certain interests and identities relative to one’s social location. After meeting and speaking with a number of local and regional women in Egypt, Davis concluded that she could not write an authoritative article on women and sex that would be fully representative of their interests, perspectives, and experiences. This was true especially because of the social distance between her and the women she met, one that was relative to not only her physical location, but also to the socio-historical context of Western colonialism and imperialism in the Middle East and North Africa. In fact, Davis acknowledges in her concluding remarks that there were some “unique issues that women in Egypt would

⁴³ Alcoff, “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” 9.

⁴⁴ Alcoff, 6-7.

have to work out for themselves,” recognizing that she was unable to write as an authority on such issues.⁴⁵ She even named her finished article to reflect its limitations: “Women in Egypt: A *Personal View*.”⁴⁶

However, the fact that practices of speaking-for are made complicated by a speaker’s social location should not so clearly suggest that advocacy is strictly limited to representation of those interests and identities of which one is a part. Taken to one extreme, the response to the difficulties in speaking for others may be to limit one’s own advocacy to their own interests; I may, for example, find it appropriate only to advocate for my own reproductive rights rather than those of all women for fear of misrepresenting those who do not share my discrete social location. Though Alcoff takes seriously the risks of misrepresentation and their effects on actual persons and communities, she squarely rejects a categorical “retreat response,” or the opting “to retreat from all practices of speaking for [others] and assert that one can only know one’s own narrow individual experience and one’s ‘own truth’ and can never make claims beyond this.”⁴⁷ Alcoff objects to this response for two reasons.

The first is that it can result “merely in a retreat into a narcissistic yuppie lifestyle in which a privileged person takes no responsibility for her society whatsoever.”⁴⁸ Alcoff poses an important question to consider for those speaking from more privileged locations: “If I don’t speak for those less privileged than myself, am I abandoning my political responsibility to speak out against oppression, a responsibility incurred by the

⁴⁵ Davis, 154.

⁴⁶ Emphasis added.

⁴⁷ Alcoff, 17.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

very fact of my privilege?”⁴⁹ Certainly, some locations may entail greater degrees of responsibility and accountability than others, such as those locations that benefit from systems of oppression at the expense of oppressed persons and groups. As Alcoff acknowledges, however, the choice to abstain from speaking for others may well be out of a desire to avoid a kind of discursive imperialism. While she maintains that this *is* at times the right response, it would nonetheless be a mistake to default to it in all cases for the noteworthy reason that it “significantly undercuts the possibility of political effectivity.” There are many cases, it is suggested, in which speaking for others “has been politically efficacious in advancing the needs of those spoken for.”⁵⁰ This may true especially in cases where a more privileged location allows greater access to platforms and resources necessary for advancing those needs.

The second reason Alcoff gives for rejecting a universal adoption of the retreat response is that it is based on the illusion that there is some alternative location to which a speaker can retreat. The idea with which she takes issue is the assumption of a liberated, discrete location from which one can speak without implicating a wider network of personal, discursive, and power relations. Such a location, Alcoff argues, doesn’t exist: “[T]here is no neutral place to stand free and clear in which one’s words do not prescriptively affect or mediate the experience of others, nor is there a way to decisively demarcate a boundary between one’s location and all others.”⁵¹ Moreover, this illusion falsely promises to allow speakers to escape responsibility and accountability for their claims and their effects. Put most morbidly, there is no such escape, because “even a

⁴⁹ Alcoff, 8.

⁵⁰ Alcoff, 17-18.

⁵¹ Alcoff, 20.

complete retreat from speech is of course not neutral since it allows the continued dominance of current discourses and acts by omission to reinforce their dominance.”⁵²

We can see, then, how the “retreat response” seems problematic for advocates who are committed to beliefs about their work yielding positive outcomes. Indeed, Alcoff explains that she does not intend for her insights on the problem of speaking for others to be taken as preventing persons in a position similar to advocates from doing so. What she *does* clearly intend, rather, is “that anyone who speaks for others should only do so out of a concrete analysis of the particular power relations and discursive effects involved.”⁵³ Here, we see how Alcoff considers speaking for others to be a problem not *only* because of the legitimacy and authority of a speaker’s claims, but *especially* because of the effects of certain claims on those who are implicated. Though one of many historical examples, Alcoff explains how the statements made by former President George W. Bush on behalf of the Panamanian people following the 1989 Panama election reinforced a false and oppressive narrative that misrepresented the Panamanian people as victims of their own government and thus re-consolidated U.S. imperialism as a legitimate foreign policy.⁵⁴ In another example, she discusses the work of Anne Cameron, a white Canadian author who wrote fictional narratives from the point of view of Native American women. Cameron’s social location not only brought into question the legitimacy of those narratives, but also had effects “counterproductive in regard to the needs of Native women.”⁵⁵ In parallel cases discussed by Jaggar and Davis, the actual needs and situations of women had been

⁵² Alcoff, 20.

⁵³ Alcoff, 24.

⁵⁴ Alcoff, 27.

⁵⁵ Alcoff, 7.

not only misrepresented through a mistake in authority, but *made worse* by even well-intentioned efforts of human rights advocates and feminist discursive practices.

It is and will remain difficult to formulate the causal relationship between one's social location and the effects on the persons or groups that working from that location will have. We should draw from this chapter's insights thus far, however, that advocates should not uncritically assume moral authority to develop and act on representations of moral situations on behalf of other persons, especially if their location is somehow complicit with systems or practices of oppression.

What is at stake?

As we have seen, uncritically assuming authority over moral situations involving others is problematic not only because it is prone to inaccuracy or error, but also because it can have harmful effects on actual persons. These effects may include the exclusion of crucial voices within an issue that some have argued amounts to a kind of epistemic violence. Kristie Dotson defines "epistemic violence" as "a refusal, intentional or unintentional, of an audience to communicatively reciprocate a linguistic exchange owing to pernicious ignorance."⁵⁶ The potential for epistemic violence derives from the relations of dependence that speakers have on their audience: in a communicative exchange between speaker and audience, the speaker depends on their audience not only to be heard, but to be identified and valued as a *knower*. This is related to a similar notion of vulnerability, insofar as "speakers are vulnerable in linguistic exchanges because an audience may or may not meet the linguistic needs of a given speaker in a given

⁵⁶ Kristie Dotson, "Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing," *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (2011): 238.

exchange.”⁵⁷ While Dotson contends that tracking epistemic violence and its effects is a “context-dependent exercise,”⁵⁸ she suggests that we can and should nonetheless recognize that oppressed groups are especially vulnerable to this form of violence.

Dotson discusses two ways in which an audience commits forms of epistemic violence against a speaker, particularly in instances where members of an oppressed group offer testimony. The first, testimonial quieting, “occurs when an audience fails to identify a speaker as a knower.”⁵⁹ This practice is related to the fact that certain identities have been “epistemically disadvantaged,” or undervalued as knowers. Drawing from Patricia Hill Collins’ analysis of black women’s lack of credibility, Dotson explains that “to undervalue a black woman speaker is to take her status as a knower to be less than plausible.”⁶⁰ Oppressed groups have been historically undervalued as knowers, even with respect to issues in which their social location should yield a certain epistemic advantage — that is, even when they are in a position to know. It is from this same social location, however, that members of oppressed groups experience limitations to their being valued as a knower. Members of oppressed groups are often undervalued as knowers by virtue of their being oppressed, not by virtue of their actual knowledge.

The second form of epistemic violence identified by Dotson is testimonial smothering, or “the truncating of one’s own testimony in order to insure that the testimony contains only content for which one’s audience demonstrates testimonial competence.”⁶¹ This occurs in situations where a speaker identifies the audience as unable

⁵⁷ Dotson, “Tracking Epistemic Violence,” 238.

⁵⁸ Dotson, 239.

⁵⁹ Dotson, 242.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Dotson, 244.

to understand the content of proffered testimony and/or unable to detect a failure to understand that content. A speaker may identify their audience as situated such that they cannot understand the content of the proffered testimony, or the audience might have demonstrated to the speaker that they are unable or unwilling to understand this content. For these and other similar reasons, the speaker may determine not to share their testimony at the expense of it being misunderstood, misinterpreted, or misrepresented. It is additionally notable that Dotson emphasizes the ability of an audience not just to fully understand the content of a given testimony, but also to demonstrate that they are sensitive to “defeaters” of their understandings; that is, being sensitive to how their initial understandings of a situation may be open to revision or objection. It is accordingly important to Dotson that an audience demonstrate their willingness to adapt their understanding of a proffered testimony when presented with potential defeaters of that understanding.⁶²

Properly understood, we may see how some feminist discourse surrounding women’s conditions in poor countries inflicts a kind of epistemic violence. Susan Okin, for example, has written on the issue of how to reconcile a “coherent and workable theory of justice” with cultural differences among persons and social groups.⁶³ Though she takes time to recognize that within prevailing moral traditions, “large numbers of persons have typically been excluded from consideration,”⁶⁴ Okin does later find justification “for those not thoroughly imbued with the inegalitarian norms of a culture to come forth as its

⁶² Dotson, 246.

⁶³ Susan Okin, “Gender Inequality and Cultural Differences,” *Political Theory* 22, no. 1 (1994): 5–24.

⁶⁴ Okin, “Gender Inequality,” 5.

constructive critics.”⁶⁵ The subsequent suggestion is that “*committed* outsiders can often be better analysts and critics of social injustice than those who live within the relevant culture.”⁶⁶ Okin finds this justifiable on the basis that “oppressed people have often internalized their oppression so well that they *have* no sense of what they are justly entitled to as human beings.”⁶⁷

However, it should not be so clear that this is the case. Many of the women with whom Davis met, for example, were very vocal about their deep disapproval of the practice of female circumcision, and equally passionate about its eradication in their respective regions. Rather, their objections had to do how their own particular experiences, perspectives, and interests had been excluded from much of the dominating (Western) discourse on the subject. In this case, the women from “the relevant culture” showed great confidence in their ability to analyze and criticize notions of social injustices they were directly acquainted with. While it may be true that this is not always the case, moral deliberations on these and similar subjects should not make the dangerous assumption that those persons are deprived in their understandings by virtue of their direct involvement. Indeed, this assumption seems inextricably linked with the epistemic violence discussed by Dotson insofar as it undervalues those persons as knowers, ultimately diminishing or silencing their testimonial contributions on the grounds not only that they do not know the conditions of their own oppression, but that someone else knows *better*.

⁶⁵ Okin, 19.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

In a similar undertaking to Okin's, Martha Nussbaum has written on the conditions of women in poor countries to develop a universalist conception of global justice for women. In "Women and Cultural Universals," Nussbaum outlines a list of "central human functional capabilities" that she asserts ought to be the goals of public policy.⁶⁸ This list is in answer to the question posed by what has been referred to as the capability approach; that is, "What activities characteristically performed by human beings are so central that they seem definitive of a life that is truly human? In other words, what are the functions without which (meaning, without the availability of which) we would regard a life as not, or not fully, human?"⁶⁹ Nussbaum's resulting list of 10 central capabilities⁷⁰ are those that she asserts ought to be shared by and developed in all human beings: "We believe that certain basic and central human endowments have a claim to be assisted in developing, and exert that claim on others."⁷¹ This is for Nussbaum a distinctly *moral* claim, and its implication is such that anything that fails to be consistent with this claim may be condemned.

I do not wish to take any substantial issue with those specific capabilities Nussbaum has articulated; nor do I contend that it is altogether inappropriate to develop and draw from some universal conception of the human good. Indeed, much of advocacy must get its moral motivations from ideas. What I do intend, however, is to point out areas in which Nussbaum's position and others like it may be incomplete.

⁶⁸ Martha Nussbaum, "Women and Cultural Universals," in *Sex and Social Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 29–54.

⁶⁹ Nussbaum, "Women and Cultural Universals," 39.

⁷⁰ Those capabilities, as listed by Nussbaum, are: 1) Life; 2) Bodily health and integrity; 3) Bodily integrity; 4) Senses, imagination, thought; 5) Emotions; 6) Practical reason; 7) Affiliation; and 8) Other species.

⁷¹ Nussbaum, 43.

We may, as a start, be wary of how the unequivocal attitude that underpins Nussbaum's position poses an alarming insensitivity to the sorts of risks discussed by Jaggar, Davis, Alcoff, and Dotson. Very early in her discussion, Nussbaum maintains that if her brand of cultural universalism "involves assault on many local traditions, both Western and non-Western, then so much the better, because any tradition that denies these things is unjust."⁷² Moreover, while she admits such risks, Nussbaum contends that "it is better to risk being consigned by critics to the 'hell' reserved for alleged Westernizers and imperialists ... than to stand around in the vestibule waiting for a time when everyone will like what we are going to say."⁷³

There is some truth to Nussbaum's conviction that many injustices require a sort of the "moral standtaking" that she endorses; indeed, Alcoff has contended that a categorical retreat from all discourses can yield the same harmful consequences or reinforce the same oppressive conditions that one hopes to avoid by retreating, and Jaggar has recognized elsewhere that ignoring injustices for women in other countries may suggest a moral double standard that is racist or ethnocentric.⁷⁴ It remains true that women suffer injustice in all parts of the world, and that decisive action is needed for working toward social and global justice. Nussbaum asks questions that are of universal importance, such as "What should people concerned with justice say about this? And should they say anything at all?"⁷⁵ Indeed, I have discussed extensively that these are questions of crucial significance to advocates, and complicated questions at that.

⁷² Nussbaum, 30.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Alison Jaggar, "Globalizing Feminist Ethics," in *Decentering the Center*, ed. Uma Narayan and Sandra Harding (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 4.

⁷⁵ Nussbaum, 30.

However, we should read a false dichotomy within Nussbaum's representation of the choices of more privileged persons to take up a position in relation to women elsewhere in the world: she depicts a choice between apathy or ethnocentric arrogance, carelessness or universal condemnation. We might understand how Nussbaum appears to perceive this choice as so clearly divided: she sees herself as possessing the proper understanding under which to sort out the problems she has identified — because she knows, she must speak. She has made several assumptions, however, that we might seriously question. The first is that she is in a legitimate position to develop her understanding — notably, one primarily concerning women who occupy a vastly different social location — to endorse it, and exert it as the norm. In other words, she has assumed that she is in a legitimate position to know, to speak, and to be heard. From this position, she also assumes that she has the moral authority to speak for others. The related assumption, though less obvious, is that she is not required to make any critical evaluation of her own social location and how that may come to bear on the legitimacy of any understanding that she develops from it. The idea may be that because she has represented her philosophical as *universal*, it is, by definition, unmediated by social location. With this understanding, the only appropriate choice seems to be *speak*, and do so unequivocally, unilaterally, and unapologetically.

But we should see how working from these assumptions is problematic. In Chapter I, I discussed how uncritically assuming moral authority in representing moral life both reflects and reinforces those socio-historical structures of power and privilege that favor certain locations over others. This means not only that the authority assigned to certain positions may in fact lack legitimacy, but also that exercising that authority may

be at the expense of other disadvantaged or oppressed positions. To speak for others, then, requires a critical evaluation of how authority is assigned by structures of power and privilege. Without such critical evaluation, speakers may mistake their being afforded the authority to speak-for others as legitimate grounds for doing so — a mistake that can have harmful effects on those spoken-for.

Therefore, such evaluations are necessary for advocates who are morally committed to the wellbeing of those for whom they speak and epistemically committed to the justified belief that speaking-for will yield the intended outcome. Having established what is at stake in practices of speaking-for in advocacy, I will in the next chapter explore what the feminist moral epistemology contributes to the critical evaluations of these practices.

Chapter III: The Feminist Challenge to Advocacy

Thus far, I have discussed how advocacy is defined by a commitment to the moral and epistemic legitimacy of speaking for others. From this commitment, advocates derive the authority to speak for others. Exercising this authority, however, is itself a reflection and reinforcement of socio-historical structures that afford certain positions authority and deny it to others. With this recognition, I have given reason to believe that the authority with which advocates speak for others merits critical evaluation with an eye to the speaker's social location and the effects that speaking from it has on those spoken-for. In this chapter, I will discuss more fully what the field of feminist ethics contributes to this evaluation.

Most simply put, feminist criticism in ethics “gets at questions about the authority to represent moral life.”⁷⁶ These are questions motivated by patterns of exclusion within the dominant moral tradition that are structured by socio-historical structures of power and privilege. Lorraine Code explains the recognition of feminist ethics that:

Disciplines and practices commonly work from embedded assumptions about what counts as knowledge worthy of the name, and whose knowledge merits acknowledgement. Frequently these assumptions confirm the presuppositions around which the epistemologies of the mainstream are constructed, to produce uneven, and often unjust multiple standards of credibility, authority, responsibility, and trust: standards that perpetuate white affluent male epistemic privilege while discrediting and discounting the knowledge and wisdom made in places and by knowers other than those legitimated by the current, authoritative knowledge-makers.⁷⁷

In order to develop a more inclusive moral tradition, feminist ethics brings into explicit consideration those features of moral life that are obscured or neglected within

⁷⁶ Walker, 62.

⁷⁷ Code, 174.

the dominant tradition. The aim is that bringing these features into consideration will serve to deconstruct those relations of power and privilege that assign authority to certain moral representations while denying it to others. Walker explains another fundamental recognition of feminist ethics as the idea that “prevalent or authoritative assumptions will shape the direction, practice, interpretation, and results of inquiry, and that social powers can render some people’s assumptions arbitrarily prevalent or undeservedly authoritative in inquiry elsewhere.”⁷⁸

In Chapter II, I discussed how advocacy is marked by similar problems of authority and legitimacy that challenge the moral and epistemic commitments that advocates have in practices of speaking-for. We can thus consider the features highlighted by feminist ethics in the context of advocacy with the hope that they will challenge its dominant and exclusionary assumptions.

Evaluating dependency and social location:

Some of the first features I identified in Chapter I were those of vulnerability and dependency. These features were at tension with assumptions central to the dominant moral tradition that moral choices are paradigmatically those entered into freely and consciously by individuals. They are also features that, because of various socio-historical structures, have characterized the experiences of oppressed and subordinated groups in society. In Chapter II, I discussed how practices of speaking-for in advocacy take place of a network of social and power relations such that a speaker’s claims are dependent on and a product of these relations. In other words, practices of speaking-for in

⁷⁸ Walker, 65.

advocacy are themselves dependent on socio-historical structures. This is also true of the outcome of advocacy for those spoken-for, who are frequently left vulnerable by these structures and so are also vulnerable to the effects of those practices.

With the recognition that relations of dependency and vulnerability shape practices of speaking-for, advocates should be appropriately open to revising their basic moral and epistemic commitments. Understanding that what one says does not always have the intended outcome for those spoken-for means that advocates are morally accountable not only for the truth or accuracy of their claims, but also for the greater effects that making them has. There is no position into which advocates can retreat to make claims that are not implicated by structures of power and privilege, and the illusion that there is such a position is itself privileged by these structures. We may find a similar illusion within the dominant moral tradition that presupposes moral subjects as sharing equal membership within a clearly intelligible community. Though it makes for attractive conditions for moral theorizing, some feminist ethicists have nonetheless that this presupposition “masks the question of what our moral relationships are to those who are our superiors and inferiors in power.”⁷⁹ Since advocates are frequently in a position of power by virtue of their platform, they should be concerned with deconstruction of this presupposition. The freedom to make authoritative moral claims in speaking for others is not by itself appropriate justification for doing so because it lacks a necessary understanding of how practices of speaking-for are shaped by relations of dependency and vulnerability.

⁷⁹ Baier, 57.

Additionally, understanding that a speaker's claims are always mediated by their social location means that advocates should not uncritically assume their position to be universally authoritative. In other words, the idea that a certain moral position is an objective or universal matter does not free a speaker from the epistemic influence of their social location. As Alcoff has put it:

[T]here is a growing recognition that where one speaks from affects the meaning and truth of what one says, and thus that one cannot assume an ability to transcend one's location. In other words, a speaker's location (which I take here to refer to their *social* location, or social identity) has an epistemically significant impact on that speaker's claims and can serve either to authorize or disauthorize one's speech.⁸⁰

We should note that advocacy is prone to the assumption that in speaking about issues that are conceived as objective or universal, a speaker can transcend the epistemic limits of their social location to make authoritative claims about these issues on behalf of others. Similar to Alcoff, Code is critical of the assumption of an "idealized view from nowhere" on that grounds that it:

...is as politically implicated as it is impossible to achieve: it sustains and is sustained by the hegemonic epistemic values and ideas of autonomous, self-sufficient subjectivity that its promulgators are positioned to regard as neutral and natural. The illusion of this stark objectivity, escalated into an objectivism that knows no bounds, can be deflated only by showing, as objectively as possible and despite the self-referentiality that such a requirement invokes, just how it bears the indelible mark of the situations and circumstances of its articulators.⁸¹

In other words, the idea that a certain moral position is objective or universal matter does not free a speaker from the epistemic influence of their social location; neither does it mean that the authority to speak from that position is legitimate. The assumption that a

⁸⁰ Alcoff, 6-7.

⁸¹ Code, 178.

speaker can escape the implications of their social location by asserting a purely objective or universal standpoint should thus seem mistaken.

Martha Nussbaum's conception of "cultural universals," or those capabilities without which a culture is to be condemned, is underpinned by the related assumption that she has the authority to speak on behalf of women who are victims of their own cultures. She derives this authority from her universal position which takes all of its subjects as equally visible and intelligible. The expectation is thus that *any* culture that violates the relevant norms will be condemned from this position — that is, that cultural biases and prejudices will not play a mediating role. Speaking as a white, Western woman, however, Nussbaum's suggestion that "both Western and non-Western" local traditions will be equal targets of the "assault" inflicted by her brand of cultural universalism should raise immediate suspicion.⁸² Western colonialist and imperialist practices and ideologies have historically subordinated non-Western cultures, portraying them as less developed, less civilized, and less morally sophisticated. While Nussbaum briefly mentions that the "familiar legacies of colonialism and imperialism" may influence some condemnation of local and cultural tradition,⁸³ she nowhere acknowledges that these are legacies in which she — like many white and Western feminists — is inextricably implicated by virtue of her social location. By failing to acknowledge this, Nussbaum gives little reason to believe that she has made efforts to assess the particular power relations involved in her analysis. It should seem, then, that while Nussbaum claims to show a moral commitment to the wellbeing of women affected by gender inequality across the world, and while she is also committed to the belief that speaking

⁸² Nussbaum, 30.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

for them will improve their wellbeing, she shows little to no concern for how her philosophical position may itself reflect and reinforce structures of power and privilege.

By no means is Nussbaum's work alone in these failings. Our own and more personal moral understandings are also subject to biases and prejudices that are relative to social location we occupy. Dotson describes an epistemic connection between this location and our moral understandings: "Our position in a given society affords understandings of reality that are marked with epistemic advantage, while at the same time they are marked by important epistemic limitations."⁸⁴ It is helpful to consider such epistemic advantages and epistemic limitations for advocates, who as we noted, cannot assume an ability to transcend their own social location in speaking for others. An example I noted in Chapter II was the limitations of my advocacy for women's reproductive rights in the United States. As a woman, I may feel confident asserting that access to sexual and reproductive health services is a fundamental right for all women. However, I may find my social location to limit my ability to speak on behalf of *all* women, even if that location advantages my ability to speak as a woman.

Dotson describes certain limitations of one's social location in terms of "situated ignorance," or "a result of epistemic limitation that fosters a kind of epistemic distance between those not in possession of that limitation and those who do possess the limitation."⁸⁵ We can see the work of advocacy as taking place over this kind of distance relative to one's social location. While the fact of this distance should not itself be sufficient reason to fully abstain from advocacy, it is sufficient to critically engage in evaluation of what speaking from a given social location means for a speaker's ability

⁸⁴ Doston, 248.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

and authority to make representative claims. In Chapter II, I explained how the necessary epistemic commitment for advocates demands that their work be justified by appropriate knowledge of the situation and those persons they speak-for. Recognizing that this knowledge may be limited or mediated by a speaker's social location therefore also demands that advocates make substantial and constant effort to be conscious of the implications of speaking from their specific location.

Efforts to constantly revise the epistemic commitment in advocacy will be just as essential as the strength of the moral commitment to the wellbeing of those persons being spoken-for. We should note that Nussbaum and Okin give reason to believe that they are fully morally committed to the wellbeing of those women they speak-for, demonstrating serious concern for the injustices they suffer. What appears lacking, however, is equal concern for how their epistemic commitment may be underdeveloped and perhaps limited by larger structural factors on which their positions are dependent.

In many cases, speaking from a certain social location thus means dealing with the limitations imposed by not only by one's own ignorance, biases, or prejudices, but also those imposed by larger structural factors. In her analysis of feminist ethics' contemporary discourse, Jaggar argues that comprehensive understandings of social location are necessary for understandings of global justice for women. Addressing Nussbaum's work by name, Jaggar argues that while it may be true that "injustice to women is inherent in many cultural traditions," it is additionally necessary for fuller understandings of these injustices to be situated "in a broader geopolitical and geoeconomic context."⁸⁶ Within this context, Jaggar continues, it becomes clear that

⁸⁶ Jaggar, 62.

Western-inspired and Western-imposed principles and policies —including neoliberal globalization — have exacerbated unjust conditions for many poor women in poor countries. In some cases, those local or traditional practices that disproportionately affect women “gain new life as symbols of resistance to Western dominance.”⁸⁷ Understanding the actual situation of poor women in poor countries more fully, then, means understanding the interactive and interdependent relationships between those women and the socio-historical structures that have created the conditions of their injustices: “Poor women in poor countries certainly are oppressed by local men whose power is rooted in local cultures, but they are also oppressed by global forces, including the forces of so-called development, which have reshaped gender and class relations in varying and contradictory ways, simultaneously undermining and reinforcing them.”⁸⁸

Jaggar contends that “sharp contrasts between Western and non-Western cultures cannot ultimately be sustained.”⁸⁹ While this conclusion should not be read as endorsement of nationally, regionally, or locally specific expressions of gender inequality, it does serve to highlight the complexity of the interdependencies between more and less privileged powerful locations, as well as the vulnerabilities of persons who occupy them:

“Western powers are disproportionately responsible for designing, imposing, and enforcing a global economic order that continues to widen the staggering gap between rich and poor countries. Since gender inequality is strongly correlated with poverty, Western countries bear a considerable share of the responsibility for creating the conditions that make non-Western women vulnerable to local violations of their rights.”⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Jaggar, 65.

⁸⁸ Jaggar, 67.

⁸⁹ Jaggar, 66.

⁹⁰ Jaggar, 69.

Ultimately, Jaggar argues that more complete understandings of these relationships and how they are arranged by power and privilege will lead to fuller understandings of our moral responsibilities.

Jaggar later suggests that this is responsibility is not only political; it is also *personal*. If we are truly interested in advocating for better conditions for poor women in poor countries, for example, then “perhaps we should begin by asking why so many countries are so poor. To do so would encourage us to reflect on our own contribution to the plight of poor women.”⁹¹ In the specific case of Amina Lawal, she continues: “Rather than simply blaming Amina Lawal’s culture, we should begin by taking our own feet off her neck.”⁹² Here, Jaggar demonstrates not only an awareness of her own social location, but also an accountability for its implications in her philosophical position. Likewise, advocates should be both aware of how their social location intersects with the representative claims they make and also accountable in those intersections. Dotson has argued that while the kind of ignorance that befalls from one’s social location “can be mostly non-culpable and unconscious,” special effort must be made nevertheless to address it. She continues, “Since one’s existence in one’s social location is the major catalyst for this kind of ignorance, mere continued existence in one’s social location is insufficient for addressing it.”⁹³

Both awareness of social location and accountability for its implications are key themes of feminist ethics that carry over into advocacy work. Much of advocacy is prone to the dangerous assumption that speaking for others is a matter of making moral

⁹¹ Jaggar, 75.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Dotson, 248.

representations from a position of free and unencumbered judgment. Similarly, feminist ethics identifies within the dominant moral tradition a tendency to prioritize moral understandings from an imagined authoritative position. To make moral representations normative from this authoritative position is to reflect and reinforce the socio-historical structures that assign authority. In the context of speaking for others in advocacy, feminist ethics thus calls for rejection of the assumption of “idealized understandings of practical discourses as politically innocuous exchanges of ideas occurring in some timeless domain.”⁹⁴ Under this assumption, it may appear that the authority to render public representations of moral situations is “up for grabs.” This can be especially apparent when speakers associate with these situations a sense of urgency or necessity, as in cases of speaking for others who are perceived as unable to speak for themselves. However, we have seen that to uncritically assume authority in speaking for others reflects is an exercise of privilege that is assigned by exclusionary socio-historical structures. To deconstruct this assumption, feminist ethics asserts that:

[T]he self-reinforcing exercise of authority in moral theorizing can’t be dislodged simply by counterexamples, refutations, and counterarguments that stay within the same practices. What is required is critical examination of the practices, of the positions to know and means of knowing moral life that these practices assume and construct, and of the conditions that make these positions and means possible.⁹⁵

The critical nature of this examination is part of what feminist ethics adds to the evaluation of the moral and epistemic commitments of advocacy. This commitment ought to be challenged by questions about the moral and epistemic authority to speak for others

⁹⁴ Alison Jaggar, “Globalizing Feminist Ethics,” in *Decentering the Center*, eds. Uma Narayan and Sandra Harding (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 5.

⁹⁵ Walker, 61.

— questions about who is afforded this authority and who is denied it. These are questions such as:

[W]hat actual community of moral responsibility does this representation of moral thinking purport to represent? Who does it actually represent? What communicative strategies does it support? Who will be in a position (concretely, socially) to deploy these strategies? Who is in a position to transmit and enforce the rules which constrain them? In what forms of activity or endeavor will they have (or fail to have) an application, and who is served by these activities?⁹⁶

Lorraine Code argues that what follows from these questions is a revised epistemic commitment within advocacy, one that sees advocates as “answerable as much to the epistemic community as to the evidence; details of a knower’s epistemic location and interests count among the conditions that make knowledge possible, and are likewise open to critical scrutiny.”⁹⁷

Attention and responsiveness to particular persons:

Built into a revised commitment for advocates is more explicit consideration of particular persons, their interests, experiences, and perspectives. It should seem uncontroversial that in practices of speaking for others, advocates should be attentive and responsive to those particular others whom they speak-for. However, there has been some contention in contemporary discussions on global justice for women, for example, that seems inconsistent with the appropriate moral and epistemic commitment in advocacy.

In her discussion on a notion of cultural universals, Nussbaum writes projects such as hers are often subject to the objection that they take “the form of enshrining the

⁹⁶ Walker, “Moral Understandings,” 24.

⁹⁷ Code, 177.

understanding of a dominant group at the expense of minority understandings.”⁹⁸ She quickly concludes, however, that this objection far from shows “that we ought to base our ethical norms, instead, on the current preferences and self-conceptions of people who are living what the objector herself claims to be lives of deprivation and oppression.”⁹⁹ Similarly, Okin discerns “problems with going in the direction of formulating a theory of justice entirely by listening to every concrete individual’s or group’s point of view and expression of its needs.”¹⁰⁰ To do so, she contends, would be to complicate the formulation of “a coherent and workable theory of justice.”¹⁰¹

Okin is correct insofar as she recognizes that a universal formulation of justice for all women is somewhat at odds with attention to particular persons and their concrete situations. She also, like Nussbaum, presents important questions about the underlying concepts and assumptions about advocating for others, such as: “How do our accounts and our explanations of gender inequality stand up in the face of considerable cultural and socioeconomic difference?”¹⁰² What she and Nussbaum fail to consider, however, is that if a coherent and workable theory is so clearly at odds with the actual experiences, interests, and perspectives of particular persons involved, then perhaps a coherent and workable theory is not all that is needed.

Nussbaum’s and Okin’s discussions reflect an attitude that is common to much Western feminist thought, politics, and advocacy. I do not intend to bring into question the authenticity of these and similar projects, understanding that many of them are

⁹⁸ Nussbaum, 38.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Okin, 5.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Okin, 9.

undertaken with sincere concern for social and global injustices. Nor do I intend to refute the moral impermissibility of the practices, conditions, and issues that they attempt to address. Rather, I aim to bring into question how these projects can operate with a highly suspect disinterest in and disregard for the particular persons who are most deeply involved and affected by these issues. This is also a question that is central to feminist ethics' criticism of how authority is assigned in making certain normative representations of moral life at the expense of others.

In Jaggar's example, she notes that the "Save Amina Lawal" campaign launched by a chapter of Amnesty International was met with a response from BABOAB for Women's Human Rights, a Nigerian organization aiming to defend the rights of women, men, and children under Muslim law. Part of their statement read: "There is an unbecoming arrogance in assuming that international human rights organizations or others always know better than those directly involved, and can therefore take actions that fly in the face of their express wishes."¹⁰³ Rather, this statement asked those who wished to help rectify the situation to "Please check with actual persons concerned and/or with the local groups active in a particular case for facts as well as for current appropriate strategy," or to assist through "experience and strategy-sharing by other groups with similar experience."¹⁰⁴ Despite whatever intentions with which the campaign was organized, and despite the weight of the issue in question, the actual situation of a woman had been obscured by simplified and sensationalized image.

¹⁰³ Imam and Medar-Gould, "Nigeria: Please stop the international Amina Lawal protest letter campaigns — for now," 2003.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

Davis shares a similar sentiment from the women she met in Egypt, many of whom were vocal about their resistance to the attitudes implicit within their being spoken-for. In her meeting with Davis, Dr. Shehida Elbaz had stated: “Women in the West should know ... that we have a stand in relation to them concerning our issues and our problems. We reject their patronizing attitude ... They decide what problems we have, how we should face them, without even possessing the tools to know our problems.”¹⁰⁵ This statement articulates the pitfalls of advocacy work that attempts to address injustices without attentiveness and responsiveness to particular persons and their actual experiences and interests. Another insight Davis gained from her interactions with local Egyptian women was the importance of developing understandings of their issues, interests, and experiences in their own terms. One of these women, Dr. Latifa al-Zayyat, described her resistance to the implicit attitudes underlying Western feminist research: “I know that through this research we are being turned into animals, into guinea pigs ... I know that we are being tested, we are being listed in catalogs, we are being defined in terms of sexuality for reasons which are not in our own interests.”¹⁰⁶ It was with these particular persons in mind — including their experiences, interests, and perspectives — that Davis ultimately concluded that she was unable to speak for them with legitimate authority. There were, rather, some “unique issues that women in Egypt would have to work out for themselves.”¹⁰⁷

It is true that we see a frequent tension between practices of speaking-for that are attentive and responsive to particular persons and more sophisticated ways of subsuming

¹⁰⁵ Davis, 121-122.

¹⁰⁶ Davis, 124-125.

¹⁰⁷ Davis, 154.

persons under universal and unequivocal statements. The fact that there exists such a tension, however, should not mean that we enshrine the latter at the expense of the former, as Okin and Nussbaum seem to suggest. Advocates may well encounter significant difficulty in speaking from understandings of those issues and persons they claim to represent while at the same time adhering to universal formulations. Given the choice between making sweeping judgments from a lofty philosophical position and saying nothing, Nussbaum may be right to say that “to avoid the whole issue because the matter of proper judgment is so fiendishly difficult is tempting but perhaps the worst option of all.”¹⁰⁸ However, all that can go wrong in speaking unequivocally from such positions should give us reason to believe that she has not considered all of the options.

Rather, advocates would do well to take into explicit consideration the particular persons and situations implicated in what they take to be issues of moral significance. In the context of global justice for women, Jaggar argues that an incomplete understanding of the actual persons and situations involved “distorts our comprehension of our moral relationship to women elsewhere in the world and impoverishes our assumptions about the intercultural dialogue necessary to promote global justice for women.”¹⁰⁹ We should, rather, “think more carefully who these women are and from what or whom they need saving.”¹¹⁰ Drawing from the insights of feminist ethics explored in Chapter I, understandings of the issues that advocates seek to address should be deeply attentive and

¹⁰⁸ Nussbaum, 30.

¹⁰⁹ Jaggar, “Saving Amina,” 56.

¹¹⁰ Jaggar, 71.

responsive to “the needs, claims, fears, and hopes of particular moral subjects,”¹¹¹ as well as “based in the actual experiences of actual persons.”¹¹²

In the case of Amina Lawal, the authors of the petition to “save” her would have done well to seek out the perspectives and understandings of those directly involved rather than unilaterally assume knowledge of and responsibility for the situation. On the subject of gender inequality for women in Egypt, those who wish to speak with some authority may find that they cannot do so without communicating closely with those women at the heart of the issue and challenging their own preconceived notions of what global justice means for women. In cases where advocates are passionate about creating positive social change and are in a position to do so, their efforts should be guided by attentiveness and responsiveness to the particular persons who have been or will be affected, and not *only* by a sense of adherence to cleanly-developed and universally-subsuming moral principles.

Notably, being attentive and responsive to particular persons should not be considered valuable only insofar as it yields better or more accurate representation in advocacy. Rather, there is something else to be said for this sort of approach that has to do with the epistemic and moral status of those persons being advocated for. Dotson has asked the important question for advocates of whether “‘better’ means of knowledge production stave off epistemic injustice.”¹¹³ Dotson writes in response to an article by Code, who writes that “It is at the level of processes, practices, and particularities, thus not of logical possibility, that questions of equality, ethics, power, identity, voice, and

¹¹¹ Robinson, “Globalizing Care,” 122.

¹¹² Bowden, 4.

¹¹³ Kristie Dotson, “In Search of Tanzania: Are Effective Epistemic Practices Sufficient for Just Epistemic Practices?,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 46 (2008): 52–64.

social change arise and epistemic injustice is enacted and condoned.”¹¹⁴ The example used by both Code and Doston is methods of research on the reformed model of health care administration in Tanzania. In this and other similar contexts, Code argues that methods of research ought to draw upon local Tanzanian peoples’ own observations of illness, marking a shift in the distribution of epistemic authority that was more responsive to specific, localized need.

What Dotson adds to Code’s conception of just epistemic practice is “a fundamental change in attitude” toward the persons spoken-for that sees them as “epistemic informants as opposed to mere sources of information.”¹¹⁵ In fact, Dotson sees Code’s position as warranting additional criticism on the grounds that it does not include voices of actual Tanzanian people: “The reason the issue of epistemic informant versus sources of information is a soft spot in Code’s account is because the presence of Tanzanian epistemic informants does not emerge from the article.”¹¹⁶ Here, Dotson identifies both a moral and epistemic significance to the voices of actual persons who are involved in the specific situations and contexts discussed. Notably, this significance is independent of the effectiveness yet essential for the justice of epistemic practices. When an epistemic practice devalues persons’ status as knowers, it cannot also be a just epistemic practice, however effective. In other works, Dotson has discussed that devaluing persons as knowers can amount to a form of epistemic violence, particularly in instances where members of oppressed groups offer testimony. Properly understood, this form of epistemic violence is morally indefensible not just because it prevents more

¹¹⁴ Lorraine Code, “Advocacy, Negotiation, and the Politics of Unknowing,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 47 (2008): 33.

¹¹⁵ Dotson, “In Search of Tanzania,” 54.

¹¹⁶ Doston, 62.

complete understandings of testimonial content from obtaining, but also because of the effect that it has on those persons who offer testimony.

A revised moral and epistemic commitment for advocates therefore seems to be not just one that yields fuller or more complete understandings, but is also one that values particular persons — including their interests, their experiences, and their perspectives — as indispensably significant. Accordingly, advocates that are concerned with how to derive their authority from this commitment should seek out and take seriously the interests, experiences, and perspectives of those particular persons for whom they advocate. Precisely because these persons are to be valued in their particularity, there may very well be certain idiosyncrasies to their interests, experiences, and perspectives that are not universally subsumable. Rather than reject such idiosyncrasies as impairments to effective representation, they ought to be considered indispensable features of the moral situation(s) being represented.

Revisions of the moral and epistemic commitment:

Taking into consideration one's own social location and those particular persons one hopes to speak-for may thus entail revising the basic moral and epistemic commitment that advocates have to their work. Jaggar proposes thoughtful ways of revising this commitment in her vision of globalizing feminist discourse. To do this, Jaggar first explains how activist and advocacy groups develop as moral communities united by a basic set of convictions or commitments that are taken as foundational. In order to preserve the coherence and the general progress of discourse within it, Jaggar notes that such a community will typically limit its agenda to those issues to which its

members are already committed. For a similar reason, Jaggar describes how these communities will also restrict participation within them, “excluding individuals who do not share the basic commitments of the group or who do not have ‘standing’ because they are outsiders.”¹¹⁷ While Jaggar insists that both ways in which these communities limit their discursive openness have been “indispensable to the development of Western feminist moral perspectives,” she also argues that there are certain moral and epistemological hazards to carrying commitments that are not open to revision. The system of ideas developed within a closed community may become dogmatic, members may be pressured to conform to the prevailing interpretation of the groups unifying assumptions and values, and the community may come to view themselves as an enlightened elite.¹¹⁸ In consideration of these hazards, Jaggar argues, “In order to increase the degree to which their moral agreements are justified, communities ultimately must open their basic commitments to critical scrutiny from the outside.”¹¹⁹

But Jaggar does not just conclude here. Having given reason to believe that Western feminist discursive communities should be open to revising their most basic moral and epistemic communities, Jaggar goes on to describe what a more open, more inclusive, and ultimately, more *just* global feminist discourse might look like:

For contemporary Western feminists to open our basic commitments to critical scrutiny requires considering or reconsidering perspectives we have hitherto excluded ... Most immediately and urgently, however, it requires that Western feminists learn to hear and consider respectfully the views of Nonwestern women from the so-called Third World, including women whose voices are muted, even within their own nations. Most especially, we should pursue critical engagement with those members of Nonwestern communities who share some of our own commitments but

¹¹⁷ Jaggar, 3.

¹¹⁸ Jaggar, 9.

¹¹⁹ Jaggar, 10-11.

who may have disagreements or different perspectives on particular issues.¹²⁰

We should notice that this demand placed on those committed to the wellbeing of women elsewhere in the world differs from the simplistic demand suggested elsewhere: *speaking*, or stay silent; be committed, or be complicit. Rather, the demand is for more extensive consideration of the implications of speaking-for, including active concern for the particular persons involved: “Global feminism requires concern for women in other communities and nations, and raising questions about the moral justifiability of foreign practices is very different from peremptorily condemning those practices, let alone intervening unilaterally to change them.”¹²¹

As much as Nussbaum seems to misinterpret the demand to which our moral and epistemic commitments in advocacy respond, she does appear to grasp at something similar in evaluating what is necessary for better discussions about global justice for women. While she acknowledges that the list of capabilities she has developed are necessarily abstract, she goes on to say that arriving at the best specification of them “will most reasonably be done by a public dialogue with those who are most deeply immersed in those conditions. We should use the list to criticize injustice, but we should not say anything at all without rich and full information.”¹²² Despite her approach being uncompromisingly universal, Nussbaum nonetheless suggests that it be “instantiated in a concrete situation, through rich local knowledge.”¹²³

¹²⁰ Jaggar, 11.

¹²¹ Jaggar, 15.

¹²² Nussbaum, 47.

¹²³ Nussbaum, 48.

It would seem, therefore, that practices of speaking-for in advocacy should be thoroughly grounded in and responsive to those particular persons who may be spoken-for. This will mean actively listening to and taking seriously those interests, experiences, and perspectives, especially those that are at tension with our initial understandings. Even though we may think of advocates as primarily *speaking*, we have good reason to believe that there is more to the practice of making representative claims about moral situations. This may be truer for advocates who speak from privileged locations and/or locations that are marked by some distance from those for whom they aim to advocate. The greater the distance between locations, the more likely those particular persons involved — as well as their attitudes, experiences, and perspectives — can be obscured. Insisting on representation of moral life as shaped by practices of expression and communication, Margaret Urban Walker explains: “We need not make our obscurity to each other worse by unnecessarily unilateral decision. We might just try turning to each other: talking and listening and imagining possibilities together.”¹²⁴

Notably, however, the sort of communication that Walker, Jaggard, and Nussbaum propose as necessary for forming more inclusive practices of speaking-for in advocacy will require more of advocates than only to hear out particular persons and perspectives. In her discussion on epistemic violence, Dotson gives reason to believe we ought to be careful about shifting the burden to speak to those who may have the most to say. In instances where advocates seek out perspectives from members of oppressed groups, for example, the content of the testimony they offer may place specific demands on advocates as an audience. Because Dotson has argued that practices of silencing are

¹²⁴ Walker, “Moral Understandings,” 23.

attributable to a failure of an audience to communicatively reciprocate in a linguistic exchange, she goes on to propose that in these exchanges, an audience must demonstrate their competence to a would-be speaker. For advocates who seek out particular persons' attitudes, experiences, and perspectives in the kind of communicative contexts many feminist ethicists have outlined, they must also actively demonstrate that they are willing to listen and to be open to ways in which their initial understandings may be defeated. This should sound similar to how while meeting with various local women in Egypt to gather their perspectives on issues of gender inequality, Angela Davis learned that she had a specific role in those exchanges: "I labored to convince myself to refrain from attempting to defend my own position. After all, was I not in Egypt to learn about the way Egyptian women themselves interpreted the role of sexuality in their lives and their struggles?"¹²⁵

Advocates therefore should not be only intent on listening; they should also be intent on actively demonstrating to those they wish to speak-for that they are open to revising their own moral and epistemic commitments in response. Lorraine Code is another to highlight the importance of hearing and responding to testimony in practices of speaking-for. In the example she draws from on Tanzanian healthcare practices, researchers traveled by bicycle to conduct "verbal autopsies" with the survivors of a local epidemic. Code notes that in this process, a guiding principle was that the researchers had to be proactively conscious of the sensitivity that interviewing bereaved families requires, even if that meant the autopsies would take several hours to complete or take place over multiple visits. Yet, Code argues that the researchers' "meticulous, respectful

¹²⁵ Davis, 124.

laboriousness is the source of their capacity to avoid or erase epistemic injustice.”¹²⁶ In other words, the researchers had to revisit their epistemic commitment to their project of representing particular persons, perhaps at the expense of some efficiency, for the purposes of representing them more fully.

In this way, Code argues that advocacy demands of its practitioners some degree of negotiation. In the Tanzanian healthcare example:

Working toward a solution had to involve engaging with local villagers and clinicians as credible informants, in sensitive, open-minded, and respectful evidence-gathering negotiations, perhaps less objectively ‘accurate’ by first-world standards than statistical analysis is held to be, but capable all the same of withstanding serious epistemic and practical-political scrutiny.¹²⁷

In this process, Code describes a blurring of epistemological and ethical-political lines in which knowers are as answerable to the community with which they engage as they are to the empirical evidence for their representative claims. The blurring of these lines will mean that it is not enough that such claims be justified — there is an added responsibility for advocates to engage with the persons and communities they aim to represent. Code explains:

As a route to responsible advocacy, in the absence of justified background beliefs apart from well-founded suspicions that the old template is just not working, it is the openness of the knowledge-gatherers and their local interlocutors to imagining beyond instituted possibilities, their demonstrated readiness to engage with surprises, that allows the listeners, in collaboration with the tellers, cautiously to advocate for the plausibility of their informed guesses even within the ongoing fragility of the process.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ Code, 40.

¹²⁷ Code, 39.

¹²⁸ Code, 46-47.

It is important that Code recognizes that the processes she proposes are “fragile,” and the language she uses to describe its methods is only approximate. Other feminist ethicists who propose parallel routes for more responsible advocacy offer similarly open-ended conclusions. Linda Alcoff ends “The Problem of Speaking for Others” far from claiming she has outlined any full resolution; rather, she voices her hope that her analysis “will contribute to rather than diminish the important discussion going on today about how to develop strategies for a more equitable, just distribution of the ability to speak and be heard.”¹²⁹ The more just and inclusive global discursive community that Jaggar imagines is, admittedly, “a community in the making, and, in this sense, it is not only both ideal and imagined but continually being reimagined.”¹³⁰ Likewise, Code describes her position as motivated by the tension “that permeates efforts to know across difference ... It is a tension that characterizes our time, and it behooves us, as best we can, to keep it alive and productive.”¹³¹

In this project, I have hoped to explain what feminist ethics contributes to critical evaluation of practices of speaking-for in advocacy. In Chapter I, I discussed how feminist ethics is a response to exclusion within the dominant moral tradition that assigns certain privileged positions authority while denying it to others. Recognizing this, I also explained how speaking authoritatively from these positions is an exercise of privilege that both reflects and reinforces the socio-historical structures that assign authority. In Chapter II, I evaluated the moral and epistemic commitment that advocates have in speaking for others, a commitment from which they derive the authority to speak-for. I

¹²⁹ Alcoff, 29.

¹³⁰ Jaggar, 21.

¹³¹ Code, 47.

also gave reason to believe that this commitment should be challenged after recognizing what is at stake in practices of speaking-for, thereby challenging the authority with which advocates speak.

In this past chapter, I considered how advocates may challenge the epistemic and moral commitment from which they derive the authority to speak for others. I proposed that this challenge must include consideration of one's own social location and the effects that speaking from it has on those being spoken-for; it also demands of advocates to be attentive and responsive to those particular persons they hope to speak-for, taking into serious consideration their subjective interests, experiences, and perspectives — even (and especially) when doing so means to revise one's own most basic moral and epistemic commitments. At the end, it is less than exactly clear what these revisions will reliably entail, and it is just as indeterminate who exactly will be assigned the authority to speak for others following these revisions. What I hope to have made clear, however, is that advocacy is as urgently moral and epistemic as it is political, and any attempt to improve it in practice ought to reflect the considerations others and I have highlighted. It is only in light of these considerations that we may begin to locate ourselves and others in the rich landscape of moral responsibility and representation.

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