

*Editorial*

## Editorial

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One year after introducing the *Journal of Controversial Ideas*, we are very pleased to present the second issue. The fourteen papers published in this issue cover a wide range of topics and academic disciplines, and each offers a rigorous, scholarly discussion of some idea that might be considered too controversial to be discussed in other forums.

Needless to say, the fact that we consider these papers to be worth publishing (after passing editorial review and external peer review) does not indicate that we agree with the ideas advanced by the authors. As editors of the journal, and as scholars ourselves, we are interested in providing both authors and readers a fruitful exchange of ideas, in the hope that debating them will take us closer to the truth. At the very least, we hope that keeping the debate open, rather than succumbing to censorship, will prevent some currently orthodox ideas from ossifying into dogma and will, at the same time, prevent other, doubtfully correct and perhaps pernicious or harmful ideas from spreading for lack of exposure to counter-arguments. We believe that discussion is the hallmark of a healthy, well-functioning and truth-oriented society, and we hope this journal can contribute to promoting academic freedom and freedom of thought and discussion.

As we stated in our first editorial, and on our website, we established this journal in the hope that it would be necessary for only a short time, and that controversial ideas would soon be discussed in all relevant academic journals without fear of negative repercussions for authors or editors. Unfortunately, it seems to us that we have not reached that moment yet. Indeed, given the large number of submissions we have received in the past year, we plan to publish two issues per year from now on, one in April and one in October.

It may be worth repeating that we do not publish controversial papers just because they are controversial. The goal is not to promote controversy for its own sake, but rather to ensure that interesting ideas do not go undiscussed or undiscovered because of fear of controversy. We aim to publish interesting, well-argued, and original papers that also happen to be controversial and, for various reasons, might not have been published elsewhere.

The quality of the papers we publish is our priority, and we strive to select only the best submissions. Our current acceptance rate is around 10%. More precisely, since the

publication of our first issue in April 2021, we have received 170 submissions. Of these, we have rejected 134, accepted 14 for publication and are still processing 21.

Of the 14 papers we publish in this second issue, four discuss questions related to the difference between sex and gender, and how we should respond to people who change their gender. The fact that this particular topic is so hotly contested will not surprise anyone who has been following recent events, both in and outside academia.

One of the papers published in this issue, entitled “‘Men’ and ‘women’ in everyday English” aims to find out, through surveys, whether, in everyday conversation, people use the terms ‘man’ and ‘woman’ to refer to biological sex, gender identity or something else. We have also been hosting an interesting and continuing debate about what those two seemingly simple terms actually do mean. In the first issue, we published a paper by Alex Byrne (“Gender Muddle”<sup>1</sup>) and a reply to it by Maggie Heartsilver (pseudonym) (“Deflating Byrne’s ‘Are Women Adult Human Females?’”<sup>2</sup>) addressing the question of what it is to be a woman. In this issue, Byrne continues the conversation with a response to Heartsilver titled “The Female of the Species: Reply to Heartsilver”.

Two papers appearing in this second issue address the practical implications of defining, or indeed, redefining ‘woman’. The first is about the place of transwomen in the UK prison system (“Queer Theory and the Transition from Sex to Gender in English Prisons”, by Michael Biggs) and the second concerns the US Equality Act (“Discounting Females, Denying Sex, and Disregarding Dangers from Self-ID” by Callie Burt).

These discussions are important and reasonable people can disagree about these matters. What cannot be justified, though, is a certain kind of behaviour toward the people with whom one disagrees. A few months ago, Professor Kathleen Stock resigned her position at the University of Sussex because she felt that, as a result of her views about sex and gender, her work environment had become too hostile. Stock had to deal, among other things, with an investigation for transphobia and the bitter enmity of many colleagues and students.<sup>3</sup>

Disagreements in higher education are not new. But dealing with disagreement via the use of petitions, investigations, suspensions and sometimes even dismissal, used to be rare. These new ways of dealing with academic disagreements are harmful not only to those who are the object of them, but also to the credibility of universities – which ought to be institutions for promoting knowledge and teaching young people how to deal with challenging ideas, and how to discuss a variety of ideas with people with whom they disagree.

In this issue, we are publishing a paper under the pseudonym Brecht Vaerwaeter, titled “The pedophile as a human being: an auto-ethnography for the recognition of a marginalized sexual orientation”. The paper does not seek to defend those who act upon pedophilic desires, and does not suggest that society should tolerate sexual or romantic relationships between adults and underage people. Instead, its argument is that pedophiles cannot choose whether or not to be sexually attracted to minors and that it is wrong to condemn someone for having feelings that they cannot avoid having,

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<sup>1</sup> Byrne, A. 2021. Gender Muddle: Reply to Dembroff. *Journal of Controversial Ideas* 1 (1): 5 <https://journalofcontroversialideas.org/article/1/1/136>.

<sup>2</sup> Heartsilver, M. 2021. (pseudonym) Deflating Byrne’s “Are Women Adult Human Females?”. *Journal of Controversial Ideas* 1 (1): 9. <https://journalofcontroversialideas.org/article/1/1/129>.

<sup>3</sup> Adams, R. “Kathleen Stock says she quit university post over ‘medieval’ ostracism”, *The Guardian*. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/nov/03/kathleen-stock-says-she-quit-university-post-over-medieval-ostracism>.

provided that they resist acting wrongly on the basis of those feelings. There is no reason to suppose that someone who has pedophilic desires is necessarily less moral than others. Just as we should not assume that people who are unable to achieve consensual fulfilment of their sexual desires are rapists, so we should not assume that pedophiles are child molesters. Vaerwaeter uses his own biography to illustrate how difficult the life of someone suffering from pedophilic feelings can be, and reiterates that his plea for understanding and tolerance applies only to those pedophiles who do not act upon their sexual and romantic desires.

One of the main points made in the paper is that pedophilia should be recognized as a sexual orientation, something that in turn would allow pedophiles to gain appropriate “recognition and attention to their emotional problems”. Vaerwaeter also argues that “society should be more tolerant of those who suffer from pedophilic feelings” on the ground that pedophiles experience an even higher degree of discrimination and isolation than members of other sexual minorities.

Any mention of pedophilia is likely to arouse very strong emotional reactions. Just a few months ago, after Professor Stephen Kershner at the State University of New York at Fredonia discussed sex between adults and children on the podcast “Brain in a Vat,” a petition signed by 60,000 people was sent to his university calling for him to be dismissed. In contrast to the widespread perception that “cancel culture” is an exclusive product of the left, the campaign against Professor Kershner was co-ordinated by right-wing activists. Professor Kershner has been suspended from teaching and is currently under investigation by SUNY Fredonia.

Apart from condemning this episode, which to us represents a clear violation of academic freedom, we cannot help but wonder why the University decided to take action against Kershner only after his appearance on a podcast prompted a petition against him. Kershner had thoroughly discussed issues related to the ethics of pedophilia and pederasty in a book published in 2015.<sup>4</sup> He never argued that pedophilia should be legalized or that current laws protecting children should be changed. He engaged in a philosophical discussion of the implications of various ethical theories for issues of sex between adults and underage people. Philosophers often engage in this kind of discussion and play the devil’s advocate in their arguments. They entertain hypotheses that virtually everyone would find wrong or even repulsive, and see where reason can take them. The fact that action was taken against Kershner only after his podcast interview achieved notoriety, and not after the publication of his book, should make us concerned about the power of social media to pressure even well-established institutions such as universities.

Today, universities appear to be more concerned about the bad publicity that comes from their employees expressing controversial ideas than about fulfilling their core mission – to produce, test, and convey ideas, which cannot be done without freedom of thought and expression. As Josh Bleisch pointed out in an article for the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, punishing someone who expresses controversial views ends up rewarding those who threaten academic freedom and gives them an incentive to continue

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<sup>4</sup> Kershner, S. 2015. *Pedophilia and Adult–Child Sex: A Philosophical Analysis*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

this kind of action in the future: “they send the message that speech in higher education is protected as long as it’s popular with people who would threaten violence.”<sup>5</sup>

We hope the publication of Vaerwaeter’s paper in the *Journal of Controversial Ideas* will prompt a lively debate on this topic, one that will surely involve fierce disagreement, but that needs to happen if we are to obtain a better understanding of pedophilia. There is a chance that, by discussing pedophilic feelings, we will help those affected by them to cope with their condition, while also enabling others to have a better understanding of the situation of those who are sexually attracted to minors but never act on that attraction. This, in turn, could help us develop better measures to protect children.

We hope that the fourteen papers published in this issue will provide interesting reading for those who like to have their views challenged, and we hope to receive civil, well-argued replies for publication in our next issue.

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<sup>5</sup> Bleisch, J. “FIRE calls on SUNY Fredonia to end suspension, investigation of professor for philosophical discussion of sex with minors”. available at <https://www.thefire.org/fire-calls-on-suny-fredonia-to-end-suspension-investigation-of-professor-for-philosophical-discussion-of-sex-with-minors/>.