

[original sent June 14, 2016]

Dear Thomas,

It has been immensely saddening to watch the unfolding of the sexual harassment allegations against you. It is a tragic drama in which there are no winners. It is wreaking damage not only on the women directly involved, but on all the women — especially minority women and women from the global South — with whom you have ever worked. It is wreaking damage on the global justice community and its scholarship. And of course it is doing damage to you and your reputation.

I count myself among the many colleagues who have long admired your work, and this admiration is part of what makes the situation so tragic. Each of us has to reach a judgment based on available information in order to decide how to conduct ourselves in relation to it. Until now, I've kept my own judgments to myself except in private conversation. I'm writing now out of a sense of responsibility not to remain silent about a matter that I think raises profoundly important questions of justice, and to ask you to find the courage to take full responsibility for your own conduct.

The issues go well beyond the most public case, that involving Ms. Lopez Aguilar, but let me speak first to that. I found your public response to her allegations against you deeply disturbing, because you chose to attack her credibility and paint yourself as the victim instead of taking responsibility for your actions. The narrow legalism of your written response functions as a dodge from the *moral* question whether it is appropriate for faculty members, and especially senior scholars, to initiate intimate, sexualized contact with their students and advisees. You suggest that the fact that Ms. Lopez Aguilar sent you enthusiastic emails following the Chile trip somehow exonerates you of any moral responsibility for having set up these intimate situations in the first place.

The larger problem is that Ms. Lopez Aguilar's case did not arise in a vacuum. There was the Columbia case. There was the case of "Aye". There is now the testimony of a philosophy professor, on the Leiter Reports page, about your conduct toward her when she was an undergraduate and you were a visiting scholar at Harvard. And there are many, many anecdotes circulating in the academy about your conduct toward younger women of color at conferences, some of which I have heard first-hand. The problem, in short, is that you have engaged in a pattern of targeting young women of color who admire your work and could benefit from your professional support. Ms. Lopez Aguilar is only the most visible instance in this pattern, because she had the courage to go public. It is the "long train of abuses," not the individual case, that makes your public response significantly less credible than the allegations in the *BuzzFeed* article, in my judgment.

You do not seem to grasp how damaging your conduct has been. Imagine, for a moment, that you are a woman of color who worked with Thomas Pogge on this or that project over the years. Imagine the topic of Thomas Pogge's conduct coming up in conversation, and eyes turning to you with the implicit question, "You, too?" Imagine further that Thomas Pogge's letter of reference for you was important in securing your current job, so that you are constantly wondering whether colleagues believe you got the job only because you slept with Thomas Pogge. I know you to be capable of imagining yourself in another's position, and you must have imagined scenarios like this. Given that, it is truly mind-boggling that you would choose to respond to the *BuzzFeed* article by trying to discredit your accuser. It was also very disappointing, and — again — tragic: for how can anyone who sees that you refuse to take responsibility for your own patterns of conduct take seriously your strenuous critiques of powerful global actors for failing to own up to their own moral responsibility in generating injustice?

Perhaps you will fall back on the defense that these relationships were consensual, though there appears to be room for disagreement about that. But the relevant question is not whether you successfully wooed the consent of women with whom you engaged in sexual relations. That is the right question for a legal judgment of criminal conduct, not a moral judgment of professional conduct. “She agreed” or “she started it” is not an excuse for engaging in intimate physical conduct with women who are subordinate to you in the academic hierarchy, and who are in some way dependent on you (or might be) for their professional advancement. I would advise junior colleagues not to get intimately involved with senior ones, but the fact that they might choose to do so does not exonerate people who take advantage of their positions in the academy to gain sexual access to subordinates. It is simply not okay to propose to a student that she share your hotel room, however much you surround that invitation with “if you feel comfortable.” It is simply not okay to sleep with your head in the lap of your student. It is simply not okay to have affairs with younger scholars who are dependent on you for their professional advancement. It is not okay to repeatedly orchestrate intimate, one-on-one conversations with younger women scholars in settings that make them vulnerable to your physical advances.

This pattern is what so many of us regard as unprofessional, predatory, and extremely damaging to the climate of teaching and research for women. It is a pattern that we share responsibility for reproducing every time we witness it and say nothing.

Can there be a constructive resolution of all this? Can the situation be redeemed somehow? I am not sure, but as always the path toward justice begins with an acknowledgment of harm, an acceptance of responsibility for one’s role in causing it, and some concrete action aimed at making amends. But as long as you continue to deny that your conduct has been seriously problematic, many of your colleagues will reach the judgment that you are morally blind with respect to your own conduct and will therefore feel that they have no choice but to refuse association with you. Otherwise, they rightly fear, they will be taken to condone your behavior and to be indifferent to its chilling consequences for women in philosophy in general and women of color in particular.

I wish you every strength in finding the right path forward.

Sincerely,

Melissa