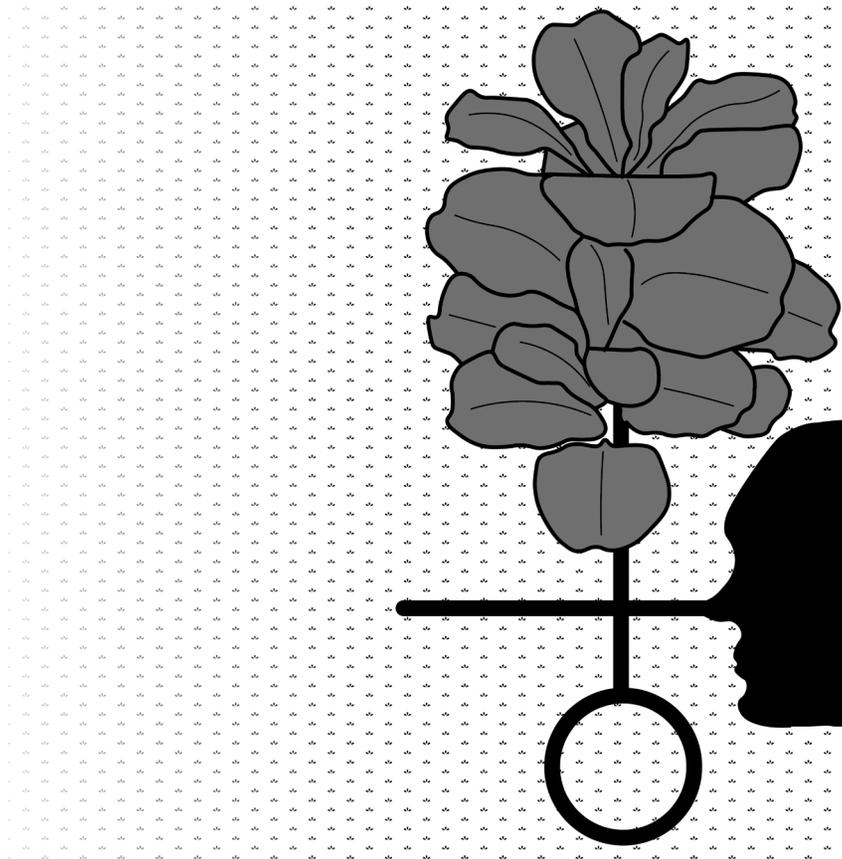


LANGUAGE, FEMINISM, AND RACISM: A Meeting with Jennifer Saul, PhD



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ABOUT JENNIFER SAUL, PhD



Jennifer Saul is Waterloo Chair in Social and Political Philosophy of Language at the University of Waterloo. Originally American, she spent twenty-four years at the University of Sheffield in the United Kingdom. Her current focus is manipulative political language, which she explores in *Dogwhistles and Figleaves: Linguistics Tricks for Racist and Conspiracist Discourse* (forthcoming, Oxford, 2024). She has also written books and articles on feminism, lying and misleading, and implicit bias. She founded the blogs *What is it Like to be a Woman in Philosophy* and *Feminist Philosophers*, and was Director of the Society for Women in Philosophy UK 2009–19. Along with Helen Beebee, she published two reports (in 2011 and 2021) on the state of women in philosophy on the UK and drew up good practice guidelines which have been adopted by dozens of department. She's also proud of having been a philosophical consultant on a zombie movie.



STANCE: We wanted to start by asking some general questions about your experience in philosophy. You've written a lot about the gender inequality that is present in the world of philosophy; what has made you stick with philosophy despite being aware of that inequality?

DR. SAUL: Hmm! I think one of the most important things was that my first job at the University of Sheffield was in an incredibly supportive department. Even though I was the only woman for a lot of the time, and then one of two women for a very long time, people were just wonderful. They wanted to do philosophy rather than show off, try to one-up each other, embarrass the speaker, that sort of thing. They were very supportive of my doing feminist things; they encouraged me to do it. For the mid 90s, it was a very unusual kind of place.

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The second year I was there, the person who taught the first-year political philosophy class left, and so my head of department said, "Oh, let's replace that with a first-year feminism class instead." And I didn't even fully realize what a radical thing that was to do. Most places didn't have feminism classes for another twenty years, let alone replace

first-year political philosophy with feminism. That was a shocking proposal, but they just thought: "Jenny's does feminism; students will like that." So, I think being in that environment made a huge difference. I could see that the world out there was bad, but I was in a good place. And it also meant that I could spend a lot of time trying to help people who were in less good places. It made me feel happy and secure enough that I could put a lot of energy into that.

STANCE: We also find your work in philosophy of language fascinating. Philosophy of language is often portrayed as a purely theoretical, academic discipline, but you have worked a lot on the connection between the philosophy of language and its actual practical applications. What led you to focus on that connection as opposed to just the academic side of it?

DR. SAUL: It took me quite a while to figure out how to do that, or even that I wanted to. I started out genuinely interested in questions like, "How does reference work?" I was into reading Russell and Frege and Kripke on names and descriptions, propositional attitude reports, all that very traditional stuff. I genuinely liked that. I'm not into it very much now, but I can get nerdy with it occasionally. But even

then, one of the things that I was very interested in, although it was not anything anyone took very seriously at the time, was pragmatics. What happens when we actually use one of these sentences? What happens when actual human beings, with all the weird stuff going on in their heads, talk to each other? I remember trying to pursue that, and people just thought, "Wait—why? How? What is anyone doing with that?" They called it the pragmatic wastebasket. So, I didn't really do anything with that for a while.

I got asked to teach feminist philosophy because I listed it as an area of competence—and that wasn't because anyone had ever taught it to me. It was because I was a feminist, and I thought I'd like to learn about it. So, I started doing some feminist philosophy as a result of teaching it. And then people started getting interested in the semantic/pragmatic distinction in the philosophy of language. And a lot of the time, I felt like people were talking past each other. That's what got me thinking, can we tie this to something that actual people genuinely care about, rather than just "I have this very strong intuition about the semantic content!" Wait—how can you have an intuition about the "semantic content"? [Laughs] This is a made-up theoretical term! So, I got interested in seeing how this played out in the lying/misleading distinction. That was my first bit of moving into the world and seeing what happens with philosophy in the world. As probably comes through from my papers, I also have an unhealthy obsession with American politics. I'm originally from Ohio. So, I just kept being obsessed with that. That led me to a real interest in racist and conspiracist speech more recently.

STANCE: On that note, we have a question about figleaves. You identify figleaves as tools that are used to shield speakers and invalidate criticisms. Do you think that using figleaves is more of an ethos appeal or a logos appeal?

DR. SAUL: Those aren't terms that I use. People have different definitions of those terms, so can you tell me how you understand them?

STANCE: I was considering logos as purely logical, nothing else. The ethos appeal would be more trying to appeal to a person's own views and emotions about the topic.

DR. SAUL: Then it would be definitely be ethos, I think. But I'm a little bit hesitant in terms of trying to appeal to their emotions about the topic. I think it is appealing to their emotions, but sometimes in a way that they may not be fully conscious of or are



fully comfortable with. But I think logic also comes into it, because if you start thinking, “Well, he said he’s not racist; racists would never say that!”, that’s not a good argument, but it’s an argument that people might make. So, I think both of those things can be going on.

STANCE: Figleaves are used typically in discriminatory conversations, and there’s a lot that language has to do with discrimination. We were curious about your thoughts on the recent popularity of hypermasculine media, especially podcasts, and how you think that language plays a special role in that media.

DR. SAUL: I have not done any listening to hypermasculine podcasts. Are you thinking of things like Joe Rogan, that sort of thing?

STANCE: I think that would be a good example.

DR. SAUL: I haven’t actually thought specifically about podcasts as a medium. I’ve done a lot more thinking about internet speech than podcasts. I think some of the same devices will come up a lot. You get Joe Rogan just asking questions a lot, and I think that’s a really important figleaf. I’d like to hear your thoughts about it.

STANCE: It seems to us that there’s a lot of different types of silencing going on. A lot of these podcasts will have female guests, and then just shut down over and over again what they’re trying to get across.

DR. SAUL: Oh, okay; that’s interesting. This how social media works: I haven’t seen these things, ‘cause they’re not being shared in my feeds. But it’s also interesting if those clips where women are being shut down are something that people are really liking and wanting to share. I think it’s a really disturbing symptom of something that’s out there, but it can also perpetuate the idea that shutting down women is a good thing to do, and here is how to do it. So, I think you’re right to worry about it.

STANCE: That lends itself very well to our next question, which is about cancel culture and social media. You talk about how people in academia are often fearful about what they’re saying: they fear of losing their positions, especially professors who aren’t tenured. How much do you think that the rise of cancel culture and the prevalence of social media has affected that fear and caution around what is said?

DR. SAUL: It depends a lot on how the term “cancel culture” is used. I think there are a lot of problems with the way that it’s used,

because it’s usually used as a way of criticizing people on the left who call attention to racism, homophobia, or transphobia. There are cases where it gets very nasty. But a lot of times, people respond with the “more speech remedy.” Free speech advocates traditionally say they that you should fight bad speech with

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more speech. But now, when a person fights, say, transphobia speech, people on the right say, “What are you doing? You’re cancelling me! You’re silencing me!” when all that was said was perfectly legitimate criticism. So, I’m not fond of the phrase ‘cancel culture’, because I think it’s used to silence legitimate criticism when there isn’t actually any cancelling going on. Now, that’s not to say it never happens, but I’m more worried about what I think happens to people who are precariously employed. My focus is people in academic jobs who are precariously employed. And right now, I think what we should be most worried about are the states that have passed laws saying that you can’t talk about gender or critical race theory, and that you could lose your job for doing that. Usually that’s not called “cancel culture,” but I think that’s actually the much greater threat to academic freedom, and the much scarier thing. So, I’d want to use different terms to discuss it, perhaps.

STANCE: In that same arena, you’re touching on how the things commonly referred to as “cancel culture” are actual issues. So, considering the fact that microaggressions in academia are very real, what kind of structures do you think need to be in place to allow for people to address those microaggressions, or any harmful language, without the fear surrounding saying what needs to be said?

DR. SAUL: I feel like this is kind of a theme; maybe this is the sort of thing that just happens when you talk to a philosopher of language. I worry about the many ways that a term gets used. I think a weird thing happens with “microaggressions,” that it gets used to describe really tiny, innocent things that can cumulatively have a negative effect on somebody; it also gets used to describe things that look like horrible harassment. I think the latter is a misuse of the term “microaggression.” Microaggressions are meant to be small and unintentional.

There’s a really tricky thing in an academic environment. You want people in the classroom to feel safe and secure and able to think,



study, and learn. But part of that is that it's okay to make mistakes sometimes. They can make a mistake, learn from it, and move on. If you're teaching something like philosophy of sex, or feminism, or philosophy of race in particular, these are issues that, for the most part, people are really quite uncomfortable discussing and don't have much practice discussing. The kind of content warning I give in the classroom is: "These are the kinds of issues we're gonna be discussing. You need to all bear in mind that people in this room or their loved ones will have personal experience with these things. But you also need to bear in mind that we're not very good at talking about this. And we're all gonna make mistakes." I've found that so far, I've been pleased with how it works, setting it up in that way. Sometimes, somebody will say something kind of clumsy, sometimes false or ignorant, and I'll see people start to tense up—but we move forward by saying, "Okay, well, maybe we could put this in a different way. Is this what you're trying to say?" Or:

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"Here's the problem with phrasing it that way. Let's talk about it." And everybody's able to learn, communicate, and make some progress in thinking through the issues without that terrible fear that can come: "What if I say something wrong?" Some of the fear that comes from cancel culture is legitimate. You know that you might offend other people because this is hard stuff to talk about. If you care about other people, you're gonna be nervous .

And in some of these areas, for example, in trans issues, the terminology that people want to use has changed very rapidly over the last ten years. I know somebody who, because an article in a book can

take three to five years to come out, for whom the terminology changed while waiting to go to press! And now, someone who's very careful to use terminology to show that she supported trans people, is using terminology that makes people suspicious that she doesn't support trans people! So, I think being nervous about that is legitimate, and we need people to feel comfortable making mistakes and helping each other to get better at this stuff. At the same time, if somebody's actually being harassing, you need to do something about that. If you tell somebody "Look, this is bad; you can't use that word, it's really a bad one," and they keep using that word, then that needs to be taken seriously.

STANCE: So, there's been a recent change to Twitter . . .

DR. SAUL: I [Laughs] I've been enjoying watching Twitter!

STANCE: . . . Twitter now requires that satirical posts be flagged as not factual. How does that fit in with additional speech?

DR. SAUL: I find this issue fascinating. I'm currently editing a volume about online speech, and we have a wonderful paper about satire online from Amanda McMullen. She's saying that for something to be satire, you can't make the fact that it is satire explicit; it just isn't satire anymore if you're explicit about that. So, in this case the "additional speech" makes a kind of speech impossible. And if we think satire's a valuable thing, then we're taking away something valuable.

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STANCE: While we're on the topic of recent events, we have to ask you about *Roe v. Wade*. In one of the chapters of your book, *Feminism: Issues and Arguments*, you talk a lot about abortion, and you cover a lot of the arguments that were common during the time you wrote the book. Do you think that any of those arguments or any arguments that have become prevalent since you wrote that, have played an especially important role in overturning *Roe v. Wade*? Or, if not, why do you think it was overturned in the first place?

DR. SAUL: I think I'm cynical enough to think that what actually played a role in overturning *Roe v. Wade* was just brute political power, that the people who wanted to overturn *Roe v. Wade* worked incredibly hard for thirty years, cared about the Supreme Court, voted for people who would put the right justices on the Supreme Court, prioritized abortion, and eventually got what they wanted. I think it's been a real problem for people on the left. The people who wanted to protect abortion rights would say, "Ugh! Don't tell me about the Supreme Court. I'm just so disappointed in the Democrats; I'm not gonna vote for them just for the Supreme Court." There was a sense that this couldn't possibly be taken away. And I think that was really naïve—not just because it could be taken away, but also because it was being taken away. Very early on, state funding for abortions was taken away so that you had to have a certain amount of money to be able to get an abortion, and then as time went on, in many states, it became rarer and rarer to be



able to find a clinic: you would have to travel, and waiting periods were imposed. All of those things should have been taken more seriously over the years. But I think the anti-choice side fought very effectively for what they wanted, and they got it. I don't think it was arguments.

STANCE: That is definitely true; they got what they wanted.

DR. SAUL: Yeah, but they lost the Senate! [Laughs] And that was probably because of Roe!

STANCE: Another controversial topic in feminism is pornography, and you've written a lot on pornography. You often disagree with some other feminists on it. We are curious on where your personal views fall, and whether they change based on context.

DR. SAUL: My personal view is that there is terrible and exploitative stuff going on in many industries, and pornography is perhaps especially prone to that. So I think that is a real problem. I strongly support efforts to unionize in all areas, including sex work. I think that pornography perpetuates a lot of really damaging thoughts about what sex should be like and what women and men are like. I think that most mainstream movies and sex education classes also perpetuate really damaging ideas about those things. So, it's not that I think anything's great, but I don't think that exclusive focus on pornography makes sense; I don't think banning it makes sense. I think, as with all these other areas, I think improving it makes sense, and unionizing.

STANCE: Many people think that concepts and words are connected, right? If you don't have a word for it, you probably don't have the concept. So sex education proliferates certain concepts, makes it easier to think certain thoughts, and makes it harder to think other thoughts, particularly with regard to how many sexes and genders there are, and what the identities of the people in the sex education classes might be. We can envision lots of high schoolers and middle schoolers being told that, because of language choices, who they are doesn't exist. What kind of concepts and words should be in such a class?

DR. SAUL: That's a great question. I think one problem with such classes is, as you said, if you tell people that there are only men and women and that no other genders exist, then that is really shutting out a bunch of people's experiences. And so, I think you need to

talk about the diversity of experiences that there are. If you talk to people in trans communities, it's not like there's a settled vocabulary that everybody agrees on. But I think talking about this as an area where thoughts and concepts are evolving is important. But I also think there's some really damaging concepts that get taught in sex education, like the concept of purity, and the idea that having sex makes you impure, less important, less valuable, less good. I think those are extremely damaging concepts that are taught in some sex education classes.

I think this view is starting to show up a bit in the philosophical literature, that exclusively focusing on consent gives people some of the wrong ideas about sex. Of course, I think consent is incredibly

important. But the term "consent" is usually used when you're agreeing to something that you don't particularly think you're gonna enjoy. You consent to a medical procedure; you don't consent to a piece of cake, right? I think consent is a pretty low bar, and usually it's one person wanting something, and the other person is saying, "Oh, okay. I'll go along with it." Maybe that's where the legal bar should be, but I think we should want more from our sex lives than that. I think you should only have sex with people who are enthusiastic about

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having sex with you and think it would be fun! And then consent becomes a weird term to use. So, I think sex education classes should teach people that sex is meant to be fun; if it's not fun, that doesn't mean that something terrible happened or that something's gone horribly morally wrong. But it seems like you should be striving for it to be fun. And the only way to be sure it's fun for everybody is if you check in with each other about whether it's fun or not. So, I think it's an idealistic idea, unfortunately, for sex education classes to teach you that sex should be fun, and that you should check in with each other to make sure that it's fun. But I think that would do a lot to help people have better lives and more ethical sex. Like I said: I think consent is necessary and where the legal bar should be, but I think people should be wanting more than that.

STANCE: It's becoming more common for sex workers to turn to sites like OnlyFans. It seems like the discourse surrounding virtual sex work is getting more mainstream. How do you think the use of these sites is changing our cultural perception of sex work?



DR. SAUL: So, I don't actually know statistics on whether virtual sex work is becoming more common. Certainly, it strikes me as a much safer kind of sex work than one where somebody else is in charge of it, and you're out on the street. So, I think if you're gonna

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be a sex worker, having a bit more independence and safety is a good thing. I think it would be far better if there were better and more secure jobs for everybody. I'm not gonna say that we're living in a utopia where people are doing sex work online; it may be better than the other options that they have. But I think capitalism has a lot to answer for, and we need better workers' rights in all areas.

STANCE: Something that goes hand-in-hand with women in sex work is sexual harassment. In your article "Stop Thinking So Much About Sexual Harassment," you propose that people should consider the best possible actions for the resolution of sexual harassment, but that there's not an obligation to intervene. Do you think that there is a point at which people should intervene, or is that never the case?

DR. SAUL: What I meant is that there is no single obligation that everybody has, because some people are in vulnerable positions where it wouldn't be safe for them to intervene. But I think that there are very strong obligations on people who are in positions where they can do something safely, and I think everybody has the obligation to reflect on what they can do in their position—and some people will find that they do have obligations. So, I never meant to say, "Oh, we should all just let it happen." I think the obligation that a full professor has is much more significant than the obligation that an undergraduate student has for dealing with sexual harassment in a department. Does that make sense?

STANCE: Yeah. So, everybody has the obligation to consider what they might do, and then doing so might lead you to realize that you do have an obligation to intervene?

DR. SAUL: Yes, but there's not a simple rule for that, right? It'll be a matter of what you are in a position to safely do. And that's partly physical safety, but not just physical safety.

STANCE: Got it. We have one last question before we leave the explicitly feminist world. You mentioned that you don't think philosophy can

do a good job of defining terms related to gender and race, like the term "woman." Despite that being the case, do you think there are any philosophical attempts to define the word "woman" that are at least partially successful, or maybe useful in argumentation?

DR. SAUL: So, I don't remember saying that I don't think philosophy can do it; that's a bit more pessimistic than I am. [Laughs] I think that definitions are hard, and philosophers will always find clever objections to definitions, but I don't think that philosophers won't ever make progress on things. One thing that I've been really interested in over the last few years is the work of people like Katharine Jenkins, Robin Dembroff, and Matthew Cole, who have all argued that there are multiple kinds of things we might want to do with our gendered terms. And I think this pluralism is a really important move. Talia Bettcher talks about this as well in her recent work.

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We need to describe the bad ways that gendered terms are sometimes used. Trans-exclusive uses of the word "woman" are extremely common. "Woman" has a trans-exclusive meaning. And I think I used to be uncomfortable with saying that, because I wanted to get the result that, no, it doesn't. I struggled with that a lot. I've become increasingly convinced that to understand what's gone wrong in the world, we have to say, "Look, that's what the word means for a bunch of people, that's describing the language that they use." To say that trans women are not "women" is a problem with the language that they use, and we need to criticize it. We can also then think, "How do we want our language to be?" What we can notice is that there are other resistant communities, and Bettcher discusses this, where the word "woman" is used in a much more fluid way, and gendered terms are much more complex and inclusive. We can see that there are other legitimate usages. We need to accept that the only way we're going to decide is by asking, "What's morally and politically better?" We can talk about what we'd like our terms to be in a better world. And I think it's useful to draw those distinctions between the planning-for-a-better-world kind of use of the word "woman" and what we'd like it to be, and the ways that it's used now, some good, some bad. And then we'll want to argue for, say, a trans-inclusive definition of "woman" by saying, "Look, here are the terrible consequences of using the definition you're using, and those are bad and you should care about it—and you're wrong if you don't care about it." And so, we need to change the way we use the word.



So, I think there's been this move over the last few years in the philosophical literature where a lot of people who are anti-trans—or alternatively, some of the people who haven't kept up with the literature—are assuming that the trans-inclusive literature is still saying that there's only one meaning of 'woman' and it includes trans women. I think instead, people were saying, "No, actually, there are

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multiple meanings. And some of them we like, and some of them we don't, and that's the way language is." I think doing philosophy helps us draw some of those distinctions in a way that's really useful. Although, you'll notice that I've avoided giving you a definition that I think is great, because I don't have one. [Laughs] I think there's also some really interesting work arguing that we shouldn't be trying to get a definition of it.

STANCE: I think part of that whole discussion is drawing distinctions, right? And you've done a lot of work with distinction, especially with the lying/misleading distinction.

DR. SAUL: [Laughs] I *am* a philosopher!

STANCE: That'll do it! In your book you establish that lying and misleading are morally equivalent when all factors are the same, but that most people believe that misleading is morally preferable to lying. So, if people actually accepted that lying and misleading are morally equivalent, how do you think that their behavior would change?

DR. SAUL: That's a great question. I'm bad at accepting it myself, as I say in the book. I still carefully construct misleading utterances, rather than lie when I feel the need. And every now and then I remind myself, no just go ahead and lie! So I think that we'd have more lies and fewer carefully constructed utterances that mislead. I'm not sure whether that would be a better world; I'm not sure if it would make any difference.

STANCE: Is moral equivalence unique to lying and misleading? Are there other ways of speaking where there are moral equivalences?

DR. SAUL: That isn't something that I've thought much about . . . I do work on is racist speech, ranging from the very blatant to the much more concealed. If you're talking about the deliberate use of, say, a racist dog whistle rather than an obviously racist term, I might be inclined to say it's equally bad. But unintentional use is going to

be different. It's very hard to unintentionally use the n-word. On the other hand, it's very easy to unintentionally use dog whistles. The intentional use of non-slurs can be just as bad and damaging. Sometimes more so.

STANCE: Do you think the intentional use of dog whistles and the intentional use of figleaves are morally comparable?

DR. SAUL: That's a good question, I haven't really thought about it. They are both really manipulative devices designed to get some deniability. They might be, but I'm not sure.

STANCE: To follow up, as Frankfurt says in *On Bullshit*, misleading is about your enterprise: that you want people to believe that you care about true and false when you don't—whereas lying and misleading both seem to be intentional about a particular belief. It seems to me that there are many types of misleading. Is that right? Is it true that all kinds of misleadings are fodder for judgment? I can partially agree that the categories are not inherently better or worse than another, but there seem to be trends. Are there trend lines? Is misleading usually worse, or something like that?

DR. SAUL: So, a few things. One thing I disagree with Frankfurt on is that I think there can be boldfaced bullshit, where the bullshitter doesn't try to conceal what they're up to. It's something that authoritarians will often use, people like Trump, Bolsonaro, and Putin, because they want you to know that they don't care about the truth and that they're just gonna say what they want to say regardless as a sort of exertion of power. I know that's not what you asked about; I just couldn't help but add that.

I would hold firm on the idea that it's gonna be down to what your motivation is, what the context is, and what the effects are for both lying and misleading. For example, I think it's common for people to try to appear more confident than they are in a job interview: a completely reasonable thing to do. I think you can lie about it or mislead, either one is fine. You can say, "I'm really confident that I can do this job and be really good at it" and it's a lie because you're actually insecure. That's just what you say in a job interview. Even if you carefully constructed your words to mislead, it wouldn't make any difference—except in very specific contexts, like in a court of law where there are perjury penalties attached to lying but not to misleading.

STANCE: We actually had a question about the exception regarding moral equivalence in the courts, where misleading is okay, but lying



is not. Is that imbalance only because of the punishment you might receive?

DR. SAUL: No, I wouldn't want it to be for that reason. That wouldn't really ground a moral distinction, though it might give you a good practical reason to avoid lying. This imbalance is because of

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the way that the court works, what the explicit expectations are. One thing is that everybody in a courtroom understands that there's a rule that we've all agreed to: it's okay to mislead, but it's not okay to lie. So, it's violating an agreement if you lie rather than mislead. You can have that same dynamic come up if you have an open relationship and your partner says, "It's okay to sleep with other people. I don't really wanna know about it, but don't lie to me. It's okay to mislead me." Then you're violating that agreement if you lie rather than mislead. It matters that you're violating an agreement, and I think that's part of it.

In court, it's not a normal conversation. Things are very, very structured. The witness is required to answer precisely the question they are asked, and if the highly trained lawyer asks the usually far less trained witness a poorly phrased question, and they answer that question in a literal but misleading way, that's on the lawyer. It's the lawyer's job to ask the question in a way that's going to get the right answer. If the lawyer fails to follow up, then I think that's their fault. One of the classic examples of perjury is of a KKK member who attempted to light a cross on the lawn of an interracial couple, but they couldn't get it to light. In court when they were asked if they had ever burned a cross on the lawn of an interracial couple, they said no. And they were tried for perjury afterwards. Their job was to answer the question that they were asked; they were explicitly told not to answer some other question. The lawyer presumably knew what had actually happened in that incident and failed to follow up with, "Yeah, but have you ever tried?" So, I think there's a clear demarcation of responsibilities in a courtroom that we don't have in ordinary life that has a moral impact on things.

STANCE: If the witness thought that lying and misleading were the same, would that make them the same for that specific person in the court?

DR. SAUL: [Laughs] That's a fun question, but I don't think it would. Even though I think they are morally the same, I can tell the difference between the two and I know that the rule of the courtroom is that I have to say stuff that is literally true. Honoring that agreement is important not only because it's important to honor agreements, but because we want courts to function by the rules they're supposed to function by. So, I think there are a lot of good reasons for taking the rules of the court seriously.

STANCE: Awesome. We just have a few more questions for you before we let you go. The first one is about an article you wrote in 2017 called "Philosophy in Danger" where you talk about how philosophy will either disappear as we know it or be expanded with the addition of a new branch of philosophy. Do you think that we've headed in either one of those directions?

DR. SAUL: I think it's too early to say. There's been a wonderful explosion in applied philosophy: it's growing constantly, and more people are trying to do politically relevant stuff to attend to all the urgent matters that are happening in our world. I think that's fantastic. New people are coming into the field, and people who had previously done only traditional stuff are realizing, "There are some urgent things that I need to look at."

At the same time, there's still budget cutting going on. Just last week, the Birkbeck College at the University of London announced that it was going to cut half of its philosophy department, a department devoted exclusively to providing evening classes for part time students while also being a top research institution. It's a uniquely wonderful thing—but academic precarity continues to grow. Governments are not funding education, and in fact, they're threatening education in new ways. I'm really concerned by these laws against teaching gender and critical race theory. So, while there are more and more philosophers trying to do really wonderful things, and there are also some really scary countervailing forces. I think both forces are continuing, unfortunately.

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STANCE: We've talked a little bit about gender inequality in academia, specifically in the field of philosophy, and you just talked about how you've noticed an explosion in applied philosophy. I'm planning on pursuing a graduate degree in philosophy after I graduate from Ball State, specifically in applied ethics. Do you have any advice for people like me, women in particular?

DR. SAUL: My biggest advice is to visit the places you are accepted and talk to the current students to find out what it's really like. I am very disconcerted that people still sometimes get the advice to find a list and go to the highest-ranked program that accepted them, because that's not what you want. It would get you some prestige—which is useful to have—but what you want is a program where you can be supervised by somebody who knows your topic, is supportive and helpful, and who you get along with. You want to be in a place where you can have fun talking philosophy with your peers, rather than competing with each other, fighting, and being horrible. You want to be in a place where you'd like to live, where you can be happy to do philosophy and enjoy it. Those sorts of things are far more important than looking at some list and seeing which ranks the best. I think the rankings are absolute bullshit. So, I think the strongest advice would be to seriously look at what's going to help you flourish as a person and a philosopher, and make sure you get those things in a university. The best way to find that out is to visit and talk to the students.

STANCE: Thank you! You have a very specific niche for yourself, and I'm curious if you have any advice for undergraduates to find their own niche.

DR. SAUL: I think it takes time; you won't find it immediately. I spent a long time doing strictly traditional philosophy of language, and then getting into feminism, but never seeing a way to connect them. It took quite a while before I started seeing how I could connect these things. I had a good time along the way, but I like what I'm doing even better now. It can take time, and it can change. I think an important thing would be to follow your interests. People will tell you to go to the highest rank school or do this topic because this is what's hot right now, and that's what you should do. And that's a terrible way to go about choosing it. I think if you're going to grad school, you're gonna have to spend a lot of time thinking about whatever you decide to do your dissertation on. It's important to be interested in it and choosing a topic because you think it might be good for getting you a job is not a way to find topic that interests you.

STANCE: We just have one last question for you, and arguably it is our most important question. While we were preparing for this interview, we saw that you were a consultant for a zombie movie. Can you tell us what movie it was?

DR. SAUL: [Laughs] It never got made!

STANCE: No! What happened?

DR. SAUL: If it did get made though, the world would be a beautiful place. This film student contacted me, and he was writing a script. He didn't tell me what the script was, but he contacted me because he wanted the main character to be a woman in philosophy, and he'd found the blog I ran, *What Is It Like to Be a Woman in Philosophy?* He wanted to interview me about that. He was this cool feminist guy, but he was really cagey about what the movie was. Eventually I managed to drag out of him that it was a zombie film. He thought that it was embarrassing, and that I wouldn't want to talk to him, but I was thrilled! He didn't know that zombies are a legitimate philosophical topic, and specifically an interest of mine. So, I was able to tell him, "Okay, this is what she should do." Once I knew that, I was able to suggest all kinds of things. I had a great time talking to him, but not many film scripts get made into movies, and, as far as I know, this one hasn't been made. But if it were made, the hero would've been a woman in philosophy who kills all the zombies at the American Philosophical Association, at The Smoker, which is the horrible event where job candidates have to make conversation with departments that might hire them over really bad beer. It would've been so good. Yeah, maybe someday.

HE DIDN'T KNOW THAT ZOMBIES ARE A LEGITIMATE PHILOSOPHICAL TOPIC, AND SPECIFICALLY AN INTEREST OF MINE.

STANCE: Thank you so much for talking to us, it was very interesting.

DR. SAUL: I will say, I keep thinking about your question about figleaves and I do not know how to categorize them as logos or ethos. I think they're gonna be some kind of blend.

STANCE: Was there anything you thought that you might wanna talk about or expected to talk about that we haven't?

DR. SAUL: Yeah! I could tell you about what I'm doing now, because I just started a really cool new project last week. I got funding to do a project with a social media researcher and a political speech



I BECAME INTERESTED IN THE WAY THAT DOG WHISTLES AND FIGLEAVES FUNCTION TO NORMALIZE CONSPIRACIST SPEECH AS WELL AS RACIST SPEECH.

researcher about figleaves online. We are looking at places like Twitter and trying to develop a methodology for identifying figleaves. I think that figleaves play a role in making people more comfortable with speech that violates important norms, similar to racist speech or wildly conspiracist speech. One of the things I predict is that in a mainstream venue, a message will spread better if it's got a figleaf attached. To take a topical example, "Paul Pelosi was attacked

by his gay lover. It wasn't a political attack at all; it was his gay lover." That message won't spread as well as, "I'm just asking questions about whether or not the man who attacked Paul Pelosi was his gay lover." In this project, we're going to be seeing if figleaves make a difference in which messages spread. I'm quite excited about teaming up with people who do empirical research.

STANCE: Is there a connection to conspiracy theories that's frontloaded into that?

DR. SAUL: Oh, that's right! I haven't published the stuff on conspiracy theories, so you don't know about it! I have a book which is half about racist speech and half about conspiracist speech. I became interested in the way that dog whistles and figleaves function to normalize conspiracist speech as well as racist speech. And by conspiracy speech I mean wild conspiracist speech. I don't mean thinking that there was a conspiracy to cover up Watergate, because there was. I mean, "Hillary Clinton drinks the blood of babies" kind of stuff. I think figleaves and dog whistles both play a big role in helping to spread these theories. If you look at what QAnon, they use lot of dog whistles to indicate their allegiance, like mentioning "the storm"—you'll see Donald Trump doing that as well. I've become interested in the way that both dog whistles and figleaves can spread norm-violating speech of more than one sort. There, I'm looking at racist and conspiracist speech. I think figleaves play a huge role in transphobic speech as well. I haven't written about that yet, but I'm planning to.

STANCE: That sounds super fun.

DR. SAUL: Also depressing! [Laughs]

STANCE: Well, I think we're done! Thank you so much.

DR. SAUL: Thank you so much! I'm so impressed by what you put into this interview, and I really enjoyed talking to you!

