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Wonder Woman and Philosophy: The Amazonian Mystique
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Quote: One of the strengths of this book is in showing that there no straightforward answer to the question whether we should champion or disqualify Wonder Woman as a feminist icon, as there are good reasons to choose to do either--and also some good reasons not to do either.

Since her creation during the Second World War, Wonder Woman has come to occupy an enduring place in the social imaginary of the United States and beyond as a symbol for women's empowerment. The seventy-eight-year-old superhero not only saves the world time and again, but has also managed to save DC films, which recently had trouble measuring up to the success of the Marvel Cinematic Universe until *Wonder Woman* (Jenkins 2017) made millions at the box office. *Wonder Woman and Philosophy* came out the same year as the stand-alone film of the superhero, following her rather brief yet awe-inspiring appearance as portrayed by Gal Gadot in *Batman v Superman* (Snyder 2016). Like many other books in the Blackwell Philosophy and Popular Culture series, the anthology contains essays that are engaging, accessible, and intended for a wide audience, that is to say, essays that are pleasantly free of obscure and impenetrable academic jargon. In that sense, the anthology fulfills what it sets out to do: it draws in philosophically inclined, curious-minded Wonder Woman fans, while at the same time bringing to bear the tools, concepts, and frameworks that philosophy offers on a pop culture figure in an

effort to make sense of the questions that emerge from the place she has occupied in the past several decades.

I find the book to be timely in the #MeToo era and with respect to the Trump administration's antifeminist politics, as well as in the context of the broader global rise of nationalism and right-wing exclusionary politics. There is much to be said about Wonder Woman's relation to ethics and politics today and in the past, and the book covers these issues (and more) from a variety of perspectives. Simone de Beauvoir's notion of *ambiguity*, which characterizes the double bind in which women find themselves, is the book's starting point, proposed in the introduction by Jacob M. Held, and is revealed later to be central to several authors' analyses in the following chapters (see especially Wright, Donovan, and Zanin). Caught between being human and an Amazon, mortal and immortal, lovingly empathetic but relentless, gender-nonconforming yet designed to appeal to the male gaze, Wonder Woman embodies several--and at times conflicting--ideals at once. As Sarah K. Donovan puts it, superheroes like Wonder Woman "perform their gender as feminine in their style of dress, but they subvert their typical gender role with their performance as ruthless warriors" (27). If we were to ask, as many of the authors in this book do, "Is Wonder Woman truly a feminist icon?," we would have to specify the ways in which this figure has served both women's empowerment and is depicted time and again in disempowering ways. Many of the essays therefore choose to preserve the tension and the ambiguity associated with being Wonder Woman. Although we see Wonder Woman as challenging gender norms and fighting for women's equality (see Wright and Donovan), we also see her reproducing some harmful norms (see Zanin, Hernandez and Hernandez, and Brake). Drawing on the creator's inspirations for the character's outfit and accessories (especially the lasso), Matthew William

Brake writes: "Wonder Woman is the dirty secret of the comic book industry that everyone 'rationally' knows: Wonder Woman is a BDSM sex fantasy, but as long as she isn't explicitly portrayed that way, the fetish of Wonder Woman as feminist icon perpetuates" (77). That is, of course, not to say that BDSM cannot be feminist (at least I hope not) nor that it is contradictory to suggest that Wonder Woman is both a sex fantasy and a feminist icon. Suggesting that having been created as "seductive" delegitimizes the status of Wonder Woman as a feminist icon would be a reductive reading of the significance she has held for women--and it would have us fall into the trap of some ill-founded stereotypes. We know that the either/or dichotomy is fallacious here. Yet, as Andrea Zanin's historical exploration shows, Wonder Woman becomes "domesticated" in the 1960s, in polar opposition to the liberatory ideas put forth by women's movements at the time. Giving up her powers to be with her man, she opens a fashion boutique and is depicted in the comics no longer in terms of her strength, but only in terms of her grace and beauty. Skimming through the pages of DC Comics' 75th year edition of *Wonder Woman*, one can notice how much her depiction has changed over the years from being initially portrayed as tall, muscular, and powerful to slim, busty, and conventionally attractive. In one of the most thought-provoking essays in the book, the mother-daughter duo Jill Hernandez and Allie Hernandez's analysis shows that when female heroes (and antiheroes) are sexualized, it takes away from their power, that is, their writers tend to present a weaker portrayal of the characters, suggestive of the misogynistic myth that you can either be sexy, that is, appeal to the male gaze, or successful, effective, or capable as a hero or an antihero (or a person, for that matter). So although the dichotomy is no doubt fallacious, it unfortunately continues to hold in popular imagination.

Wonder Woman is ambiguous not simply because her portrayal changes over time, but also because we expect women to comply with conflicting gender norms (which, of course, is impossible), and much like Wonder Woman, we find ourselves in a double bind. Wonder Woman's fate is symptomatic, in other words, of living in patriarchy, which she cannot simply transcend, apparently, even as a superhero. Despite her "imperfections," feminists, of course, reclaimed Wonder Woman, and that is noteworthy in and of itself: expressing dissatisfaction with Wonder Woman's regression over the years, Gloria Steinem chose to have the original Wonder Woman on the cover of the very first issue of *Ms. Magazine*, which was published with the title "Wonder Woman for President" (Garcia 2016). Attending to this ambiguity that not only becomes apparent for Wonder Woman in her adventures, but also for us feminists in our consideration of Wonder Woman as a feminist icon, Brake concludes, "In the same way that Wonder Woman isn't an exhaustive representation of all women, maybe one representation of Wonder Woman doesn't exhaust what she is. Perhaps she is a feminist symbol. And a symptom. And a fetish" (79). Holding onto this tension, many of the authors in the anthology agree that she is all these things at once--and though that may not be ideal, it is also the reality that characterizes many of *our* lives. One of the strengths of this book is in showing that there no straightforward answer to the question whether we should champion or disqualify Wonder Woman as a feminist icon, as there are good reasons to choose to do either--and also some good reasons not to do either. Wonder Woman has struggled and continues to struggle in an imperfect world laden with misogyny--just as we do. Our situation, whether we are wonder women or not, is characterized by this double bind.

When I first decided to write a review of *Wonder Woman and Philosophy*, I bought the aforementioned DC Comics' 75th year edition of *Wonder Woman* as a gift for myself. When I posted a photograph of its cover on my Instagram page later that day, somebody commented, "Oh look, it's you!" We recognize this comment as flattering; we take it as a compliment about our strength, endurance, and ability to do many things at once. Yet at the same time, we are well aware that the suggestion is bittersweet (if not a total rip-off), meant to be a consolation prize for making us feel less terrible about constantly being exhausted from stretching ourselves too thin. We do not simply want to be complimented for how much we do; we want an equitable distribution of labor. We do not want to *have* to be wonder women. Superhuman levels of strength and persistence have come to be the new ideals for women, no less oppressive but perhaps more insidious than some of the older ones. Zanin writes: "In a new millennium, 'wonder woman' is an unattainable ideal. She represents a pressure to be the impossible" (58). She calls wonder woman a "feminist faux pas." The "I can have it all" narrative undoubtedly has its own set of problems, and the "wonder woman" trope is being used far and wide to promote a particular kind of womanhood--who, for instance, happily(!) takes on the double shift, which may fit the model imposed by our current economic systems, but not necessarily to the benefit of women. "After all," Zanin writes, "Wonder Woman is a mere figment of our collective imagination. The real wonder of being a woman is living to fight another day" (68). We must recognize that the sense of empowerment that this trope gives to women is rather misleading.

Thus far, I have enumerated some of the strengths of this anthology. Having given credit where it's due, this review would not have been complete if I were to refrain from mentioning the book's desperate need for intersectional and decolonial feminist perspectives. Although the

feminist essays in the book skillfully cover the paradoxes of Wonder Woman as linked to the situation of women at large, I do think that *Wonder Woman and Philosophy* limits itself somewhat to the conceptual framework of what we may call a predominantly white version of second-wave feminism and must be introduced to some of the tenets and normative (and methodical) commitments of the third wave. The anthology does not contain a single essay about the question of race, even though there is a lot of room to think critically about this question in relation to Wonder Woman in particular and the DC Extended Universe in general. One could (but shouldn't) overlook this as a simple omission, if it were not for some casual remarks made in the book that serve no less than to perpetuate some delusional colonial fantasies of Western self-aggrandizement to describe Wonder Woman's world (and perhaps ours as well): "Art can be a visual expression of philosophy, and Wonder Woman is an artistic expression of a specific philosophy of history: the ideals of freedom first found in Ancient Greece will be spread worldwide by the United States and her allies" (151). Leaving such statements unproblematic as simple descriptors of the Wonder Woman universe is troubling.

The anthology clearly needs a decolonial framework to think critically about and take issue with these assumptions that are taken for granted. Although feminist philosophy challenges the exclusionary trajectory of canonical philosophical traditions (we see this challenge in the book, for instance, in Mark D. White's presentation of care ethics as capable of overcoming some of the limitations of deontology in an effort to show the ethical uniqueness of Wonder Woman), one must remember that feminist philosophy, too, could very well support and sustain white, Eurocentric traditions of philosophy. This is something about which one must be cautious. I would have liked to see more of this caution in the context of a book on a feminist icon at a time when feminist movements (and philosophy as well) continue to struggle to be more inclusive.

I find Wonder Woman's reliance on care ethics to be an astute observation that is studied in several essays in the book, but some of these essays are subject to the same criticisms that were initially posed to care ethicists--it becomes rather ambiguous at times whether care ethics is *feminist* or simply *feminine*, that is to say, whether these "feminine virtues" that are being revalorized are seen to be a contingent result of socialization or an essential part of being a woman. I do not mean to suggest that care ethicists are essentialists (I would not agree with this statement); but I think it is important to be careful about the ways in which these virtues are understood in relation to gender. Drawing from the ideas of Wonder Woman's creator, William Moulton Marston, about women's emotional strength, James Edwin Mahon's essay in particular relies on an essentializing and naturalizing language. Mahon writes: "The power of the magic lasso is not the power to force someone to obey you. That is masculine power, or domination. The magic lasso is not like a loaded gun pointed at someone's head. The power of the magic lasso is the power to captivate someone. That is feminine power, or inducement (allure). The magic lasso is like a beautiful face, or an attractive perfume. It *enchants*, like a love potion. Its effect on the other person is *magnetic* . . ." (183). Bringing to mind age-old stereotypes of women as seductresses and succubi, his analysis seems to mistake a sexist trope for women's empowerment. Showing that although conventionally seen as a moral strength, women's emotional labor is self-consuming, alienating, and disempowering, Sandra Bartky's essay "Feeding Egos and Tending Wounds" would have been a pertinent resource with which to engage here (Bartky 1990). Such naturalizing discourses serve to obscure the workings of oppression and present as empowering what is ultimately disempowering. One must be careful not to

essentialize "women's virtues" or naturalize "women's experience," as these may very well have been assigned to women time and again in an effort to keep them in their place.

All in all, this anthology touches upon a variety of issues and rethinks some important philosophical questions in relation to a prominent figure within popular culture, whose relevance has not ceased to grow in recent years. It contains quite a few essays on feminist philosophy and includes the work of many women philosophers, therefore far exceeding hundreds of anthologies that fail to do either of those things when it comes to the project of diversifying philosophy. May I humbly suggest, however, that we might need a second book on Wonder Woman that meets some more ambitious diversity goals (such as the aforementioned question of race), especially in light of the recent Wonder Woman movies (the second one to come out in 2020)--with Gal Gadot as Wonder Woman, who is an ex-Israeli soldier and who publicly expressed support of the 2014 war on Gaza in which Israel killed more Palestinians than in any other year since 1967, as well as, of course, the growing pluralist feminist solidarity in response to the Trump administration's misogynistic policies. There are some interesting paradoxes to explore in these movies as well--in the 2017 film, for instance, we see Wonder Woman depicted with a childlike naiveté that is supposed to be humorous, even though she is a capable, knowledgeable Amazon. The book, of course, by no means claims to be a comprehensive work on Wonder Woman. Many more philosophical questions remain unexplored as *Wonder Woman and Philosophy* leaves its reader desiring more. Written in a style that is fun to read, the quality of the scholarship in some of these essays is also irreproachable, an example that some of the others would have done well to follow.

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