

Against Bullying

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Philosophy association issues statement against the way some scholars are being treated. Some praise the effort. Others fear it could limit free expression.

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By

[Scott Jaschik](#)



Few academics endorse bullying of or by their colleagues. But is bullying something about which disciplinary associations can take a stand? Can bullying even be defined in ways that don't limit strongly worded criticism that is part of academic freedom?

Those are some of the issues raised by [a new statement](#) against bullying issued Friday by the American Philosophical Association.

"Philosophers are gadflies, at least some of the time, and we must support those who take intellectual, ethical and social risks in their work, including their public presentations. Bullying and harassment that target a person's race, gender, class, sexual orientation or other status are especially abhorrent. We unequivocally condemn such behavior and stand in solidarity with our members who are subjected to this deplorable and discriminatory abuse," says the statement.

The statement addresses itself both to bullying of and by philosophers and states: "We call upon any member who has engaged in such behaviors in the past to cease and desist" and "We also call upon our membership to speak out against such attacks, whether from within the academy or from the public sphere."

The APA cites as one impetus for its new statement the treatment of George Yancy (right), a professor of philosophy at Emory University, after he published an essay in *The New York Times* in December called "[Dear White America](#)." The essay argued that white Americans, even those who are well intentioned, benefit from racism and are racist in ways that they may not understand. (Yancy also writes that, as a man, he is sexist and benefits from sexism even if that's not his intent.)

After his piece ran, Yancy "received harassing emails, phone calls and letters containing racist slurs and threats of violence. This is one very egregious example of bullying and harassment that philosophers who speak out publicly endure, and there are many more, often taking racist, sexist, homophobic and/or ableist forms."

The attacks on Yancy led some philosophers to argue that the American Philosophical Association should take a strong public stand to back him. [A petition](#) urging the APA to do so attracted hundreds of signatures from philosophers.

The APA statement against bullying goes on to discuss another type of attack on philosophers. "Abusive speech directed at philosophers is not limited to responses by the public to published op-eds," the statement says. "A look at some of the anonymous philosophy blogs also reveals a host of examples of abusive speech by philosophers directed against other philosophers. Disagreement is fine and is not the issue. But bullying and ad hominem

harassment of philosophers by other philosophers undermines civil disagreement and discourse and has no place in our community. Attacks that focus on a philosopher's race, gender or other status are unacceptable and in violation of the [APA Statement on Nondiscrimination](#)."

Jennifer Saul, a professor of philosophy at the University of Sheffield, in Britain, is one of the founders of the blog [Feminist Philosophers](#), which has written extensively about online abuse of philosophers. "The APA statement is a welcome statement of opposition to bullying and abuse, which does not in any way actually constrain anyone's speech. It is a remarkable commentary on the state of our profession that something like this could be controversial," she said.

Justin Weinberg, an associate professor of philosophy at the University of South Carolina who is editor of *Daily Nous*, a website about philosophy issues, said the APA statement addresses a real problem that makes some scholars in the discipline unwilling to participate in public discussion for fear of online abuse. "Some philosophers are worried they will be personally attacked elsewhere on the Internet, and so refrain from speaking out," he said. "The stronger this worry, the fewer people speak out, and each who does is more likely to be a target." In turn, he said, this pattern "increases the perceived cost to speaking up, and so the cycle of intimidation continues, choking discussion. It is a classic collective action problem."

Weinberg added that he did not view the APA as trying to restrict speech, and that it couldn't really do so if it tried. Rather, Weinberg said he viewed the APA statement as "calling for more speech," in encouraging members to speak out against bullying. "We need to encourage a community of robust public disagreement, so that the voicing of unpopular or risky or offensive views is so common that the prospect of personal attack for expressing them is widely distributed, and felt less by each person," he said.

In [discussion of the new statement on Weinberg's website](#), opinions were mixed.

Several comments warned about the lack of agreement on what constitutes bullying. "This would be great, if I knew precisely what the boundaries of ad hominem harassment were, and if I knew that the standards were applied equally to all kinds of bullying. The fact that 'ableism' is cited, but religious animus is not, makes me suspect that the declaration is only focusing on certain types of bullying, not others," wrote one of the site's readers.

Brian Leiter, the Karl N. Llewellyn Professor of Jurisprudence and director of the Center for Law, Philosophy and Human Values at the University of Chicago, was more critical of the statement [on his blog](#).

He criticized the philosophy association for "conflating the criminal threats and racist abuse to which Professor Yancy was subjected with 'uncivil' but lawful speech (the APA even uses, bizarrely, the language of 'cease and desist!')." Further, he writes that there "were reasons to be skeptical that an APA statement would have much impact on racist sociopaths of the kind who were harassing Professor Yancy, but now the APA has gone and done something much more outrageous and unprofessional. The APA has no business regulating lawful 'uncivil' speech, or legislating what counts as 'civility,' let alone calling on people to 'cease and desist' from it."

Via email, Amy Ferrer, executive director of the APA, defended the new statement and said that it did not interfere with anyone's free speech.

"Freedom of speech and expression are paramount; the statement released today fully respects those fundamental freedoms," Ferrer said. "But freedom of speech does not extend to hate speech or threats of violence, to which some of our members -- such as George Yancy -- have recently been subjected in response to public essays on controversial topics. We have seen this happen in many venues across the blogosphere and social media, as well as in personal communications. The statement expresses that the APA stands against such attacks, wherever they occur, and stands with our members when they are attacked with the kind of vitriol that Yancy and others have received."

'An Important Historical Moment'

Yancy, the Emory professor who was harassed online after his *New York Times* piece, said via email that he thought the statement from the APA was an "incredibly important historical moment" in that it was the first time the association has taken a stand on behalf of those who engage in public philosophy.

He recounted the reaction to his piece. "I have been called by the N word in the last month or so over a thousand times. I've even had to report such email and voice message threats to police at my university. Several readers have even attempted to have me fired from my position. I must say that I've thought of philosophy in Socratic terms before this all happened, but the level of racist hatred that I received from practicing public philosophy was extremely daunting," he said.

He said his situation, to which the APA responded, "is not just about bullying, but about deep structural and systemic issues involving white racism, racist discourse and hatred."

As for the APA statement, he said that the association "is encouraging philosophers (and nonphilosophers) not to engage in threatening discourse, nasty putdowns, racist and sexist insults. It is seeking forms of discourse that are critical, but not filled with hatred or derogatory personal attacks or insults. In my case, after viewing many of the messages that I received in response to 'Dear White America,' I think that the APA wisely took this as an important opportunity to speak out against what was/is clearly unacceptable violent and racist discourse and to show support for members who engage in various forms of public philosophy, especially forms that challenge crucial issues of our contemporary moment. There is so much more work that needs to be done as the APA rethinks its identity, but it is on the right track and I am thankful for that."

Will such statement prevent what he experienced? "I don't think that the APA's statement will erase online bullying or racist vitriol, but its statement, as a premiere institution, has taken an important stand against this kind of behavior," Yancy said. "Hence, it is the principle of the statement, the ethics of the statement, the solidarity of the statement that counts. It was never about whether or not the APA's statement could control what readers would say within the safety of their anonymity, but about issuing a statement in support of its members."

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