

Marguerite La Caze

The analytic imaginary

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Famous violinists, veils of ignorance, and persons who reproduce on the order of amoebae simply blind us, in many cases, to getting a grip on the underlying assumptions, many of which are wildly androcentric and/or Eurocentric. By focusing on these tropes and similes, LaCaze claims, we can come to a much greater understanding of what is at stake in various arguments.

Marguerite LaCaze's *The Analytic Imaginary* is an intriguing and innovative work that calls for more than the usual amount of attention from a reader. From first to last, the burden of the work is that images, metaphors and similes have played a much larger role in the construction and development of analytic philosophy than some would like to believe. Taking off initially from the work of Michele LeDoeuff, LaCaze examines arguments and images in the abortion debate, bioethics and several other areas of contemporary analytic endeavor.

What proves challenging for the reader, however, is precisely what makes this work so interesting. It is difficult to sustain an argument as complex as that which LaCaze has chosen to develop over a great number of pages, and, as so often happens in philosophy, the larger burden of the argument sometimes becomes buried under the many examples. The careful reader will find, however, that each section attempts to further the main thesis in its own way, and what makes each section valuable is precisely the detail with which LaCaze approaches the development of the argument.

The section on abortion is a case in point. Much of the focus of La Caze's delineation in this section is Judith Jarvis Thomson's famous "violinist" example, and here LaCaze does a superb job not only of tracking the use of the image in the original piece, but of noting its use in the various and many responses to that piece. But the danger is that reader, if not paying sufficient attention, will likely forget that the overall point of this section, and others like it, is to sustain the notion that imagery and examples rich in visual detail are indeed important on the current analytic scene.

Indeed, one could assert that LaCaze's main point would not be so crucial were it not the case that analytic philosophy is often cast in terms—by both its friends and opponents—that tend to understate the force of such examples and metaphors. Clearly, it is part of the author's larger argument that not only do metaphors and images abound in standard Anglo-American theory, they help to push such theory toward the hegemonic stances with which it has, ultimately, become associated. Thus one of the points of LaCaze's work is that exclusion of females, "others," and anyone not taken, paradigmatically, as part of the dominant group is achieved in part in traditional analytic argument by the ways in which examples are constructed.

In chapters on the notion of a person, contractarianism, knowledge, and aesthetics, the author makes this point again and again. The examples constructed and used make certain assumptions, then (all too frequently) they reinforce or make stronger the assumptions already inherent, and the argument is developed in a certain exclusionary way. LaCaze is herself a careful analytic philosopher, and she accomplished much by pursuing each subsidiary line of argument to its end. One of the strongest chapters is that on the myth of the social contract and its origins: here her skills shine, and a great deal is accomplished in a comparatively short space.

In this particular chapter, which might be taken as exemplary, LaCaze sustains the thesis that “assumptions about political organization, human nature and moral reasoning are incorporated into the image itself and its formulations, assumptions that reveal the nature of the analytic imaginary. Furthermore, a number of tensions in the image emerge in relation to women and family” (94). In expanding on this claim, LaCaze shows how Rawls himself—under close scrutiny by critics both feminist and non-feminist—eventually had to make alterations in the concept of the veil of ignorance, and how his formulation of the original position was such as to undermine the very concept of women as rationally participating citizens, even if, as is so frequently the case, this was not spelled out.

Manifestly, what makes LaCaze’s work powerful is precisely her emphasis on what is not spelled out. Famous violinists, veils of ignorance, and persons who reproduce on the order of amoebae simply blind us, in many cases, to getting a grip on the underlying assumptions, many of which are wildly androcentric and/or Eurocentric. By focusing on these tropes and similes, LaCaze claims, we can come to a much greater understanding of what is at stake in various arguments. In other words, much of what is actually up for debate is implicit, rather than explicit, and developing the notion of the analytic imaginary helps us here. Again, with respect to the notion of the social contract, LaCaze notes, “the contract begins to fall apart once women are brought into the myth, because the facts of difference reveal anomalies and tensions within the argument” (118).

A difficulty with LaCaze’s work, as indicated, is the problem of trying to hang onto her argument throughout several chapters incorporating of wide variety of examples. Fortunately, many of these examples are common stock-in-trade for analytic philosophers, and hence they remain in one’s conceptualization of her overall argument without a great deal of difficulty.

It is tempting, however, to turn a few of LaCaze’s main argumentative strokes on their head, and against her own argument. Her line requires that there be something that we can more or less hypostasize as the “analytic imaginary,” even if its various permutations are almost unrecognizable as falling under one rubric. Furthermore, to strengthen her argument she often gives the impression that many of the myths and metaphors have a strong visual aspect that they simply may not have. There is, for instance, quite a bit of difference between the “famous violinist,” and the “original position.” One might guess that, given the construction of Thomson’s abortion argument, readers may indeed be given to a brief visualization of the violinist, but it would be interesting to pursue the notion that many have tried to visualize individuals thinking significantly about contracts and social structures while in the original position. One might hazard the claim that this simply is not the sort of example that requires (or even profits from) visualization.

Nevertheless, despite itself being in the careful analytic style, which many find difficult and even off-putting, LaCaze's work is a profoundly important addition to a growing corpus of work that examines the methods of the analytic tradition, or of that portion of the tradition that purports to deal with specific, core areas of philosophy. (We can think, for example, of the many works in epistemology that question the relevance of epistemic arguments and positions that cannot be instantiated in actual believers, or that ask us to pursue epistemic questions using material taken from recent developments in cognitive science.)

LaCaze ends her work by noting that "sensitivity to the nature of imagery" can "teach us to philosophize in a way that connects us with others, [and that] help[s] make philosophy more open to the world, and hence ultimately more philosophical" (182). In this positive sense, LaCaze's book is itself an example that promulgates her own line. This striking work asks us to look at analytic philosophy in a new way, and in so doing makes that particular branch of philosophy more hospitable to all visitors.

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