TRANSCRIPT

Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa

2024 Lebowitz Prize: A Discussion on the "Dehumanization and its Discontents"

This special episode of Key Conversations is joined by Kate Manne, Associate Professor of Philosophy at Cornell University, and David Livingstone Smith, Professor of Philosophy at the University of New England. Each year, the Lebowitz Prize is presented to a pair of philosophers who hold contrasting views of an important philosophical question that is of current interest both to the field and to an educated public audience. The professors discuss the topic for the 2024 Lebowitz Prize, which is the "Dehumanization and its Discontents"

Fred Lawrence: This podcast episode was generously funded by two anonymous donors. If you would like to support the podcast in similar ways, please contact Hadley Kelly at hkelly@pbk.org. Thanks for listening. Hello and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. Since 2018, we have welcomed leading thinkers, visionaries, and artists to our podcast. These individuals have shaped our collective understanding of some of today's most pressing and consequential matters, in addition to sharing stories with us about their scholarly and personal journeys. Many of our guests are Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars who travel the country to our Phi Beta Kappa chapters where they spend two days on campus and present free public lectures. We invite you to attend. For more information about Visiting Scholars' lectures, please visit pbk.org.

In today's special episode of Key Conversations, it's my pleasure to welcome the winners of the Lebowitz Prize for Philosophy, Dr. Kate Manne and Dr. David Livingstone Smith. Kate Manne is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Cornell University, and David

Livingstone Smith is a Professor of Philosophy at the University of New England. These two scholars are the 2024 recipients of the Lebowitz Prize for Philosophical Achievement and Contribution awarded by the Phi Beta Kappa Society, in conjunction with our partners at the American Philosophical Association, the APA, for recognizing their outstanding achievement in the field of philosophy. Each year, the Lebowitz Prize is presented to a pair of highly regarded philosophers who hold contrasting views on an important philosophical question. Our 2024 winners' topic is “Dehumanization and its Discontents”, which they will present at the 2025 APA Pacific Division meeting in San Francisco. We're excited to be with them here today to talk about their respective viewpoints on their topic. Welcome professors.

David Livingsto...: Thank you.

Kate Manne: Thanks for having us.

Fred Lawrence: You are both among those philosophers who produce work that is both on the highest level of academic philosophical rigor and simultaneously accessible and interesting to a broader public, the people we once called the serious general reader, and I guess we have to expand that now to the serious general listener. We're joined today by two top-flight philosophers used to talking to philosophers, but also to the serious general listener who are our listeners on Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. Let's dive in. David, let me start with you. You have three particularly important books on dehumanization, *Less than Human* in 2011, *On Inhumanity* in 2020, and *Making Monsters* in 2021.

Taken together, these arguably constitute the most thorough and compelling exploration of dehumanization ever conducted by any philosopher. I'm particularly struck by the wide range of interdisciplinary sources that you draw on psychology and history, to be sure, but also sociology, political science, even computer science and military analysis. Now, if I understand the thesis, it's based on the view that the essence of dehumanization lies in conceiving of others as less than human. My first question is, do I have that roughly right, and can you take us through the development of your understanding of dehumanization?

David Livingsto...: You have it very right, not merely roughly. But of course, in that simple sentence, there's a lot to unpack. *Making Monsters* is the result of nearly 20 years of thinking and finding errors in my own views and trying to correct them, so it's very difficult to give you a summary of my position, but let me try. Let me try. There are lots of ways that people harm and denigrate one another, and I think we really should make distinctions between the sorts of phenomena that come under that broad umbrella.

Dehumanization is one of those, it's not all of those, so I propose a very narrow conception of dehumanization. It's very important to be clear about what one means by this term because it's used in lots and lots and lots of different ways. Even in the

academy, it's used in lots of different ways. I understand dehumanization as the attitude of conceiving of others as less than human creatures. Those words are chosen very carefully.

Conceiving of others, I see dehumanization as fundamentally a psychological phenomenon, but it can't be understood entirely in terms of psychology. This is my critique of the work done by psychologists on this topic because I understand dehumanization as a psychological response to political forces. We cannot just look at what's going on in people's heads. We have to look at what people's heads are in to understand dehumanization. There are various forms of dehumanization. In my view, in the most toxic form of dehumanization, what goes on is somewhat paradoxical, and it's this, that the dehumanizer has a contradictory picture of those whom they dehumanize in their own minds. They see them as subhuman creatures, dangerous subhuman creatures typically, because generally speaking, populations are racialized before they're dehumanized, and when populations are racialized, they are again typically conceived of as physically threatening, as murderers, as rapists, and so on.

That's on one hand. On the other hand, they're seen as human beings because we just can't help responding to other members of our species as human beings, at least if we're up close to them, if we're encountering them. This, I hold, transforms them into monstrous or demonic beings in the eyes of their dehumanizers, which in turn leads to the most terrible atrocities that human beings have ever inflicted on one another. I mean, that's basically it. There are a lot of bells and whistles, but I think that gives the listener a general idea of what I'm out about.

Fred Lawrence: In your view, does dehumanization require a social context? What I mean by that is that, in a hate crime context, somebody could have a prejudice against a group, but if there's no social context for it, we wouldn't necessarily call it a hate crime. It would be sort of an odd peccadillo that was the animus that was driving somebody's behavior, that the term of a bias crime means that it is picking up on a societal trend that they are channeling in their behavior. Does that map on to what you're talking about in dehumanization?

David Livingsto...: Yes, yes. Dehumanization shouldn't be understood individualistically. It's a sort of ideological structure, and it's collective. The victims of dehumanization are a collective, and the perpetrators are also collective.

Fred Lawrence: Kate, let me turn to you now. Your 2018 book *Down Girl* is arguably the single most important 21st century book on misogyny, followed up by *Entitled: How Male Privilege Hurts Women*. Now, I took a chance at trying to articulate David's thesis. Let me see what I can do with yours. As I understand the work, and particularly I'm thinking of *Down Girl* here, you argue that misogyny is not a matter of hating women or dehumanizing women, it rather concerns the maintenance of male dominance: controlling, policing, punishing, exiling women who challenge male dominance, and

perhaps even rewarding women who fulfill submissive roles in response to male dominance. Let's start with the thesis, then an exposition of some common ground, and then we'll get into where there are different positions that you have.

Kate Manne: That was a very nice précis of my views about misogyny, which really depart from the observation that there is this common, what I call, perhaps tendentiously naive conception of misogyny about, which says that misogyny is a kind of individual hatred in the hearts of men towards girls and women. It's also meant to be a very general universal hatred towards any and every girl or woman, which I argue would make misogyny a very rare and puzzling phenomenon, because the nature of patriarchy is to socialize girls and women to be very pleasing, to serve at least designated privileged men, and to often be the kind of person who would be really handy to have around. Why hate the hand that feeds and soothes you, to put it in a nutshell. What I argue is that misogyny is better conceptualized from the point of view of the victim or target rather than the perpetrator, and that the way we should think about it is misogyny is a hatred or hostility that women face, not what men feel, and that hatred or hostility has a particular function, and that is to police and enforce patriarchal norms and expectations.

Because of that, it's more common, not that this is the only way misogyny plays out, but it's more common for a woman who is subverting or violating patriarchal norms and expectations in some way to become the target of misogynistic treatment and attitudes. Now, I think one crucial point of common ground between David and I is that human cruelty needs explanation and clarity in order to address it fully. One of the reasons I so deeply respect David and why I wanted to engage with his work is he's someone who really cares about cruelty, brutality, man's inhumanity to man, to use a stock phrase, and to the kind of philosophical clarity that we need in order to even begin to tackle it. I think that, among many points of commonality, we're kind of united in a moral sensibility and a philosophical bent, that says we need to take this seriously and we need to face some of the most confronting human behavior in order to philosophically unpack it and have a chance of addressing it.

Fred Lawrence: Let me jump in there for a second. The work that I've done in the criminal civil rights area and the hate crimes area, no one would ever call that moral philosophy. They would call it applied moral philosophy. I draw on other philosophers for that, but I don't hold myself out as a philosopher. But what you just said sounds a lot like what I and other legal academics do, so how do you distinguish your project from one that is overtly applied?

Kate Manne: I don't, really. I'm never that interested in boundaries, either disciplinary or interdisciplinary. I am someone who thinks of human cruelty as actually very ordinary, painfully ordinary, and often at stake in very mundane human interpersonal relationships, that I think begins to put pressure on an idea that I sometimes do see, in

both the dehumanization literature generally and in David's work in particular, which is this idea that people have difficulty inflicting violence in up-close-and-personal context with recognized human beings. My basic thought is look at domestic violence, look at the ubiquity of rape, look at the way girls and women are treated historically, and that becomes to me very implausible.

I think the idea that there is a kind of repression or dampening of aggressive impulses when you see that someone is much like you is a hopeful thought and one that is not actually borne out by the data on how girls and women face brutality from some of their nearest and dearest, as in things like intimate partner violence, as in sexual assault within marriage. These are unfortunately phenomena that are pretty common and I think are well-explained by pretty ordinary quotidian interpersonal moral mechanisms.

Fred Lawrence: David, obviously, this comes back to you. First, I want to ask you, if you would also, to respond to where do you and Kate agree? And then I want you to have at it where the problem that she has raised for your approach.

David Livingsto...: We both are concerned with real world problems. We're concerned with suffering, we're concerned with life and death, and we're also concerned with communicating with many people. Neither of us are writing our books for 12 people to split hairs over. In doing that, we have to leave the tidy, comfortable space of logic and engage with what people do. Making conceptual distinctions is great, it's wonderful, but in engaging with the world, we have to go beyond making conceptual distinctions, and really look at what's going on, and use our philosophical sensibilities to try to make sense of it. We're also dealing with things that conventional empirical methods have very limited applicability to. I mean, we can get something out of them, but we are needing to interpret the facts of the world, the facts of human cruelty and oppression and bigotry, in ways that a psychologist can't do in their lab and a sociologist can't do either. I'll quote Adolf Grünbaum, a noted philosopher of science, who once said to me, "David, you're a philosopher who's not afraid to get his hands dirty." I think Kate and I are just real okay with getting our hands dirty.

Fred Lawrence: Kate, let me see if I can square the circle here. Is gender and gender-motivated antisocial behavior just different from racially-motivated antisocial behavior, and is that what we're talking about?

Kate Manne: One of my hesitations about this is methodological, which is that once you see that really horrible things can be done with no attribution of a nonhuman essence or a subhuman essence to a person, then I think that puts explanatory pressure on someone like David. The other issue is metaphysical. Think about the thesis of intersectionality and the fact that gender intersects with every other major form of classification and oppression. Some of David's target phenomena are the most brutal forms of antisemitism, as in the Holocaust, the most brutal forms of racism of an anti-

Black kind, as in slavery in certain eras. The thing about this is and the thing I keep coming back to in my own mind is, well, of course there are Jewish women who were raped en masse during the Holocaust. There are, of course, Black women who were raped en masse during American slavery. Some of what I worry about is that if we separate out gender and race and say that they're subject to different analyses, what do we make of the intersection of gender and race here?

I mean, we can either say that the dehumanization thesis applies to, for example, Jewish women or it doesn't. If it does apply, then I think that there is something a bit puzzling about the fact that rape is the characteristic form of much of the brutality, because if you see someone as a monster, tangling with them sexually is a little bit hard to square for me, especially since David's really vivid description of the vision of a monster is someone you're simultaneously fascinated with but repulsed by and want to avoid or exterminate, so it doesn't really make sense of rape to me, which again, this isn't widely known about the Holocaust still, but people who include both of our ancestors for the record were if they were female especially, they're not exclusively subject to sexual mistreatment.

Now, if, on the other hand of the dilemma or the horn of the dilemma, we have the idea that Jewish women, say, were not dehumanized proper, then that is a funny fit for the data point in David's thought, that a subhuman essence is ascribed to a whole racialized class and would presumably need to be passed on from mother to child. That's the dilemma in my Lebowitz lecture that I actually end on. For him, again, it's a question. I don't know the answer to it, but I certainly think it can't be as simple as, well, gender is one thing, race is another with respect to dehumanization because of this intersection of the two.

Fred Lawrence: David, let me just even raise the stakes further. We know, from tragic recent history, that the issue of rape as a form of war crime has become all too common, and so the other kinds of war crimes that, if you will, are more understandable, no less heinous, but understandable, but Kate's point is of all the things to do, looting, vandalism, theft, even murder, but rape involves this strange, impossible intimacy of the most macabre evil kind. How does that map on to your thesis?

David Livingsto...: Well, I think in those cases of rape, which, again, I'm glad Kate mentioned this, it was actually very common even in the extermination camps in Treblinka, which in Treblinka, there weren't even selections on a ramp. The big trains would come in, 6,000 people would be then marshaled into gas chambers, and women were regularly dragged away by the guards, the Ukrainian guards and the German guards, and raped. I think this actually exemplifies this odd combination of fascination and contempt that I'm trying so hard to formulate. There is a difference though. If we look at Nazi visual propaganda, antisemitic visual propaganda of which we have quite a bit, it rarely features women. It's quite unusual. There are a handful of examples, and in none of

those examples are women portrayed with subhuman characteristics, whereas there are numerous examples of Jewish men portrayed in that way. There certainly is a gender issue going on here.

The same, by the way, in the South, with victims of lynching and representations of them in the press, and in popular literature, and so on as dehumanized. Victims of lynching in the South were at least 97% men. I say at least because there are a certain number where the reports don't specify the gender of the victim. They were regularly represented as monstrous subhuman predators, so yet again, there's a gendered component. But in the specific case of monsters, it veers towards the male, and I think the reason for that is that one of the necessary conditions for this, what I call demonizing dehumanization, is that the victim poses a physical threat, that the victim is physically dangerous. That's where we get the rhetoric of the rapist, and the murderer, and so on. There's lots of interesting stuff to explore here.

Kate Manne: I find that fascinating, and I have a different impulse in explaining it, which I don't know if it's the right one, but roughly speaking, I think that a lot of what white supremacy protects is designated male interests, and both in terms of, in very different ways, anti-Black racism and antisemitism involved a sense of white men as threatened by Black men and Jewish men respectively, although for different reasons based on different noxious racial stereotypes. In the case of Jewish men, for example, it was often the idea of Jewish men being too clever, and cunning, and brilliant even, again, like very human attributes. In the case of Black men, it was often this more idea of a threatening physical force.

But because of that, what I tend to think about dehumanizing rhetoric and propaganda is that it's a fairly superficial rhetorical or piece of iconography that tries to justify forms of brutal mistreatment that would otherwise be utterly unacceptable by making salient the idea that these people are threatening to your interests, by depicting them as, for example, a rat, or a beast, or a demon. I tend to think of that as not meant or taken literally, but as a vivid way of saying these men are threatening to the designated interests that matter. This is meant to be an alternative way of explaining what I agree are very interesting and gendered data.

David Livingsto...: A lot of the Nazi, this is really interesting actually, antisemitic propaganda accused Jewish men of being rapists. It's very, very common.

Kate Manne: That's interesting.

David Livingsto...: What's also very common, rapists and pimps actually, is that the Black men are represented with some kind of African features. There's this sort of hybridity in the Nazi mind between the Black man and the Jewish man, so they're not as entirely separate as one might think.

Fred Lawrence: This is Phi Beta Kappa, after all, and we take books seriously. People who've listened to this, my guess is, are bimodal, those who are serious general listeners who are interested in these kinds of questions and those with some expert knowledge in philosophy. I wonder if each of you has a recommendation or two for the general listener, but also for the more experienced philosopher with training who is particularly interested in these questions. In other words, a philosopher who doesn't necessarily have a special interest in this particular area.

David Livingsto...: A couple of really great books that intersect philosophy and history of the sort that concerns me, one is Johann Chapoutot's *The Law of Blood: Thinking and Acting as a Nazi*, which is really about Nazi legal philosophy. It's a fascinating and very, very penetrating book, and I learned a lot from it. Another is Claudia Koonz's *The Nazi Conscience*, a classic, a wonderful, wonderful book. If one is interested in racialization, and I see antisemitism as a form of racism and therefore involving racialization and dehumanization, both those books are very relevant.

Fred Lawrence: Kate, do you have a couple of other recommendations you'd like to give us?

Kate Manne: Yeah, for sure. One book I really love for a more general readership is *Thick: And Other Essays* by Tressie McMillan Cottom, who is a sociologist and New York Times columnist and just one of my favorite writers. I think that she's done a huge amount to illuminate misogynoir, which is the intersection of misogyny and anti-Black racism in the U.S. context. She is just a real fount of wisdom on everything, from body size, to beauty norms to intellectual cultures, exclusion of Black voices, and a whole lot more besides.

Another book is Talia Mae Bettcher's *Beyond Personhood: An Essay in Trans Philosophy*, and I've been teaching Talia's work for years. Broadly speaking, she argues that trans folks, particularly trans women, are targeted, again, with moralistic mechanisms, the sense that they're an evil deceiver of privileged men, and that puts a particular target on the backs, tragically, of trans women. Either that or they're a kind of pretender to womanhood in a way that trans-inclusive feminists like me categorically reject, I think. Trans women are absolutely women. I think Talia Mae Bettcher is just a wonderful source for understanding the excitement and the promise of trans philosophy, and also thinking about some of the most vulnerable people in America today from the perspective of those who have lived in a terribly transphobic world and are doing really brilliant philosophy, to try to illuminate that predicament.

Fred Lawrence: Thank you both for that and for this whole incredibly thought-provoking and important conversation. I'm struck by the fact that the Lebowitz Prize is for a pair of highly-regarded philosophers who hold contrasting views on an important philosophical question. I think it is fair to say that that is often taken to mean important philosophical questions for philosophers. That is never the way in which I have taken it. I think importance stands on its own and is an important philosophical question for all of us. It's hard to imagine a more important philosophical question than the one that you

have both wrestled with. Thank you for the work that you have done. Congratulations on being recipients of the 2024 Lebowitz Prize, and thank you so much for joining me today on Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa.

David Livingsto...: Thank you.

Kate Manne: Thanks for having us.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast is produced by Phantom Center Media and Entertainment. Kojin Tashiro is lead producer and mixed this episode, Michelle Baker is editor and co-producer, and Hadley Kelley is the Phi Beta Kappa producer on the show. Our theme song is Back to Back by Yan Perchuk. To learn more about the work of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and our Visiting Scholar Program, please visit pbk.org. Thanks for listening. I'm Fred Lawrence. Until next time.

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