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LETTER

Values matter in science, so do facts: Response to Gingras

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Following my letter to *QSS* (Siler, 2021), Yves Gingras (2022) responded with a variety of bad faith arguments, *ad hominem* attacks, and hyperbole. Gingras repeatedly distorted what I actually wrote, then attacked the distortion. Straw men might be convenient interlocutors, and can provide ballast for hot takes, but seldom yield intellectual progress. In his letter, Gingras broadly posited a false dichotomy, with "rational," apolitical stalwarts (including himself) protecting the integrity of modern science against an incursion of hysterical, moralizing social justice warriors hostile to unpopular truths. Not only does this perspective betray a facile understanding of modern scientific communication, it also entails the fallacious notion that scientific empirics and underlying values are mutually exclusive.

Gingras made a baseless accusation that my letter exhibited "ignorance of the nature of publishing," since I criticized reviewers of Strumia (2021) for refusing to anonymously share their peer review reports. However, Gingras omitted the important detail from Waltman's (2021: fn1) editorial that reviewers of Strumia (2021) were asked to anonymously publish the reports. While the reviewers were within their rights to refuse, I stand by my opinion that this was a cowardly and unproductive response, especially since open science is a foundational value of *QSS*, and an open peer review program has since been implemented at the journal. Incredibly, Gingras doubled down with farfetched, scattershot accusations of "character assassination." Despite Gingras' hyperbolic accusations, nobody's character was put in peril by my letter.

Next, Gingras added a 900-word tangent on the self-retraction of a 2020 *Nature Communications* article on gender and mentorship, which is largely irrelevant to my letter. Notably, I took no normative position on that article or retraction, beyond suggesting that open peer review can be beneficial with controversial articles. However, I will suggest to Gingras that when authors self-retract an article—forestalling further empirical scrutiny—public proclamations that empirics are nevertheless correct should be taken with a grain of salt.

Gingras used further misinterpretations of my letter to fuel attacks that I made "bizarre" comparisons between Strumia (2021) and other controversial social science articles. I invoked analogous cases of controversial articles to provide historical evidence that editorial philosophies that promote "diverse" and "controversial" viewpoints for their own sake can entail dangerous slippery slopes. The bothsidesism espoused in Waltman's editorial can potentially be used as justification to publish *anything*. Gingras went as far to argue that we should congratulate *QSS* for providing a platform to debate Strumia (2021). By this logic, should we congratulate the former *Lancet* editors for creating space to "rationally debate" links between vaccines and autism, after they published the infamous Wakefield article in 1998? If someone is willing and able to meaningfully defend Strumia (2021) from the widespread theoretical and empirical

criticisms it received, that can convince reasonable people. However, at the very least, one needs to do better than merely assert "we need diverse and controversial perspectives" or simply dismiss critics as sanctimonious, politically correct ideologues with ulterior motives.

Gingras also argued that contemporary academia exhibits confirmation biases towards politically fashionable research. I agree that this sometimes occurs; in some academic fields and communities more than others. In my letter, I explicitly stated my opinion that political biases in the social sciences—which tend to skew socially liberal—can be intellectual and sociopolitical liabilities. However, betraying a lack of reflexivity, Gingras lobbed accusations of "bullying" and "confirmation bias" without meaningful evidence. Further, Gingras appears to be unconcerned with—or oblivious to—the obvious parallel possibility that someone who publicly expressed opinions including, "physics was invented and built by men" (Strumia, n.d.), and that modern notions of gender equality are "blind to human biology practiced as in the plains of Africa thousands of years ago" (Strumia, n.d.) might himself be prone to confirmation bias, particularly regarding gender issues.

As a professional institution, *QSS*—or any legitimate academic journal—requires quality control of both theory and empirics. I certainly did not argue that there should be political litmus tests for academic evaluations or editorial decisions. There are many competent published articles that challenge or contradict orthodoxies on gender and inequality in science and elsewhere, from a variety of theoretical and political perspectives. Strumia (2021) even cited some of them. Most or all of those articles were published without creating widespread backlash or getting debunked by members of the relevant journal's editorial board. Subsequent to publication, empirical criticisms of Strumia (2021) have been extensive and thorough, while defenses have been paltry. Quality control and social values are important to any professional institution (Abbott, 1988). In academia, these values include academic standards (theoretical, methodological, empirical), as well as professional and social responsibilities. After *QSS* published an incendiary and heavily criticized article, and the strongest defense of the article made by the editor-in-chief (and MIT Press) was an appeal to the virtues of controversy and "ideological diversity," it is reasonable to question what the values and standards of *QSS* currently are, and what they should be. Asking such questions is professionally and scientifically vital, as opposed to indicative of social conformity, political correctness, or other bogeymen Gingras perceives.[1]

Professional and intellectual values might often be nebulous and contested, but they are a core part of any academic or scientific pursuit and thus should be monitored and discussed. While there will inevitably be disagreements on values and other normative matters in science, engaging in good faith and sincerely listening to others is a necessary start for productive dialogue. I hope others in the *QSS* community—and beyond—are willing to engage in such discussions.

[1] An especially addled sentence from Gingras: *"I will not comment on the fact that the very speed at which the petition was signed probably means that most of the signatories never analyzed the data and were simply reacting emotionally."*

1. Gingras says he is not going to comment but continues with a rambling sentence afterwards. Within the *same sentence*, he *both* says he will *not* comment and also *does* comment.
2. Gingras boldly asserts a "fact," but there are no facts in the sentence. This is just Gingras' personal opinion about what he thinks what the diffusion of a particular petition "probably means."

COMPETING INTERESTS

No competing interests.

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