

ARTICLE SECTION

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Intellectual Asceticism and Hatred of the Human, the Animal, and the Material

Abstract

Friedrich Nietzsche associated philosophical asceticism with “hatred of the human, and even more of the animal, and more still of the material”: with aversion to life. Given the prevalent view that philosophy is anthropocentric and idealizes the human, Nietzsche’s remark about philosophical hatred of the human is unexpected. In this paper, I investigate what Nietzsche’s remark implies for philosophical claims of human uniqueness. What is the meaning of the opposition between human and animal, if the opposition somehow expresses hatred also of the human? The investigation leads to an inquiry into metaphysics as an intellectual kind of magic, and into the notion of “power over life” as it connects to intellectual asceticism. Finally, I relate Nietzsche’s remarks on ascetic ideals to Donna Haraway’s questioning of the Anthropocene as a story to think with. I propose that the dualism of the story, the idea of a conflict between Humanity and Nature, can be seen as a feature of the metaphysical attitude that *life* is to be mastered through escaping from it into the purity of *thinking*.

I now believe that it would be right to begin my book with remarks about metaphysics as a kind of magic.

—Wittgenstein, “Remarks on Frazer’s *Golden Bough*”

1. Introduction

This paper is about power, but not about ordinary power *in* life. It is about more transcendent power *over life itself*, which may appear achievable if we discipline ourselves intellectually. Naming this self-discipline “intellectual asceticism”, I explore how it can drive claims of human uniqueness, and attract us to imagine the Anthropocene dualistically as a collision between Humanity and Nature. My starting point is this remark by Friedrich Nietzsche on ascetic ideals in philosophy:

We can no longer conceal from ourselves *what* is expressed by all that willing which has taken its direction from the ascetic ideal: this hatred of the human, and even more of the animal, and more still of the material [...]. (Nietzsche 1969: 162)

Nietzsche’s remark gives rise to a problem that will drive my investigation: What is the meaning of the philosophical opposition between human and animal, if the opposition somehow expresses hatred also of the human? Here is what I will do: First, I summarize Nietzsche’s remarks on ascetic ideals in philosophy. Thereafter, I discuss what these remarks imply for philosophical claims of human uniqueness and for intellectual aspirations to power over life. Finally, I relate Nietzsche’s remarks to Donna Haraway’s (2016) questioning of the Anthropocene as a story to think with.

2. Nietzsche on Ascetic Ideals in Philosophy

Nietzsche may be an anti-metaphysician, but he is not an anti-philosopher. As I read him, he aims at freeing philosophy from metaphysics: from the lure of a “real world behind the apparent one”. This is reflected in his remarks on what it means when a

philosopher is attracted by ascetic ideals, such as living in poverty and solitude. The analysis is double-sided in that ascetic ideals both support philosophy and invite metaphysics. There is nothing wrong with ascetic ideals in philosophy, as I understand Nietzsche. They are vital conditions of philosophizing, “in the case of philosophers and scholars something like a sense and instinct for the most favorable preconditions of higher spirituality” (Nietzsche 1969: 97). Simply put, it is difficult to think your own thoughts if you have to compete with others and be dependent on their recognition. A certain asceticism helps you to think your own bold thoughts. This is “the way” of philosophy. Nietzsche seems to know the value of ascetic ideals from experience and he starts his diagnosis with the supportive function of asceticism in the lives of philosophers, and probably also in his own life. “What, then, is the meaning of the ascetic ideal in the case of a philosopher? My answer is [...]: the philosopher sees in it an optimum condition for the highest and boldest spirituality and smiles – he does not deny ‘existence’, he rather affirms *his* existence [...].” (Nietzsche 1969: 107-108).

Philosophizing means questioning what usually is taken for granted. It means contemplating possibilities that typically are not considered. It means criticizing what generally is believed or esteemed. A philosopher’s inclination is to stop and think where others move ahead. Such meditative practices – questioning, contemplating, criticizing, clarifying, thinking – are invigorating for philosophers.

Like all activities, philosophizing has its own favorable conditions for which philosophers develop an instinctual appetite. Just as a politician instinctively approaches the crowd and wants its attention, a philosopher instinctively avoids all that; avoids fame and career as dangers next to marriage, and values poverty and solitude as means to lifelong, independent thinking:

Ascetic ideals reveal so many bridges to *independence* that a philosopher is bound to rejoice and clap his hands when he hears the story of all those resolute men who one day said No to all servitude and went into some desert [...]. (Nietzsche 1969: 107)

Nietzsche emphasizes the merely instrumental function of ascetic ideals and instincts: their function as *bridges* to independence. The

reason the philosopher values poverty and solitude, or willingly accepts them, is that they are means towards the goal of questioning, contemplating, criticizing, clarifying, thinking. Asceticism is healthy in philosophy, I assume Nietzsche would say, as long as it stays instrumental, as long as it supports independence and time for contemplation. In such a spirit, Ludwig Wittgenstein (CV: 91e) wrote, “This is how philosophers should salute each other: ‘Take your time!’ [‘Laß Dir Zeit!’]”. Wittgenstein (Z: 455) described the connection between philosophy and independence in these words: “The philosopher is not a citizen of any community of ideas. That is what makes him into a philosopher.”

Nietzsche describes three steps through which ascetic ideals historically lost their merely instrumental function and gave rise to what he calls “ascetic self-misunderstanding” (1969: 116). I believe it is this self-misunderstanding that he associates with “hatred of the human, and even more of the animal, and more still of the material”. Inspired and enlightened by Peter Westergaard’s (2016) discussion of Nietzsche’s remarks, I briefly summarize these three steps towards ascetic self-misunderstanding.

First step: Just as politicians, shopkeepers, and business leaders tend to generalize and advocate their particular virtues as virtue *as such*, philosophers soon lost sight of the merely instrumental function of their ascetic ideals, and began to advocate them more absolutely as the highest virtues. This meant turning philosophy into an obedient servant of the ascetic ideals, as if the purpose of philosophy was to demonstrate ascetic ideals as general truths of existence. Our sensuality really does lead us astray: not only when philosophers need some peace and quiet to think, but universally in life. Truth demands curbing our ill-constituted human nature through ascetic regime, philosophers began to preach. Instead of functioning as a bridge to independence, asceticism became for philosophers a demand to accommodate.

Second step: Philosophers’ drive to doubt and deny, to compare and counter-balance, to analyze and investigate, to be objective and neutral, was in opposition to social demands to embrace morality as absolute truth. This tension gave rise to lack of self-confidence in philosophers, even to bad conscience: they questioned what they,

too, could see as sacrosanct. Philosophers sought the solution to this painful situation in downplaying the socially suspect, questioning nature of philosophy. The ultimate aim of philosophy is not that of questioning morality, but only that of releasing a few drops of critical acid on morality to discover its hidden foundations and limits. Philosophers lacked confidence to philosophize all the way through and became instead edifying system builders who “rigorously” secured morality, rather than understood it as a problem.

Third step: Because of philosophers’ contemplative and inactive nature, they were met with social mistrust. Moreover, since philosophers belonged to society and understood this mistrust only too well, they doubted themselves. In order for philosophy to achieve social status, in the eyes of society and in the eyes of the philosophers themselves, philosophers followed in the footsteps of previous contemplative figures like priests and magicians. Priests and magicians already knew how ascetic practices could inspire fear and reverence. Now philosophers too began to foreground their asceticism. Only thus could philosophy acquire social status: by turning the ascetic ideals into an awe-inspiring disguise, in which not least the philosophers themselves believed.

To put it vividly: the *ascetic priest* provided until the most modern times the repulsive and gloomy caterpillar form in which alone the philosopher could live and creep about. (Nietzsche 1969: 116)

These, then, are the three steps through which the drive to philosophize almost immediately misunderstood itself, according to Nietzsche. Ascetic ideals serve philosophy, functioning as bridges to independence and time for reflection. However, philosophers soon acted as advocates of the ascetic ideals, and thereby became servants of the ideals. Moreover, they handled their self-doubt as uncomfortable questioners of the society to which they belonged by presenting their asceticism as “intellectual rigor”, through which morality could be secured rather than problematized. Finally, they sought social status by identifying philosophy with its terrifying ascetic disguise: as if denying the world, as if hating life and doubting the senses, constituted the philosophical attitude as such. Ascetic self-misunderstanding took over philosophy.

Historians often point out how historical conditions shaped universal philosophical claims, which thereby, in retrospect, become suspect. Nietzsche is unique, I think, in suggesting that philosophy *itself* has conditions as a human activity – forms of asceticism – that shaped not only universal claims, but also the philosophical attitude. When philosophers exaggerated these instrumental conditions as the highest virtues, they deformed “the way of philosophy” and philosophy’s attitude to life, which is not necessarily unloving. Ascetic self-misunderstanding crept into philosophy, deceptively displayed as “the philosophical attitude as such”. Let us now look at this attitude, which I believe Nietzsche associated with “hatred of the human, and even more of the animal, and more still of the material”. How does it relate to philosophical claims of human uniqueness and to aspirations to intellectual power over life?

3. Ascetic Self-Misunderstanding and Human Uniqueness

It has become almost a habit to accuse philosophy of anthropocentrism, of idealizing the human. If we are to believe Nietzsche, however, the philosophical attitude as such means *hatred* of the human, along with hatred of the animal and the material. This gives rise to a problem: what is the meaning of the hierarchic opposition between human and animal if the opposition expresses hatred also of the human? Is not the human elevated by philosophers as the being that has what the animal lacks, or is poor in?

To understand this, we need to recall that philosophers, unlike politicians, were not jovial fellows happily drawn towards the crowd and to its social virtues. The virtues philosophers were inclined to advocate were the more secret ones of their own philosophical asceticism, which *separated* them from society. They felt no instinctive calling to act as advocates of the rest of humankind, or of what Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston (1995: 10) call the “exclusive club of the Human”. They acted on behalf of their ascetic ideals. Moreover, if they presented their intellectual efforts as foundations of human society (when they really desired independence), it was because they lacked self-confidence and did not dare to question morality all the way through. Finally, if they proclaimed their philosophies as if all humanity should pay attention (when they really longed for their

desert), it was because they did not trust themselves and did not know how to relate to society as philosophers. Therefore, they hid in a priestly disguise.

The philosophical notion of the human hardly idealized the variegated humanoid collective, if Nietzsche is right. It idealized ascetic self-misunderstanding, put forward as the essence of the human. Only by whispering into our ears, “we are all essentially thinkers”, did philosophers dare to step into society: as advocates of a *philosophy club* that offered potential membership to all humans. However, not to rocks, trees or horses, and perhaps not even to women, children, slaves, the uneducated masses, or busy city people. Not even philosophers could count on full membership. Martin Heidegger, for example, associated human essence with his own thinking, which he suggested only five or six humans in the world could master.¹ Were they more numerous they would be a crowd! Philosophy was anthropocentric only on the surface. Deep down it was much more exclusive. It was “ascetic-centrally thought-centric”, making the mass of merely potential human members dependent on their master thinker, like a congregation on their priest. In fact, it is questionable whether any bodily being can be “truly human”, since human essence seems to withdraw into the purity of (the right kind of) thinking.

In short: To understand what philosophical claims of human uniqueness mean, we need to understand the unique situation of the ascetic philosopher, which is not a happy union with society. Through the hierarchic opposition between human and animal, philosophers transformed their social insecurity as philosophers into a rhetorical weapon that they aimed at their human audiences, whose humanity was threatened rather than supported (Segerdahl 2015). Nietzsche speaks of a denial “of all the rest of mankind: all of that is mere ‘people’” (1968: 35). That is how what appears to be an idealization of the human actually expresses hatred of the human. The human is elevated not as human, but as potential thinker. Those who do not bother to develop the potential remain mere “people”.

¹ YouTube: “Heidegger im Interview mit einem buddhistischen Mönch”. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hFSWDnD24Mc> (accessed 17 June 2018).

The animal and the material are co-figures of this rhetoric aimed at human audiences. In order to threaten the humanity of these audiences, and simultaneously affirm it in idealized, ascetic-centric form, the animal and the material had to be hated even more than the human: hated for *utterly* lacking that which the master thinker offers humanity as its potential, but oh so pure, essence.

4. Metaphysics as an Intellectual Kind of Magic

Let us now, in the light of these remarks about how ascetic self-misunderstanding deformed philosophy, consider a notion mentioned earlier, namely, the notion of power over life. Having power over life means having extra-ordinary, magical powers. An agricultural people knows perfectly well when it is time for sowing, but a happy result may also require friendly relations with the hidden powers of life. A ritual practice that promises such extra-ordinary friendship is not on the same level as other practices in life, such as sowing. Through its connections to the forces of life itself, the ritual practice surpasses all ordinary activities. Nietzsche speaks of a “power-will that wants to become master not over something in life but over life itself, over its most profound, powerful and basic conditions” (1969: 117-118).

I think it is easy to see how the displayed asceticism of the priest, of the magician, and of the philosopher, supports the appearance of power over life. By living in celibacy, for example, ascetic leader figures demonstrated that they, although human, were not completely submerged in human society. Their innermost attention was directed elsewhere: at something transcendent, at something that is so important that it *justifies* living in celibacy.

There is an old joke about displaying asceticism, or failing to do so (I read it in Don Quixote). Some travellers, thirsty for wine, go to visit a hermit. They knock on the hermit’s door, which is opened by a female hermit. The female hermit explains that the male hermit is not at home and will not return until late in the evening. There is no wine unfortunately, but if the visitors are willing to wait for the hermit’s return, there is plenty of water. They leave. We may laugh at this scene not only because of a social norm that hermits should not have domestic partners, but live alone. We may laugh also

because hermits should not be ordinary fellows, living ordinary lives. Ordinariness destroys the connection to transcendent power, in this case, the connection to God. A jovial hermit who fails to display asceticism loses his divine aura.

Philosophy, too, made pretense to power over life. The difference is that philosophers did not speak of controlling spiritual powers, as magicians did, or of having direct contact with the most powerful being, as priests did. *Philosophers described the realm with which they connected in intellectual terms.* They promised mastery of pure concepts, of pure categories, of pure essences, of pure ideas and principles: in short, of pure norms. The adjective “pure” means here: pure from the ordinary, pure from that which goes on between us here and now, pure from life. Metaphysics is, I believe, an intellectual kind of magic. It presumes that the most profound, powerful and basic conditions of life are accessible through *intellectual self-discipline.*

I have elsewhere investigated how the life-penetrating metaphysical gaze, which beholds truth behind appearance, appears in philosophy as a misinterpretation of ordinary normative practices *in* life (Segerdahl, submitted). I cannot summarize that connection between normativity and metaphysics here. Joking is faster. The following joke is Jacques Derrida’s. It is about another type of hermit, a Cartesian pure thinker. However, it is also about breathing, ordinary breathing. Let us participate in Derrida’s version of the *cogito ergo sum* ritual. A breathing thinker thinks:

“I breathe therefore I am”, as such, does not produce any certainty. By contrast, “I think that I am breathing” is always certain and indubitable, even if I am mistaken. And therefore I can deduce “therefore I am” from “I think that I am breathing”. (Derrida 2008: 86)

A certainty that survives “even if I am mistaken”: even if I am dead. That is magical certainty, transcending life and its deplorable dependency on breathing. Derrida makes us laugh just when we were supposed to be dead serious about Descartes’ intellectual kind of magic.

What the joke reveals, in the blink of an eye, is the following. The Cartesian Mind/Body dualism hides a more personal dualism in René Descartes as philosophical ascetic. We have already encountered that dualism in the ascetic practices of priests, hermits

and magicians. It is the opposition between life itself, and that which supposedly has power over life: the normative *source* of the order of life. In their meditations, treatises, and essays, philosophers tried to control this source intellectually. The one who controlled the source, the one who intellectually sorted it out and got the twelve categories of pure reason right, so to speak, had power over life. He was the magician of the intellect, the master thinker on whom the happiness of humankind depends.²

Jacques Derrida's joke works like the joke about the hermit. It destroys the magical aura of the metaphysician. What destroys the aura is imagining a living thinker who *thinks* that he is breathing, as if that *thinking* made him independent of breathing: made him transcend life and gain intellectual access to its crystalline source.

I believe we can now see how ascetic self-misunderstanding, “the philosophical attitude as such”, means aversion to life as bondage to ordinary ways of living that ought to be transcended and mastered intellectually. Being incapable of the philosophical attitude shift from life towards its intellectually accessible normative source, means taking life naively for granted. It means remaining at the level of mere people. However, such an extra-ordinary shift of attitude can also create feelings of shame; namely, when you consider your own parents and siblings, your friends, your childhood, your own breathing – which you arrogantly declare are naively bound to what is ordinary and derivative, and ought to be transcended in the name of reason. When David Hume was in his late twenties, he confessed, surprisingly honestly, how his own philosophizing made him feel like a monster, unable to mingle and unite in society (Hume 1978: 264). Although he was a frugal ascetic, David Hume was also ordinary, a jovial hermit who often preferred company. He needed people, but felt that his philosophical attitude betrayed their confidence.

Let us now, finally, use this metaphysical attitude, and this Humean shame of having it, as an object of comparison for how we

² Nietzsche (1966: 11) remarks: “Kant was first and foremost proud of his table of categories; with that in his hand he said: ‘This is the most difficult thing that could ever be undertaken on behalf of metaphysics.’”.

are inclined to think about our role on this planet. We need the planet, but our attitude seems to betray it.

5. Ascetic Self-Misunderstanding in the Anthropocene

Many of us have a sense of living late on Earth, in a fateful downfall period that humanity brought about by not living in harmony with nature. The evidence is there: climate change, mass extinction of species, pollution down to the deepest ocean floors, and much more, all linked to human activity. These effects are so pervasive in a geological perspective that many suggest that we are living in a new geological era, the Anthropocene, succeeding the Holocene.

Without denying that these troubled times are associated with human activity, Donna Haraway (2016) questions the Anthropocene as being an unfortunate story to think with. Among her objections, the following relate to the concerns of this paper. First, the Anthropocene overemphasizes the bad actor – the human – and the bad ending caused by the human. Thereby, the story is preset for disaster. Moreover, the story separates the human from what the human kills, cuts down and pollutes. Thereby, the story can only end in double death. It is not about ongoingness. Finally, the story depicts human activity as self-contained and autonomous. However, Species Man does not make history, Haraway remarks, and neither does Man plus Tool: “That is the story of History human exceptionalists tell” (2016: 49). Instead of thinking with the Anthropocene, Haraway proposes “multispecies stories and practices of becoming-with in times that remain at stake” (2016: 55). These alternative stories, stories of what she calls “the Chthulucene”, portray a more dynamically woven world texture than is suggested by dualisms like human/animal and culture/nature. In times in need of recuperation, they are better stories to think with. They do not prophesize disaster or salvation, but support response-ably staying with the trouble.

Rather than discussing these alternative stories, which I agree are better to think with, I want to stop and think about the human-centered dualistic story that we are more immediately inclined to embrace as the truth. I want to relate this story to Nietzsche’s remarks about ascetic self-misunderstanding. For it seems to me that

the notion of the bad actor, causing the bad ending, resembles that human essence which insecure philosophers offered their human audiences. It appears to be a notion of “Man” soaked in intellectualist magic of power over life, but suddenly struck by bad conscience. The story of the Anthropocene expresses, I believe, something of David Hume’s shame as a philosophical monster. The Anthropocene is, so to speak, the punishment that “Man”, and life on the planet, finally must suffer for his stubbornly being this thinking monster on Earth.

Nietzsche’s remarks add a dimension to the story. The human figures centrally in the story only to propagate an even more exclusive centrism: that of intellectual asceticism. Philosophers cunningly used claims of human uniqueness to get a grip on their audiences and make them identify themselves as potential thinkers. These claims never glorified actual humans, but expressed hatred of the rest of humankind – mere people! – and even deeper hatred of the animal and the material. What happens if we view the story of the Anthropocene as a continuation not only of human exceptionalism, but also, and more fundamentally, of this aversion to life, of this hatred of being bound to the ordinary, of this hatred of being dependent on breathing?

If we view the Anthropocene as I just proposed, I believe we ought to take it more seriously than as a badly chosen story. It is obviously a story that we want to tell. Why does the story attract us as the truth of our situation? I doubt that it does so simply because we are a self-absorbed species that always sees itself as the protagonist. If Nietzsche is right, the real protagonist is the quest for intellectual mastery of life. Philosophers cunningly presented this quest as human essence – “we are all essentially thinkers” – to rhetorically ensure our loyalty to intellectualism. They used our self-absorption to sneak in another protagonist: the intellect. Perhaps we embrace the dualistic story of the Anthropocene precisely because this rhetoric succeeded. Is not identification with intellectual asceticism discernible in attitudes to science and technology as “magic that actually delivers”, as “methods through which we overcome our imperfect faculties as biological creatures”? Do not our intellect-driven industrial and economic practices make

themselves insanely insensitive to the forms of life they invade? – Perhaps we should feel like David Hume: monstrous, unable to mingle with people and with other animals, and to unite in nature. Not because we are humans, but because intellectual asceticism got its grip on us, and on our culture. *It is a monstrous attitude to life.*

A problem worth thinking about, I believe, then, is the terrible transcendence from life that intellectual asceticism demands of the human. It belittles more humbling experiences of life. For example, when we witness growth and decline in plants, in animals, in humans, in ourselves. When we experience health and disease. When we consider our unknown future. When we face birth and death. When we notice what happens when there is not enough air to breathe. These experiences expose our vulnerabilities as living beings. Such humbling experiences appear naïve, however, as degenerate willpower of mere people, when compared to the transcendence of rigorous, intellectual asceticism, *which refuses to accept these aspects of life.* Intellectual transcendence does not occur in sublime moments; it is not a deepening experience of life. It is an obstinate act, produced as if life were a container that we can exit by *thinking* that we breathe its air.

Consider how transhumanists believe that current work in bioscience and artificial intelligence allows them to extrapolate the future and present it to us as already known, as the supreme reality to accommodate. I wish it were a joke by Derrida, but Nick Bostrom (2003) asks, dead seriously, if we are living in a future computer simulation, that is to say, in a future that already is in the past. A Future Intellect might already have created us in a computer program that simulates even our breathing: what a victory of the intellect over life!

The Anthropocene, by contrast, is a story of the *defeat* of the human intellect in its efforts to master life on this planet. Stories of human rise and fall touch us. They induce optimism as well as pessimism. Seen through Nietzsche's remarks, they do not fundamentally revolve around the humanoid collective. They are about the quest for intellectual power over life. The reason they appear to be about the human is that we swallowed the rhetoric of the human thinker. The conflict between Humanity and Nature in

the story of the Anthropocene can be seen as *a feature of intellectual asceticism*. It is connected to the ascetic attitude that *life* is to be mastered through escaping from it into the purity of *thinking*. That dualism of intellectual asceticism, comically impossible since we must breathe, is propagated through a rhetoric that suggests that we are a unique species that in its essence *does* transcend nature, life, the body, the animal, the material, the planet, and mere people. Such rhetoric is undeniably a bad tool to think with. The intellectual kind of magic that the rhetoric furthers, however, is worth thinking *about*. It is worth questioning, contemplating, overcoming.

We do not need to become “post-human”. What we really need is to overcome the ascetic self-misunderstanding that insecure philosophers felt they had to transmit to society before they dared to enter it as philosophers. We are more than intellectual. We can use the intellect instead of being driven by it. If we drop the identification with the intellect, I believe we can live and philosophize more confidently and lovingly.

6. Afterthought

If thinking is driven by stories, then the only conceivable response to a bad story is immediately seeking alternative stories. Without a story in the driver’s seat, thought cannot move ahead: “Think we must; we must think. That means, simply, we *must* change the story; the story *must* change” (Haraway 2016: 40). In this paper, however, we discovered that we are able to *reflect* on the story. Instead of thinking with it, we think about it. Philosophical thinking begins here: in stopping to allow a story to drive thought. Instead, we reflect on it, slowly transforming it into insightfulness. That is the meditative freedom philosophy needs and that is why philosophers love bridges to independence.

Confucius said, “When the archer misses the center of the target, he turns around and seeks the cause of his failure within himself”. Doing like the archer, we sought to rectify the philosophical notion of the human. Breathe we must; we must breathe.³

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human world". Thanks to Jacob Bull, Michele Farisco, Camilla Flodin, Niklas Forsberg, Andrea Pettit and Sören Stenlund for helpful comments on drafts of the paper, which was written while I was employed at the Centre for Gender Research, Uppsala University. In a late phase of work, I also profited from participating in a reading group at the Department of Philosophy, studying Wittgenstein's remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*. The paper is a longer version of a presentation given at the symposium, "Power and the Chthulucene", at the Centre for Gender Research, Uppsala University, Sweden, 6-7 April 2017.

Biographical Note

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