

# THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION



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## THE REVIEW

By *Anastasia Berg*

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**E**thical prescriptions are implicit in the work of many academics, from literary scholars to economists, but no one is as unabashedly willing to claim moral authority as are philosophers. Only they promise to deal with the most urgent human questions, private and public: How should we live? What should I do?

It is not unreasonable to suppose that philosophers would have plenty to offer by way of moral guidance to the general educated public. Philosophers' impulse to reach the

widest possible influence is therefore understandable. This task, however, is a delicate one: Audiences turn to the public philosopher neither for philosophy lectures nor pronouncements in the manner of prophets and demagogues. At her best, the public philosopher helps her audience to think through matters of concern with greater clarity and precision, maintaining accessibility without compromising rigor. At her worst she gives her prejudices, and by extension those of her audience, the guise of philosophical insight.

## **For Manne, a murderous spree represents the logical terminus of all behavior motivated by misogyny.**

The challenge is formidable, and it is one that the Cornell philosopher [Kate Manne](#) has taken up consciously and methodically. In graduate school at MIT, Manne was inspired by her adviser, the feminist philosopher Sally Haslanger, to theorize the importance of social phenomena; she accordingly shifted her focus from logic to moral and feminist philosophy. She didn't wait long before offering her work to an audience extending far beyond the classroom. Besides essays in the popular press and a robust social-media presence, Manne, now an associate professor, has written two widely celebrated books that seek to revolutionize our understanding of gender-based discrimination: *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (Oxford, 2017), a crossover work for professional philosophers and the general public, and this year's *Entitled: How Male Privilege Hurts Women* (Crown, 2020), a piece of even more straightforwardly popular writing. In response, Manne has been showered with praise from professional philosophers and mainstream authors alike — hailed as “a once-in-a-generation mind,” “one of the most essential voices of our times,” and “the Simone de Beauvoir of the 21st century.”

The work is indeed ambitious. In *Down Girl*, Manne argues that we ought to entirely rethink our understanding of a familiar explanatory framework for gender-based hostility and discrimination: “misogyny.” Rather than thinking of misogyny as a

hostile psychological attitude directed toward womankind, or toward particular women merely insofar as they are women, Manne says that misogyny is better conceived of as the various more or less visible coercive mechanisms by which patriarchal norms are maintained.

These mechanisms include everything from the excessive sympathy we extend to men accused of offenses against women (“himpathy”) to the double standard faced by women seeking positions of power — especially highest political office. *Down Girl*’s secondary thesis is that the patriarchal norms enforced by misogyny dictate not only that women should occupy certain professional and social roles and not others, but also that women, in the most general sense, should be “givers” of various “moral goods,” like approval, admiration, attention, and care, to which male “takers” are entitled.

Manne has said in an interview that she took her time between projects, “lest I inadvertently write the same book twice.” In part, *Entitled* ends up covering similar ground as *Down Girl*, albeit with some updated examples: Brett Kavanaugh instead of Donald Trump; Elizabeth Warren rather than Hillary Clinton. But the newer book also expands Manne’s discussion of the ways patriarchal investments disadvantage women, from inequities in medical care to unequally shared domestic labor. And it offers more extensive treatments of men’s “entitlement” to various goods like attention and respect (“mansplaining”), women’s bodies (abortion), and sex (rape). Even complicated cases of ambivalence and reluctant acquiescence of the sort depicted in the short story “[Cat Person](#)” find a place in Manne’s schema as instances of men’s entitlement to “consent.” What had been a secondary argument in *Down Girl* becomes the focus of *Entitled*.

Manne’s delineation of such forms of discriminatory distribution of harm and benefit may not be entirely original — they won’t come as news to many of those inclined to pick up *Entitled*. But Manne’s main purpose is not so much to enlighten her audience about facts as to demonstrate how the idea of entitlement — real, felt, or longed for —

reveals the internal unity of what may at first glance appear to be the rather disparate forms of maltreatment to which women are subjected.

Each chapter of *Entitled* focuses on male entitlement to a different moral good (sex, power, knowledge, etc.). This is a neat organizational principle, but it is conceptually strained. While “a sense of entitlement” is perhaps a decent descriptive, if not exactly explanatory, framework for, say, much of the uneven distribution of domestic labor, it is a more awkward fit for the *central* force behind, for instance, what Manne calls the “vigorous cultural policing” around pregnant women’s habits of consumption, i.e., medical restrictions of and affective taboos around pregnant women’s alcohol intake. Must we really invoke the patriarchy as the main explanation for why present-day men and women, renowned for their neurotic attempts to “maximize their health” and their unprecedentedly anxious parenting, are so averse to risking the fetus’s well-being — even if the evidence does suggest, as Manne dutifully reports, that the occasional drink is merely “*unlikely*” to be harmful?

But we can largely leave this sort of quibbling to [others](#), for the imperfect conceptual fit of this or that example to the main theory is hardly the most noteworthy feature of the work. The biggest problem with Manne as a public philosopher is the way she conceives of her audience and her duties toward it. To appreciate this, we must attend to what is perhaps the strangest feature of Manne’s popular feminist philosophy: her avid interest in “incels.”

**B**y now the incel needs little introduction. Short for “involuntary celibate,” the label is used by participants in online forums who self-identify as sexually undesirable. In these digital grottoes of resentment and despair, self-described incels share abbreviated tales of woe, explanatory theories of their cursed inferiority, and violent fantasies directed against their oppressors — the sexually attractive women who have no interest in them and the sexually attractive men over whom the women fawn. Of course, if posting online were all the incels did, it’s unlikely most of us would ever have heard of them. That we know so much about them owes to

several fatal attacks by young men who either identified as incels or whose online statements and activity resonated with incel rhetoric. The two most famous cases, Elliot Rodger's 2014 Isla Vista, Calif., shooting rampage and Alek Minassian's 2018 Toronto van attack, left six and 10 dead, respectively.

On first glance, Manne's focus on incel murders might be explained biographically. By her own account, it was the Isla Vista shootings that inspired her to write *Down Girl*. But the extent of the treatment is still bewildering: Elliot Rodger is referenced in six of *Down Girl*'s eight chapters, including an extended discussion of the Isla Vista killings at the beginning. In *Entitled*, Manne again dedicates her first full length chapter to Rodger's rampage. It is not immediately obvious that Manne's argument requires her to give so much attention to the case. That Rodger, to put things mildly, harbored intense negative feelings toward women can hardly be doubted: "I will attack the very girls who represent everything I hate in the female gender: the hottest sorority of UCSB," he declared in the YouTube video he uploaded before driving to the Alpha Phi house. But recall that misogyny, on Manne's account, is not about individuals' psychological states of mind; it is, rather, "the 'law enforcement' branch of patriarchy." Its job is to "police and enforce gendered norms and expectations." To see Rodger's actions as misogynistic in Manne's sense, we must identify particular patriarchal norms that the murders were meant to sustain. What is it that Rodger, whose suicide made clear he had no hopes of getting away with anything he did, took himself to be "entitled" to?

The answers to these questions are meant to be straightforward. *Down Girl* asserts that the patriarchal norm Rodger's actions were meant to uphold was the maintenance of women's role as nurturing carers and doting companions: "What could be a more natural basis for hostility and aggression than defection from the role of an attentive, loving subordinate?" *Entitled* explains that Rodger, like his fellow incels, felt entitled to sex with, as well as the admiration and the love of, young, attractive women.

The relationship between the incel “worldview” and that of the “patriarchy” is, however, far more complicated than Manne acknowledges. According to Manne, as a misogynist, Rodger was trying to defend, or restore, the patriarchal norms that consigned women to the role of givers — norms that entitle him, as a man, to admiration, affection, and care. But this claim fits awkwardly to the case. First, it is odd to say that the murder spree and suicide were a means of “enforcing” or “policing” anything. As delusional as Rodger was, there is little reason to think he took his act to actually advance any practical goal.

Manne speaks sometimes of Rodger’s desire to “punish” his tormentors, suggesting his actions can be read instead as an attempt at quasi-retributive justice for its own sake, but even in that case it’s crucial to note just how broad he considered the category of his tormentors to be: “After I’ve annihilated every single girl in the sorority house,” Rodger says in the video, “I’ll take to the streets of Isla Vista and slay every single person I see there.” His beef was not simply with women but with mankind. It is humans, with their exclusionary ways of bestowing social favor, that Rodger could no longer abide.

The most glaring complication in Manne’s analysis is that the hierarchies of social and sexual value which, according to incels, govern how affection, admiration, attention and, of course, sex, are distributed — and against which incels struggle — are patriarchal through and through. To the extent the members of the nation’s sororities past, present, and future prefer handsome, athletic, successful, and socially adept male acquaintances over despairing, nihilistic, and socially awkward posters and gamers, it is hardly feminist propaganda that determines their choice. In other words, the ordinary incel’s investment in the patriarchy is not positive. He considers himself its victim. And the murdering incel’s so-called rebellion is not a way of climbing up the patriarchal ladder; it’s a desperate, if largely symbolic, attempt to sabotage it. This is why, as Manne herself notes, “an incel’s plans for revenge may therefore target not just women but also the men they perceive as besting and thwarting them.” The

rebellious incel is not fighting *for* the patriarchy; in his own insane way he is struggling against it.

None of this is to suggest that incels are feminist allies, obviously. My point is that the claim that murderous incels police the patriarchal order is a gross simplification. This is problematic because, for Manne, Rodger's murderous spree isn't just a central case: It represents the logical terminus of *all* behavior motivated by misogyny.

Manne acknowledges in *Down Girl* that the risk of any individual woman falling victim to an actual incel attack "is rather low"; what is crucial for her is not the literal threat incels pose, but what they help us see. Rodger's "rhetoric," Manne tells us, struck a nerve with many women not because it raised the fear of meeting the same fate as his victims but because "it sounded a bit too familiar." Manne approvingly recounts how in response to the Isla Vista attacks, women reported "offenses that were less serious on the face of it, but that were held to be connected — for example, disparaging and domineering behavior of subtler varieties, including mansplaining." In other words, Rodger's actions were not different in kind from the wide range of more familiar behaviors that are the focus of her work: The murders were merely "at the most violent end of the spectrum," his outburst but "a particularly violent reaction to a common kind of grievance." Here is Manne returning to this theme in *Entitled*:

Moreover, and more subtly, incels are but a vivid symptom of a much broader and deeper cultural phenomenon. They crystallize some men's toxic sense of entitlement to have people look up to them steadfastly, with a loving gaze, admiringly — and to target and even destroy those who fail, or refuse, to do so.

Incel mass murderers (along with family annihilators and serial rapists) fall on "a spectrum" with garden-variety misogynists: mansplainers, manspreaders, sexist voters, obtuse lovers, bad colleagues, dads skimping on child care, and Donald Trump.

In turn, the incel murderer, delusional and homicidal, serves not only to condemn the long line of more familiar misogynists, but to justify Manne's preferred mode of response to all of them. To say the difference between the mansplainers and Elliot Rodger is merely one of degree is not only to say that there is a common essence to all the cases under consideration; it is also to say something about the prospects of tackling the underlying problem. If the mansplainer, the inattentive partner, and the biased political journalist are but a change of circumstances away from a heinous murder spree, what hope do we really have to work with them, let alone to enlighten them? Indeed, reviewing the analysis she offers in *Down Girl*, Manne admits defeat: "I give up. I wish I could offer a more hopeful message."

**M**any of Manne's critics have seized on elements in her style and method, or pointed out the ways in which her ideological commitments limit her analysis. They are not wrong: Manne cherry-picks her evidence (e.g., discussing the 2020 Democratic primary, Manne insists misogyny is responsible for Warren's defeat but fails to note that Warren didn't lose only to men, but, in a significant moment for her campaign, to Amy Klobuchar, in New Hampshire); engages in dubious psychological conjecture (e.g., when discussing the case of a man accused of serial rape, she asserts that "many will hence instinctually reach, with a sense of moral necessity, for any excuse in the book as to why he's innocent, and all the women who testify against him can't be trusted" — the man was unanimously convicted by a jury of his peers and sentenced to 236 consecutive years in prison); indulges in selective hyperbole (e.g., she equates the pressure women feel not to disappoint a romantic partner with the experience of the participants in the infamous [Milgram shock experiments](#)); and is reluctant to consider alternative explanations for the phenomena she's interested in (she never so much as raises the possibility that Donald Trump defended Brett Kavanaugh because he was his nominee, not because of "himpathy," or that, similarly, the father of [Brock Turner](#), the Stanford student convicted of sexual assault, defended him because he is his father; that at least *some* conservatives oppose abortion because they sincerely believe it is a religious and moral wrong, not because they wish to keep women in their place; that at least some



of the white women who voted for Trump did so because they favored the Republican platform, not merely because they sympathized with their husbands' sense of patriarchal entitlement, etc.).

Manne is guilty of all of this. But more troubling is her abandonment of the possibility of persuasion in advance.

In Manne's telling, the forces stacked against progress, embodied in the figure of the deranged incel, are often simply insurmountable. Misogyny-driven defeat is nearly preordained. For example, according to Manne, misogyny did not just contribute, as a matter of fact, to Clinton's 2016 loss; misogyny is so prevalent that, in hindsight, Clinton never stood a chance. In this light, any appearance of progress is very likely deceptive. Here she is explaining why the #MeToo movement is no sign of improvement:

As powerful man after powerful man has been exposed as a sexual wrongdoer, it's tempting to conclude that the ground has finally shifted. At last, we are taking their sexual misconduct seriously. Another possibility: Something has changed about the perpetrators. The obvious factor is that they have gotten older, making it easier for people to cast them as "dirty old men" — albeit a more powerful variant of the ageist cultural trope, rather than a more pathetic figure. Notably, older men also tend to be less useful than young earners from the perspective of late-stage capitalism; their sell-by date is approaching. And so, in some such cases, they are more disposable than their younger counterparts.

Did men fail to get older in the past? And haven't countless younger men been similarly called out, for instance on the so-called Shitty Media Men spreadsheet? What's the point of this sort of motivated reasoning? Manne, it seems, wants to undermine any sense of positive change and hence of future possibility. "During the time I was researching this book," she confesses in *Down Girl*, "I became less

optimistic about the prospects of getting people to take misogyny seriously — including treating it as a moral priority, when it is — *unless they already do so.*” (emphasis mine).

In *Down Girl*, Manne’s “solutions” fit her terminal diagnosis. Don’t worry about reaching out to misogynists, Manne advises. If an offender has shown progress but still falls short of the mark, beware of expressing any gratitude for his efforts, say, in order to encourage him to continue to improve (accordingly, Manne berates Jancee Dunn, author of *How Not to Hate Your Husband After Kids*, for showing appreciation for her husband, who by the end of the book does more around the house than before, though still less than half). In fact, better to stop worrying about those who disagree with you altogether:

I suspect that, for many readers who have made it this far, you may be of a similar mind to mine and feel similarly frustrated by the apathy, indifference, and pernicious ignorance of most people. So maybe the thing to say, somewhat reluctantly, is — fuck ’em, in the limited sense of ceasing to even try to catch the moderate with mild honey.

In *Entitled*, Manne remains careful not to give in to the seductions of hope, distinguishing her “political commitment” to “fighting for a better world” from any reasonable conviction that such a world is possible. She is, she makes clear, “still pessimistic about the possibility of making much-needed feminist social progress without incurring destructive, toxic backlash.” However much encouragement she received from the positive responses to *Down Girl*, nothing material has changed in her analysis of the world she lives in — the misogyny is just as rampant, the men merely grow older.

More importantly, nothing has changed in how she thinks we should make our way in this world. The second book has no more to offer than the first concerning how we might communicate our grievances to the partners, care givers, and colleagues who let

us down. After all, “most people” remain ignorant, indifferent, and apathetic. If anything *has* changed in *Entitled*, it is that whatever nuance existed in *Down Girl* has been replaced in the new, slimmer volume by a shorthand of bitter sarcasm. Reflecting on an anti-domestic-violence activist’s statement to the effect that “you can disagree with someone without wanting to silence them,” Manne is quick to interject: “Well, I assume *you* can, dear reader. But not everyone is so capable.” The only thing escaping mockery and condemnation is the strategy Manne sets herself: Stoke the anger of those with “a similar mind,” shame the rest, and to hell with those who remain unmoved.

**W**hat should we do about the injustices we encounter, about the ways in which we and those around us continue to fall short of our ideals? This remains the most important question faced by those concerned with — and suffering from — gender-based discrimination and violence today. But Manne’s two books, grounded in her perception of continuity from mansplainer to murderer, offer only two options, both equally fatalistic. You can give up, as she threatened to do in *Down Girl*, or you can take up proverbial arms, as she promises to do by the end of *Entitled*. In the latter case, though, you are to appeal only to those who are like-minded, and your work will be to teach them to disregard any analysis or experience that fails to reaffirm the “pernicious ignorance” of the crowd.

## **Who if not philosophers will remind us how much we have to learn from others, even from those we fear most?**

Here we see the real threat posed by the public philosopher who, instead of guiding her readers through matters of great concern, exploits her disciplinary authority to hawk personal opinions under the guise of philosophical insight. In flattering the prejudices of her audience, the philosopher does not merely fail to offer clarity, she does her readers harm.

To turn your readers against “most people” on account of their alleged ignorance and moral turpitude is to fail them both politically and personally. It is to discourage them, as members of a democratic society, from continuing in the task — Sisyphean though it may sometimes seem — of determining their collective fate together. It is also to do a disservice to all those private individuals who will never have the luxury of shutting themselves off from the less enlightened.

To advise one’s readers to give up on communication is also to fail them as a thinker. Who if not a philosopher should be responsible for keeping the faith that intellectual and moral insight might be uncovered where we least expect it? Who if not philosophers will remind us how much we have to learn from others, even from those we fear most? Who if not philosophers ought to be challenging us to expand our intellectual communities beyond those of “similar mind”? In the [words](#) of one of Manne’s own bogeymen, an anonymous self-identified ex-incel:

The biggest problem of the community is that it does nothing to solve the problem, and only reinforces the beliefs that one already has. ...[You] go online and find people like you, you find false explanations for your problems and a sounding chamber for your ideas ... they don’t help you in the real world, they just make things worse.

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SCHOLARSHIP AND RESEARCH

OPINION

## Anastasia Berg

Anastasia Berg is an assistant professor of philosophy at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and an editor at *The Point*.

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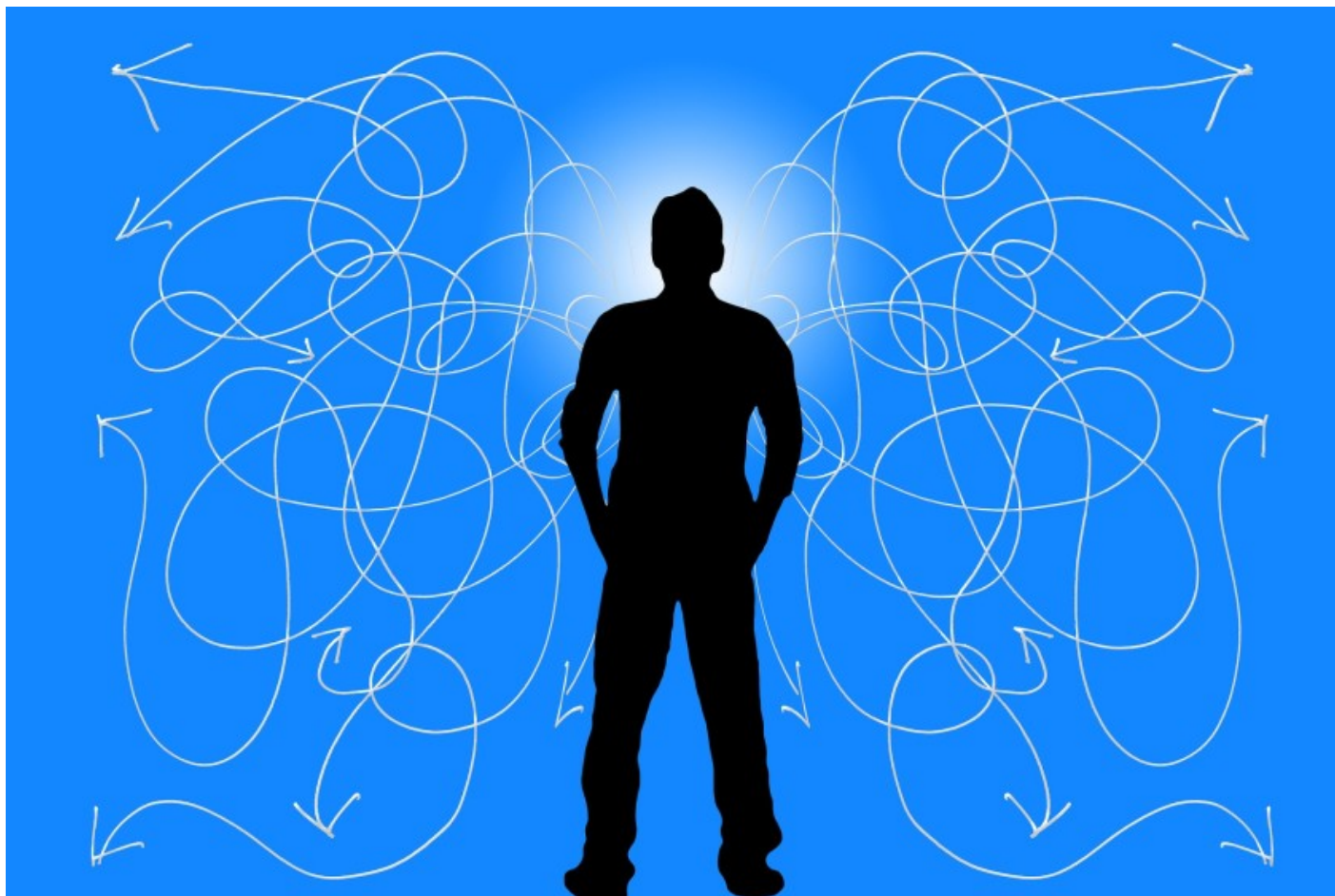


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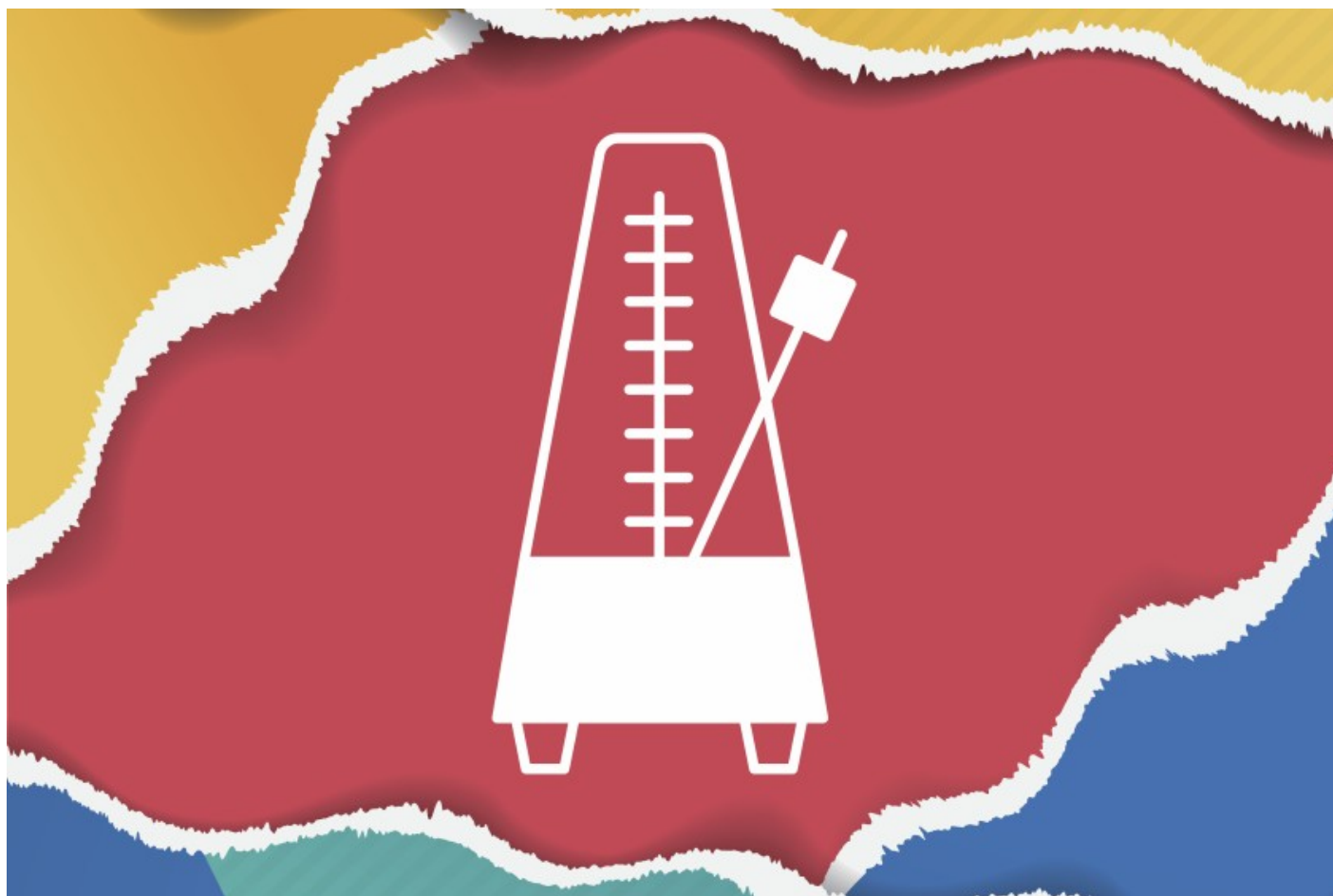


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