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Women in Philosophy: What Needs to Change?

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Philosophy has a problem with women, or women have a problem with philosophy. While women enroll in philosophy at first year level in healthy numbers, at each higher level the proportion of women drops. By PhD level, the figures are abysmal: around 30% of doctorates in philosophy are awarded to women in the United States. The proportion of women in faculty positions, and especially senior positions, is even lower. What explains the gender gap? Should it be corrected? What needs to change to correct it?

Some obvious explanations of the gender are clearly wrong. One explanation might be that women shy away from disciplines requiring skills—like formal logic—that resemble mathematics. You might think, that is, that women prefer ‘softer’ areas (the humanities more generally) to ‘harder’ ones like the sciences, and among the humanities philosophy resembles a hard discipline more than any other. The problem with this explanation is that it does not fit the available data. While it is true that the proportion of women earning doctorates in English literature is high (nearly 70%), women also earn more than 50% of the PhDs in some of the sciences, including molecular biology and neuroscience. The proportion of PhDs granted to women is higher in chemistry, economics and even mathematics than in philosophy. The explanation is far from obvious. This volume of essays by female philosophers aims to provide the explanation, as well as to identify why (and for whom) it is a problem, and to provide guidance as to how to correct for philosophy’s woman problem.

We might categorize explanations of the gender gap into those that identify barriers unique to (or at any rate distinctive of) philosophy and those that philosophy shares with other disciplines. Hypotheses that identify features that philosophy does not share with other disciplines seem particularly promising, if the aim is to explain why philosophy is distinctively bad. However, it might be that shared features interact in unique ways in philosophy, or interact with distinctive features, so it is possible that shared features explain a greater proportion of the gender gap than unique features. Given our current state of knowledge, we can only speculate. In any case, I will begin with essays identifying features unique to philosophy.

Several authors suggest that the paucity of women in the readings typically assigned to undergraduates may contribute to the development of a perception that philosophy is not for women. Another theme that runs through numerous contributions is the adversarial style that is common in (analytic) philosophy but relatively rare elsewhere in the academy. Given that women are acculturated to avoid confrontation, this adversarial style may be uncomfortable for many women, who may perform worse under the kinds of conditions it produces. In her contribution, Marilyn Friedman suggests that as well as being off-putting to women, this style may promote philosophical shallowness by putting winning the argument ahead of discovering the truth. Friedman also suggests that the problem may arise (at least in part) from the way philosophy is taught and communicated. She examines several introductory textbooks, finding in them a stress on individual autonomy that might be alienating to women. She also suggests that the ideals of the

philosopher these textbooks promote—the sage and the gadfly—are not characters with whom women can easily identify.

A number of contributors highlight aspects of (analytic) philosophy's methodology that may play a role in explaining the gender gap. The centrality of intuition is certainly distinctive of analytic philosophy. But there have been claims that women have different intuitions, on average, concerning important thought experiments. Helen Beebe suggests, very tentatively (because she is far from convinced that the alleged gender differences in intuition are real), that this kind of divergence may alienate women, especially if thoughtless teachers respond to unusual intuitions by dismissing them or taking them as evidence that the student has not understood the cases properly.

In her excellent contribution, Katrina Huchison suggests that standards for excellence in philosophy may be less clear than in some other areas. This lack of clarity in what constitutes excellence may make it harder for women to be confident that they are competent when they encounter dismissive attitudes, and may enable others more easily to dismiss them on spurious grounds. Huchison thinks that it is the reliance on first-person data—intuitions—that creates the problem, but it seems to me that the suggestion is a fruitful one with an importance that extends beyond intuition-mongering. It is genuinely difficult to identify what constitutes excellence in philosophy. Disagreement runs deep: it is not hard to think of individual philosophers (Heidegger and Derrida come immediately to mind) regarded by many well-credentialed philosophers as brilliant and by others as little more than charlatans. Even in analytic philosophy, there is deep disagreement: some philosophers regard the argument from evil as devastating to theism while others regard it as multiply rebuttable.

Huchison suggests that we respond to this lack of clarity by paying more attention to philosophical methodology and explicitly teaching it, to ensure that there are less ambiguous signs of philosophical competence. I think the suggestion may be helpful when it comes to retaining undergraduates and perhaps in increasing the number of PhDs, but at the more advanced level it is less help, because I suspect that those people who deliberately or inadvertently downgrade the philosophical acumen of their female colleagues do regard them as competent: it is excellence that they deny them. We might recall here Sally Haslanger's report that in graduate school she was told by one of her teachers that 'women were incapable of having seminal ideas'. Excellence is much harder to identify than competence, which enables these kinds of casual dismissals.

These features distinctive of philosophy may interact with others that are shared. Several contributions, most notably Jennifer Saul's, highlight the role implicit bias and stereotype threat almost certainly play in explaining some proportion of the gender gap. There is a large body of evidence indicating gender bias in assessing women's capacities and their achievements. While some of this bias is very likely overt, much is implicit. (Again, there is a large literature indicating that many people with egalitarian ideals have negative implicit attitudes toward women.) Implicit bias probably is responsible for some proportion of negative judgments directed at women, and therefore might cause teachers to judge their female students less able, and hiring committees to prefer male candidates. It is easy to see how this may interact with, say, the relatively amorphous standards of excellence in philosophy, to women's detriment. Implicit bias is likely to be more powerful a cause of discriminatory behavior in those with unbiased explicit attitudes when criteria of merit are ambiguous. (Indeed, there is a literature on how implicit bias leads to the confabulation of criteria of merit).

Whereas implicit bias may lead to women being perceived as less competent, stereotype threat may actually lead to worse performance on a task. Stereotype threat is evoked when people become aware that a group to which they belong is stereotyped as performing badly at the current task; it may therefore be triggered in women who encounter a male-dominated curriculum. The heavy use of formal methods in analytic philosophy might also trigger stereotype threat in women. As Helen Beebe points out in her contribution, it need not be true that women are worse at, say, maths, for stereotype threat to be evoked by maths; similarly, the fact that philosophy is adversarial might therefore evoke stereotype threat regardless of whether women are put off by the style or not.

Together, implicit bias and stereotype threat might be powerful forces explaining why women tend to leave philosophy in disproportionate numbers. Fortunately, psychologists have identified ways of fighting or avoiding these problems, ways highlighted by Saul: anonymous marking and review lead to problems with implicit bias being circumvented; stereotype threat can be mitigated by ensuring that women feature more in conferences and invited volumes, and of course in the classroom.

Samantha Brennan also focuses on a feature that is not distinctive of philosophy, but (presumably) a product of the wider sexist culture. She suggests that attention to micro-inequities—small, unjust inequalities—not only helps to explain the gender gap but would also enrich moral philosophy. These small acts of disrespect, expressed in a tone of voice, patterns of attention, and so on, usually fly below the radar of normative and applied ethics, because they are so small. But Brennan makes a convincing case that micro-inequities, while arguably trivial taken one by one, can make an enormous difference to career trajectories (and no doubt to overall well-being too). They ramify, and play a significant role in explaining why ‘there are no qualified women’ in the higher echelons. A central suggestion is that men outperform women, in part, because early on they are paid different amounts of attention and treated with different expectations. Brennan suggests that micro-inequities actually help to reduce competence.

As well as explaining the gender gap, a number of contributors also tackle the question why we ought to care about the gap. Philosophy is, after all, a rather marginal pursuit with little cultural influence; it seems less urgent to have better representation of women in philosophy than in politics, the judiciary and in business. Friedman devotes considerable attention to why the gender gap matters, focusing mainly on the benefits for philosophy (rather than for women). Eliminating the adversarial style might lead to a greater focus on substantive issues, rather than on winning the latest battle, she suggests. Bringing women into philosophy in greater numbers would also increase diversity in the profession; Friedman suggests that a greater variety of perspectives on philosophical questions would lead to better philosophy. Many other contributors put forward a view like this, according to which increasing the proportion of women would lead to philosophy being able to pursue its internal aims better. Jenkins dissents, suggesting that the inequality is somehow linked to the kind of discipline that philosophy conceives itself as being, so that increasing the proportion of women would lead to a transformation of the kind of discipline it is.

The volume concludes with two useful appendixes, collecting the available statistics on the representation of women in philosophy. The figures available are patchy and incomplete. Without more data, especially longitudinal data and carefully designed studies that probe why women leave philosophy, it is clear that we cannot isolate the contribution of the various factors explaining the gender gap. Future work will find a rich set of suggestions, amenable for empirical

testing, in these volumes. They represent the state of the art in our understanding of the gender gap in philosophy, and will prove fruitful in explaining exclusion (of women and minorities) in other arenas too.

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