

Equality, Diversity and Professional Philosophy

Oxford D Phil **Fiona Jenkins** (Australian National University) explores the ways in which academic philosophers are engaging with the under-representation of women in their ranks.

In May 2015 Oxford hosted a workshop addressing a problem that has been increasingly receiving attention - the question of diversity and equality in philosophy. The workshop also tackled the ethics of a range of aspects of our academic lives, including staff-student relationships, writing responsible references, and standards of conduct in philosophical conversation. The workshop brought together participants and contributors from around the world to discuss issues that have recently won philosophy a certain degree of bad publicity.

So: what's the problem? Professional philosophy today looks not that different from how it looked 25 years ago, in terms of the gender, colour and class of its tenured practitioners. Despite its place among the humanities, philosophy has a lower rate of appointing female professors than many of the areas of science that have so far been better known for their problematic gender gap. Over 80% of full professors of philosophy in the UK are men, and the picture is slightly worse in the USA as well as Australia. Philosophy's 'problem with women' has in fact been known and discussed for years, but recent commentary has also focused on the dearth of black philosophers, and many other minorities who are either not choosing philosophy or seem to be squeezed out at all levels. Given that enrollments of undergraduate students in philosophy classes are fairly gender-balanced (though less so in Oxford's PPE degree than in Philosophy degrees elsewhere in the UK), it is worth asking how it can be the case that the ranks of professional philosophy are still disproportionately filled with men (at about 75% of all continuing positions) who are white and generally of a similar class and background.

Before a conversation about this as a practical problem to be fixed, it is worth thinking about why it matters. For many in the profession, there seems to be a deep disjunction between a willingness to accept that there are equality issues to be address, and an unwillingness to see them as being very important, especially for 'philosophy itself'. There are various ways to articulate the sense that it does not

matter much. One professor of philosophy explained to me that although 'in principle' he was sympathetic to the concern about women's underrepresentation, given the financial rewards of philosophy as a career relative to other, more lucrative choices, he was not too fussed. Another version of the view that women might well be choosing to avoid philosophy for their own good reasons appeared in David Papineau's *Times Literary Supplement* review of a book I co-edited, *Women in Philosophy: What Needs to Change?* (OUP 2013). Professional philosophy, he suggests, is a bit like professional snooker: it's not that women are incapable but that they can't be bothered with, to quote Steve Davis, "something that must be said is a complete waste of time - trying to put snooker balls into pockets with a pointed stick."

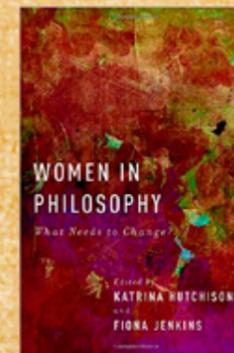
Neither intervention sells philosophy very high. Papineau does argue that its snooker-ish tendencies are in part an indictment of philosophy itself, which has veered toward a 'scholastic' preoccupation with the technical minutiae of established positions, suiting men who relish competition per se, but not women (no small generalisation here) who require pursuits to be important in their own right. He also agrees that if there are forms of bias that exclude women, then these should be addressed on grounds of equality. He takes it that it would be a mistake, however, to believe that the gender imbalance in philosophy as a profession fundamentally affects the character and epistemic integrity of philosophy as a discipline.

Does equality and diversity matter in a way that's intrinsic to good philosophy? One response to this question is to point out how much philosophers draw on experience to make their arguments. If that experience is relatively shared among a homogeneous group, how much easier is it to believe one has found broad agreement and how much easier is it to speak, as if from a position of universal truth, about what is 'morally permissible' and the like? Papineau proposes in the *TLS* that while "good practice in [politics, law and medicine] often demands familiarity with the problems of marginalized groups",

"this line of thought has no obvious application to philosophy." Amia Srinivasan, who co-authored with Daniela Dover a paper presented at the conference, responds with the well-made point that "theorizing well about, say, inequality, pornography or racial hate crimes - to take a few central topics of philosophical interest - might require one to know something about being poor, a woman, or non-white. Insofar as philosophy is in the business of getting the world right, it would seem useful to have more philosophers who are acquainted with some of its less savoury aspects."

My own paper at the workshop came at the question of why this matters from another angle, by looking at how perceptions of 'excellence' in philosophy track social networks and status hierarchies better than they track anything we might reliably regard as independent evidence of value. This inflects the character of the discipline in multiple ways, limiting in particular the importance accorded to the major contributions of feminist philosophers across all fields of the discipline. For instance, the fact that we differentiate between 'epistemology' and 'feminist epistemology' and that the latter rarely appears in the most highly-ranked journals, tells a story both about how women's contributions to research continue to be overlooked by many men and about the failure of most philosophy to grapple with gender as a basic aspect of identity, experience and social relations.

One of the differences I observe between disciplines like philosophy, politics and economics and others like sociology, anthropology and history is that in many contexts in the latter group there has been a productive uptake of feminist scholarship, leading to general acknowledgment that a complex understanding of gender is fundamental in research design and analysis. In disciplines and regions where this exchange has taken place there are also higher levels of women's participation and status. In philosophy, on the other hand, there is a powerful perception of what constitutes 'mainstream' work that reinforces long-standing practices of exclusion - of the many Asian philosophies, or of race-based perspectives as much as of feminist work.



Women in Philosophy: What Needs to Change?
Ed. Katrina Hutchison and Fiona Jenkins (OUP 2013)



Some very important work is going on to challenge and change all this, and particularly the poor judgment it can tend to support. At the workshop Sally Haslanger, who has been powerfully setting the agenda in this discussion for some years, tackled head-on the shifts in understanding philosophical method that are needed to foster diversity. Helen Beebe, a former British Philosophical Association president, described the BPA's guide to good practice which departments in the UK are invited to sign up to. Jennifer Saul talked about the measures she has taken as Chair of her department to shift patterns in appointment toward greater balance, by applying findings from the psychological literature on how implicit bias affects decision.

It was wonderful to have these ideas presented and debated among an at least fairly diverse group of around 70 men and women (and perhaps even some non-normative genders in between) who attended the day. There is plenty of food for philosophical thought in the issues surrounding the continuance of the 'great (white) man' tradition into our discipline today and plenty of work to do to foster the better practices that will in turn support more rigorous and diverse philosophising.