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# Why philosophy needs feminism

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Is philosophy handicapped by its male bias?

Philosophers are usually much more likely to think that they are needed than needy. That philosophy needs feminism is a startling concept to many philosophers. Surely, many professional philosophers would argue, philosophy is a deeply neutral subject, with no room for points of view. It may, they would continue, become political, but only when it is 'applied'. Feminist philosophers deny all this: philosophy both as practised and in its content shows all the signs of being male-dominated and masculine.

Some feminist philosophers are unconcerned with the mainstream. While they are interested in the essentially philosophical activities of redrawing concepts, reclaiming language, redefining what counts as significant or important, and as Daly put it (in *Pure Lust*, 1984), 'naming', they are uninterested in holding a dialogue with the rest of academic philosophy. However, in this article I shall concern myself with work by feminists who acknowledge what they are doing as 'philosophy' as it is commonly understood, although all of them draw on the activities of feminists and philosophers who do not concern themselves with contemporary, academic, male-dominated philosophising.

Feminists who are academic philosophers are thin on the ground. Part of the reason is simply that philosophy, the academic pursuit, is mostly done by men, once you move from the level of student to staff. The sex ratio in philosophy departments in Britain is very like that in engineering departments. A quick count of people writing for philosophy journals shows how few of them are women. It is hardly surprising that where there are few women there are fewer feminists.

What have these few been doing? What connections have been made between feminism and philosophy in the last twenty years, in response to the so-called second wave of feminism of the late sixties and early seventies? Two kinds of feminist philosophy began to appear at more or less the same time; discus-

sions of issues thought to be of interest to women, such as equality or abortion, and the re-examination and re-interpretation of the history of philosophy. Since philosophy often proceeds by paying attention to and criticizing past philosophers, the central concepts of past philosophers were brought into question. The argument soon became that the misogynistic views of philosophers could not be discarded leaving the rest of their work intact—as had been assumed by most philosophers if they had noticed misogyny at all.

Philosophical issues rather than philosophical history have been the focus of attention in recent feminist philosophy. It has become apparent that feminists are raising fundamental questions in ontology, epistemology, ethics and mind, as well as in political theory—the place that mainstream philosophers expect to find them. At the same time attention has been turned to the examination of philosophical issues within feminism itself, to the tensions and contradictions produced by the new ways of thinking and the new kinds of practices evolved by the 'second wave' of feminist thought, dating from the mid-sixties. Not surprisingly, these two sets of concerns have overlapped.

As time has gone on it has become increasingly clear that feminist philosophy finds and redresses male bias in the practice, methods, and content of philosophy. I am making what may seem to be a large claim here. In effect I am saying that philosophy, as practised in our culture, place and time, is in need of a feminist perspective. It is not just a need for footnotes to established theories of the form 'women and . . .' On the contrary, the need is a very general one. Nor is it just confined to political philosophy where many philosophers expect to find it. Indeed the claim is that a feminist perspective is needed in all the branches of academic philosophy. Moreover, as a corollary, feminism (theory, practice, ideas) is a suitable subject for the attention of philosophers; so it is proper that a sizeable proportion

of them should have read widely and thought about it. They should, for instance, be concerned with feminist analyses of language, with feminist practices of knowledge seeking, with the widespread exclusion of women in psychological theories, and with feminist analyses of private and public.

Maybe the claim I am making is not so large. It is certainly becoming less odd than it was. I note that Trevor Pateman mentions sex and gender issues in philosophy in his short beginners' introduction to philosophy (1987). Moreover, he mentions not only the historical dimension but also the exploration of reason from a feminist perspective. I am sure he would also be happy with the idea that philosophers should take feminist ideas seriously. Indeed, there may be a fair proportion of philosophers who would be happy with the suggestion that they should understand feminist ideas.

### Philosophy suffers from male bias

But I am going to make an even larger claim. It is this: over and above the feminist concerns already identified, philosophy suffers from male bias, a bias which pervades quite generally. I say this in spite of the fact that it is clear, and even extremely obvious, that philosophers speak with a variety of voices, and agree on practically nothing at all. Indeed, it is quite

surprising when they do agree—when there is some small measure of agreement it is called a 'school' or a 'tradition'. In spite of all this, my claim is that philosophy would be different if it lost its male bias. More, it would not only be different but also better.

The force of the claim is that the bias is one that cannot be cured simply by men reading feminist ideas and considering them, however coolly and logically, using the usual methods of philosophy. In other words, it should be clear that I am not going to say that philosophy is missing some special content or method that women could uniquely contribute. Conversely, I am not saying that there is some particular content in philosophy that could be identified as male.

In saying that there is no particular content or method that can be identified as feminist, I am disagreeing with some other feminists interested in philosophy who identify the feminist critique of philosophy with a critique of what they see as male content. An example is Jane Flax, (1983). She argues that certain preoccupations are typical of masculine philosophy and arise out of dilemmas deeply rooted in the masculine unconscious, resulting from child-rearing practices. She is impressed by the theories of the feminist psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow, which she draws on to argue that the dualisms of subject/object, mind/body, inner/outer, reason/sense reflect masculine dilemmas rooted in fear and deva-

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uation of women. In her 1987 article she appears less certain about the necessity for this content, but she argues strongly that some kind of post-modernism is a necessary attribute of feminist philosophy. Hartsock (1983) argues that the experiences of discontinuity, aloneness and human relationships have consequences in the work of male philosophers. She argues that women, unlike men, perceive relationships as non-violent, and that for them continuity rather than discontinuity is the core experience. Many philosophers interested in feminist ethics have drawn on Carol Gilligan's critique of Kohlberg, and argue (though Gilligan herself does not) that a feminist ethic would be an ethic of care rather than of rights.

Prescribing any of these contents as being the distinguishing characteristic of feminist philosophy seems to me to be fruitless. Doing so ignores the long, varied history of philosophy and identifies all male philosophy with one strand of recent Western philosophy. But if it is not content or method which distinguishes feminist philosophy, what does? And what distinguishes it so sharply as to make me think that philosophy is suffering in very general way from male bias?

I'll make the large claim more specific. In any particular time and place and culture where there is philosophy, it will be male biased in content and style. The content and style will change, slowly, no doubt, but radically. Indeed it is likely that in the US, UK, France, Africa, Japan, for instance, philosophies are very different—but they will still all be male biased.

The arguments for the claim that philosophy has a male bias depend on a view both of philosophy and of gender. If it is correct it has important consequences for the practice of philosophy. I only have space to sketch out the views of philosophy and gender that I am basing the claim on—and experience tells me that it is likely that these views will seem either banally obvious or entirely unlikely, depending on the reader.

### **Philosophy based on restricted experience**

I begin with philosophy. The question is raised: how are the problems defined? It used to be argued that philosophy was a 'second-

order' discipline, picking up the conceptual problems of others in order to sort them out. Whatever the truth of this—and very few nowadays would think that philosophy could be defined only in this way—the question remains: which conceptual problems, exactly, need to be sorted out? Where and how do they arise? Exactly the same question arises whatever view is taken. There are those, for instance, who appear to view philosophy as a kind of academic game, an intellectually satisfying kind of chess or chase. Again the question arises: which problems are used to indulge this pastime? It arises too if philosophy is seen as a way of answering fundamental questions about the human condition: which problems are thought to arise as part of the condition? Moreover, when the problems have been defined, what contributes to thinking about them? For instance, where do examples and counter-examples come from?

The answer to all these questions about the genesis of philosophical problems and about methods for solving them must be, partly, from tradition. Philosophers are always returning to the tradition for inspiration and enlightenment. But it is a large tradition, and there is a lot to choose from. And, anyway, where does the tradition itself come from? Clearly, the whole answer must include not only tradition, but also the particular experience of individual philosophers. What else but experience could be the source of the intellectual discomfort or excitement which would lead them to consider particular issues, and to know what is problematic about them. To be sure, the experience may not be first hand; it may be derived from other people, either directly or through the tradition. Some problems may appear self-evidently 'important' or 'interesting' or 'significant', but others have been defined as significant by the philosopher's peers or teachers, and he has taken them on. The creation of a tradition is a process of the abstraction of the experience of generations of philosophers. In short, the practice of philosophy, and therefore, willy-nilly its content, language and methods, depends on the experience of philosophers, both living and dead.

Experience varies from person to person, from group of people to group of people, and from class of people to class of people. Therefore, if only some people are included, or only some groups, or only some classes, the tradition will be one-sided, the language improve-

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rished, and the methods biased. Clearly, for a full human picture, experience needs to be shared between individuals, groups and classes: it needs to be shared publicly. If only some groups are included, then the quality of public understanding will be diminished. The understanding of any of the participants is likely to be altered by the participation. This is not a relativist point. I am echoing Mill's arguments for liberalism, but the argument is not quite the same, because it is an analysis which includes classes which will be in power relations with each other.

## Gender relations are power relations

My claim does not only rest on a view of philosophy. It also rests on a view of gender. Roughly speaking, gender is the result of social influence: sex is physical. The sex/gender system is difficult to think about. If gender differences are socially constructed why should there be anything that women in different societies have in common? And if there are essential differences, which account for the position of women, doesn't that undermine the whole feminist project to improve it? It is no

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straightforward matter to identify women's issues and problems without being essentialist about women. The questions raised by this difficulty—the questions about whether we should be doing gender studies or women's studies—is itself a feminist issue. French feminists have raised these questions particularly sharply (Jaggar, 1983, Whitford, 1988). So have the voices of black and working class women all over the world which have pointed out in a variety of ways that white middle class women need not take it for granted that they speak for all women simply because they are women.

Whatever the complex of reasons behind the sex/gender system, any description has to

accommodate the observed facts about it. For instance, it must explain the wide variation in what is considered to be masculine and feminine in different cultures. It must explain why such efforts are made in any society to make boys and girls behave according to that society's views of gender. Finally, it must explain why it is typically women rather than men who complain about sexism and sexual discrimination, and why in any given society women's activities are accorded less status than men's. What is thought to be masculine has varied over time and place, and still does today. But the superior value and status attached to whatever it is has not.

A description that fits these facts is that gender relations are power relations. Not only are masculinity and femininity not fixed, but also they are dependent on each other. They co-vary systematically. Gender is defined by opposition. To be masculine is not to be feminine. Feminine is what is not masculine. What appears on either side of the divide is even in our time extremely variable over class, culture, and history. For instance, males may be thought to be particularly warlike, bookish competitive, co-operative, individualist or role-oriented, rational or emotional. And whichever combination of these is associated with masculinity, femininity will be associated with the opposite, and taken to be inferior—even if lip service is paid to some of the virtues of femininity.

When a group sharing experience is mostly male there will be a male bias to the understanding it reaches in any particular time and place. Their experience will inevitably be partial because masculinity is constituted by excluding and devaluing the areas of life assigned to femininity. It is impossible simply to add femininity on to masculinity and to call it different-but-equal: femininity has already been defined as different and inferior. To take femininity on equal terms would undermine both the masculine identity and the masculine value system. This is what would happen in philosophy. For instance, men's so-called autonomy depends on women to provide material and emotional support—hot dinners and comfort. To see this undermines both the men's experience of themselves as 'autonomous' and the value attached to it. All this is probably more obvious to feminists who can see how women's experience has been systematically left out. It will also be more obvious to any other non-included group. Indeed, in our own time and place various groups who are not middle-class white men may find that they share that excluded experience. (Harding, 1986)

### A question in epistemology

In so far as philosophy hopes to explain or describe the world, or to come to terms with the human condition, it needs to take women's experience seriously. I have argued that this is not just a question of adding on content, or methods. What is missing are points of view that may transform what is already there, rather than fill in the gaps of a ready-made

structure. The experience is needed during the process of formulating philosophical understanding: using a ready-made understanding to consider feminist ideas is radically inadequate.

How to include that experience is a question in epistemology, and taking the question seriously may seriously affect currently accepted theories of epistemology (Seller, 1988, Harding, 1986). Taking the question seriously is itself an example of why philosophy needs feminism. The question would not have been asked if there were no feminists, and, in particular, no feminists consciously asking philosophical questions. It is a question which has the power to transform current philosophical thinking. Once the experience of women is included, equally fundamental shifts occur in other areas. Reading recent feminist philosophy is often like looking at a familiar landscape from a new perspective. The themes of knowledge, autonomy, freedom and ethics are all still there, and quite recognizably so, but in unexpected configurations. Some themes, like birth or fantasy, barely visible before, come into view. That is how it is emerging at the moment. It would be surprising if that were all or if the preoccupations were static. We are just at the beginning.

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