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Against a Sequestered Philosophy

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Abstract

This paper argues that philosophical practice in the Western world, in particular analytic philosophy, suffers from problems that contribute to its lack of diversity in two senses: the exclusion of women and minorities, and a narrow choice of subjects and methods. This is not fruitful for philosophical exchange and the flourishing of philosophical thought. Three contributing factors are covered: A flawed execution when instilling intellectual humility; the gaslighting of women in philosophy; and an overemphasis on a narrow conception of intelligence. The conclusion calls for a more humane and socially aware practice of philosophy.

Résumé

Cet essai soutient que la pratique philosophique dans le monde occidental, en particulier la philosophie analytique, souffre de problèmes qui contribuent à son manque de diversité dans deux sens: l'exclusion des femmes et des minorités, et un choix étroit de sujets et de méthodes. Ceci n'est fructueux ni pour l'échange philosophique ni pour l'épanouissement de la pensée philosophique. Trois facteurs y contribuant sont l'objet de la discussion: Une mise en pratique défectueuse en inculquant l'humilité intellectuelle, le "gaslighting" envers les femmes en philosophie et une trop grande importance accordée à une conception étroite de l'intelligence. La conclusion fait appel à une pratique plus humaine et socialement consciente de la philosophie.

Keywords: gender, diversity, culture of philosophy, gaslighting, epistemic humility

Introduction

What drew me, and I think many others, to philosophy is its wide scope. There is hardly anything that cannot be examined from a philosophical perspective. For this reason, it can be difficult to explain exactly where the borders of philosophy lie. We cannot exactly reject something as non-philosophical on the grounds that it is on the wrong topic, in the way that biologists can turn away talk of rocks or historical fiction as just not being within the scope of their field. As a result, philosophers are perhaps more preoccupied than many others with the borders of their own field. We become frustrated when people with no formal philosophical training claim that they can make just as good a philosophical argument as we who have spent countless years learning philosophy and working as philosophers. After all, nobody likes to hear that their hard work for years has been useless.

So here we are, perpetually insecure about the borders of our own field, the deep secret fear of many of us being that our own work will end up being unphilosophical. To assuage their insecurities, philosophers have come up with various methods of gatekeeping. Some of them function externally so that their effect (intended or unintended) is to keep certain people or groups of people outside the discipline. Others have a function that might be called internal and encourage those who practise philosophy to restrict themselves to a narrow methodology and fix their focus on particular topics. An unintended effect of such methods may also be that certain groups of people will be less likely than others to practise philosophy. What I will consider in this paper is how some of these gate-keeping methods, along with some other practices in philosophy, can contribute to a sequestering of philosophy that prevents it from fulfilling our expectations.

Philosophy is the least diverse among the humanities when it comes to the demographics of its professional practitioners. Not only does it have a lower proportion of women than any other humanistic discipline (across the board at least in the Western world); the proportion of non-white philosophers is also extremely low.¹ This lack of diversity is problematic for a number of reasons,

¹ APA Member Demographics 2014–2016; Meijers 2013; Women in Philosophy in the UK. Gender and race are the demographical parameters most frequently mentioned regarding

some of which I will take for granted in this paper and others which I am about to bring to the readers' attention. The diversity problem seems to have been gaining attention in the past decade or two, such that it is finally being acknowledged by the mainstream, while possible explanations and solutions are still being sought and discussed. Unfortunately, solving the problem does not prove to be an easy task and we are still very far from any solution.

It is not my intention to bring forth a magic solution to philosophy's diversity problem in this paper. What I will argue is that the kind of philosophy that invites this kind of problem is not an optimal form of philosophical practice and that it is symptomatic of the sequestering of philosophy. Philosophy is meant to be a discipline dedicated to showing us both the depth and breadth of human thought. It ought to be evident that this goal cannot be served unless it is practiced by a diverse group of people with a varied range of backgrounds and life experiences.² A related issue is that it is important to enable this diverse group of practicing philosophers to work on a wide range of subjects.

In her paper, "How Is This Paper Philosophy?",³ Kristie Dotson argues that professional philosophy in North-America shows symptoms of a culture of justification. Her description of a culture of justification is based on a paper by Gayle Salamon describing her reasons for leaving philosophy for English:⁴ "To say that philosophy has a culture of justification, then, is to say that the profession of philosophy requires the practice of making congruent one's own ideas, projects and, in her case, pedagogical choices with some "traditional" conception of philosophical engagement."⁵ "A privileging of 'justification as a method' refers to a heightened value placed upon processes of legitimation, or identifying congruence between accepted patterns and standards with one's own belief, project, and/or processes, for the sake of positive status."⁶ Dotson argues that this culture of justification yields a difficult environment for what she calls diverse practitioners of philosophy. By diverse practitioners she

philosophy, and where philosophy is clearly lacking in diversity in comparison with many other disciplines. I do not mention other parameters specifically as it is not clear to me where philosophy stands regarding those in comparison with other disciplines.

² Fehr (2011) makes an argument for the importance of diversity in scientific communities or disciplines more generally.

³ Dotson 2012.

⁴ Salamon 2009.

⁵ Dotson 2012: 6.

⁶ Ibid: 7.

is referring to those who deviate from the mainstream in any way, whether through social group membership or through choice of topics or methods in their philosophical work. The claims I make in this paper are similar in spirit to Dotson's, or at least they seem consistent with it.

In short, I believe that some of the ways that philosophers police their borders, along with other methods typical for philosophical practice, contribute to two ways in which philosophy becomes sequestered. One is that philosophers have come to restrict themselves to a narrow range of "acceptable" topics and methods.⁷ The other is that the people practicing philosophy are predominantly white men. Both kinds of sequestering limit the potential of the discipline. The narrowing of philosophy in the first sense clearly makes it difficult for philosophy to fulfill its promise as a discipline that can be about virtually anything. It runs the risk of making philosophy, philosophical problems, and philosophical methods seem uninteresting and/or irrelevant to many people who might otherwise find it a worthwhile venture. This is somewhat related to the second manner of sequestration, i.e. philosophy's demographical diversity problem. As one might expect, philosophy has been shaped by those practicing it. As a result, those questions and methods that reflect the needs and interests of white men have been dominant within it. Thus, each of the two ways in which it has come to be sequestered is likely to contribute to the perpetuation of the other.

I discuss three issues associated with philosophical history or methodology, all of which reflect to some degree the above problem. While they are separate issues, they are related in that they all have something to do with how philosophers view themselves, their discipline and one another that are relevant to the issues I have mentioned above. I first discuss how a misuse of the notion of intellectual humility can become harmful in a biased and unjust environment. Then I move onto the topic of the exclusion of women from philosophy through what I consider to be a process of gaslighting. The third issue concerns an overemphasis on intelligence and innate talent, measured and conceived of in a superficial way. On the whole,

⁷ This is, for instance, discussed in Kitcher 2011. Barnes 2014 argues against a narrow conception of fundamentality in metaphysics that is also relevant in this context. Another discussion of narrow conceptions and an exclusive culture in philosophy can be found in Jenkins 2014.

the paper can be considered a call for more humane and socially engaged practices in philosophy, both for the sake of the people who are unhappy under current practices, and for the sake of improvement of philosophy as a discipline.

Humility

My first semester in graduate school, I was hit with a severe case of impostor syndrome and became convinced for a while that I had been admitted by mistake. I kept entertaining the thought that my application had been mixed up with someone else's in the selection process, or that someone at the office had accidentally sent me an acceptance letter instead of a rejection letter and that it was only out of mercy or embarrassment that the department had decided to let me stay after the mistake was discovered. There were probably many combined reasons for this. This was my first time studying in English and I was experiencing difficulty writing papers in this foreign language, as well as adjusting to norms that were somewhat different from what I was used to in my home country. I was studying alongside some brilliant students and felt inadequate in comparison. And the professors seemed to consider it their job to teach us humility. We had been admitted to a highly competitive graduate program, most of us presumably near the top of our class in college. It seemed to be taken for granted that our intellectual self-esteem at arrival would be very high, that we had to be taught to be more humble, and that the best way to accomplish that was through extensive and harsh criticism.

Philosophy has a long tradition of training students in humility, and both epistemic and intellectual humility are considered important traits for a good philosopher.⁸ The ideal of epistemic humility is frequently introduced early on

⁸ It can be argued that the goal of harsh critique in philosophy graduate school is not to instill humility but to prepare the students for professional life by treating them as they may expect to be treated once they have completed the program. Furthermore, they are thus given the courtesy and shown the respect of being treated as "peers" or "intellectual equals" by their instructors. This is an explanation commonly given for this kind of "tough love" approach. It is, of course, impossible to divine the motivations of individual instructors. However, it seems to me that even if this is what motivates many philosophy instructors, it is quite likely that their ultimate reason for that is that they value intellectual humility. Why do we consider it important for philosophers to be able to stomach criticism once they become professionals if not

when students first encounter philosophy and hear of Socratic wisdom, or of how Socrates was wise because he did not think of himself as knowing anything.⁹ The notion of intellectual humility has formally been one of the subjects of virtue epistemology, but less formally, intellectual humility in one sense or another has been emphasized as an important habit in philosophical training, such as when my professors in graduate school made sure to criticize our work heavily. It is considered very important to get a philosophy student to comprehend and internalize the following and more: that they may fail to grasp a complex issue at first glance, or that they may even misinterpret it as one that is less complex; that gaining a good understanding of a subject matter may take considerable effort on their behalf; that if they do not understand their interlocutor it is possible that it is due to their own failure to understand rather than the interlocutor's failure to express themselves properly; that if they have a disagreement with someone it is possible that it is the other party who is right.

It is of course good for anyone to grasp all this; we must all be aware that we are not omniscient and infallible authorities on everything and each of us must be able to practise self-criticism in order to produce good work. We have all seen shoddy work produced by people who seem to lack self-criticism and even felt embarrassed on their behalf. Holding one's own work up to a high standard can thus be helpful if one wants to produce something of a high quality. However, it is not self-evident what the best way is to instill a healthy dose of humility and self-criticism in people, be they philosophers or something else. Is it really best to have humility and self-criticism in as large quantities as possible? In the case of self-criticism the answer is clearly negative; regarding humility we may have to consider first what exactly we mean by the term. Self-criticism can be so extreme that it becomes stifling, resulting in no work produced. My own largest battles back in graduate school consisted of periods during which I could not bring myself to write anything that would become a part of my dissertation because I felt all my attempts at it were doomed to produce things too bad to be worthy. Whatever intellectual

because we think it is important that those who present flawed ideas and reasoning are able and willing to do their best to amend it? At least it seems to be a very likely explanation, although other explanations may be conceivable.

⁹ Ryan 2012.

humility is, I doubt I had too little of it during those periods. What I lacked was self-confidence. I did finish in the end, after a long struggle with my self-criticism; I had to learn to rein it in. In the years since, I have always found the management of my self-criticism to be one of the most difficult aspects of my work.

There is nothing extraordinary about my story. In fact, I believe it is quite ordinary, especially for women in philosophy. Many do not make it through graduate school; I am one of those who did. I had several friends there with brilliant minds and wonderful ideas who gave up along the way, not to mention all the people who for some reason were put off by philosophy or its culture well before graduate school. But let us return to the matter of intellectual humility.

There are different approaches to describing intellectual humility in the literature on virtue epistemology. On some accounts, it consists in getting as far away from certain vices as possible, such as arrogance and vanity.¹⁰ On other accounts, being intellectually humble is to be at the right balance point between too much and too little self-esteem, between arrogance and servility or self-effacement. On such an account, being intellectually humble would mean having just the right amount of self-criticism in intellectual matters.¹¹ The difference between these two kinds of accounts matters in that they seem to lead to different pedagogical approaches. It seems possible to instill humility in the first sense by making sure to provide enough criticism. The more the better, if humility is the only goal. Given the second kind of view, however, heaping negative criticism on philosophy students may not always be a good idea as there are various other traits that must be nurtured as well to keep the proper balance.

My worry is that in many philosophy programs, a great part of the training is focused on giving negative criticism without much encouragement. This may be due to the fact that many philosophy instructors themselves underwent such training and take it for granted that this is the way one does things, or at least they are not familiar with other methods. A downside of this is that philosophy students enter with different backgrounds. Many women and

¹⁰ Roberts and Wood 2003 give such an account.

¹¹ An example of such an account can be found in Whitcomb et al. 2015.

members of various minorities begin receiving the message from a very early age that their intellects are not up to all that much and that they'd better concede their judgments to those who are more respected than they are; those who have more intellectual authority. On the other hand, there will also be students with a high level of intellectual self-esteem who have never received such indoctrination in intellectual self-doubt and have even become used to considering themselves intellectually superior to some of their fellow students, or to people "like them". When all these students repeatedly receive the same message of "what you did was not good enough, you are too arrogant and must become more critical of yourself and your work", it is very likely that those who already have low self-esteem will readily take it to heart and become even more intellectually submissive and self-critical, whereas those with high self-esteem, who would actually be most likely to benefit from more self-criticism, will be more resistant recipients. In other words, sending the same harsh message to everyone may result in reinforcing a flawed social dynamic already existing between the students when they enter and exacerbating insecurities of underprivileged students. A member of a marginalized group who enters philosophical training may exit such training with a mindset that we might call *too* intellectually humble, or alternatively intellectually submissive or self-effacing. Not only is this harmful in the context of the person's own work and personal well-being, but also in the context of interactions with those lacking such humility. Another concern is that people who are intellectually submissive, or highly self-critical, are more susceptible to becoming victims of gaslighting, which I will cover in the next section.

To illustrate the lack of sensitivity in some of the literature on intellectual humility to different conditions of the "potentially humble", I present an example. In an influential paper, Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood make the claim that intellectual humility can be defined in contrast with a list of fourteen vices. The two vices they focus on are arrogance and vanity. My purpose here is not to discuss Roberts and Wood's account of intellectual humility, but to scrutinize this description they offer of vanity:

The vain person is preoccupied with his status-relevant appearances. Robustly healthy and virtuous people are a little bothered by others' not taking them seriously, slighting them in society, thinking they are not worth much; but the vain person is

very bothered by such things. We are inclined to say that the vain person is enslaved to others' approval of him, or at any rate unduly beholden to it.¹²

The implication here seems to be that anyone who is more than “a little bothered” by not being taken seriously, by being slighted in society, or being thought worthless by others is vain and in need of more humility, “enslaved by others' approval”. What Roberts and Wood seem to have in mind is a well-established person who on a regular basis has no reason to worry about being taken seriously or to worry about their social status, and who can rely on social support. For such an individual, it may seem vain to linger on a single incident of being disrespected even though it may sting a little. However, this description becomes problematic when it comes to those who are frequently or systematically not taken seriously, who get slighted on a regular basis, and are considered less worthy than others because of their social status. It ought to be clear that feeling hurt, exasperated or even desperate when being silenced, yet again, or slighted in the context of frequent slights are, after all, perfectly normal and justifiable human feelings that have nothing to do with vanity. They signify a will to be treated with due respect, to be able to communicate successfully with others, and a desire to have one's dignity intact and to accomplish one's goals.

The message in the passage is by no means uncommon. Members of marginalized groups often feel pressured to trivialize their perceptions of unjust treatment. Such treatment often takes the form of microaggressions where each individual instance may seem completely insignificant when taken out of the context of the accumulation of similar instances. Furthermore, the perpetrators of microaggressions may be completely unaware that they are doing anything problematic.¹³ Thus, members of dominant groups will lack understanding of the ongoing injustices and there is a risk that they will deny that they occur or be unwilling to acknowledge them for what they are. I say more about this example in the next section when I discuss gaslighting. What is important for now, however, is to keep in mind that philosophy students differ in their social status and vulnerabilities and making the blanket

¹² Roberts and Wood 2003: 260.

¹³ Tschaeppe 2016. Work on systemic and internalized oppression is also relevant here, such as Frye 1983 and Cudd 2006.

assumption that they are all equally arrogant or have the same self-esteem when they enter a philosophy program and addressing them as if they all had the same needs and were likely to respond in the same way to criticism can be downright harmful to many of them. This is another reason to emphasize the need for philosophy to find ways to become a discipline in which different kinds of people can feel comfortable and respected.

Gaslighting

In recent years, so-called gaslighting has gained increasing attention as a tool of manipulation and psychological abuse.¹⁴ Gaslighting occurs when a person manipulates another by making them doubt their own perceptions, memories, judgments, experiences, and, finally, sanity. The manipulator or abuser—the gaslighter—frequently uses methods such as lies, denial, misdirection, and contradiction. In other words, the target of the gaslighting is led to believe that they are crazy, that their judgments, memories, and experiences cannot be trusted, and that they would better off relying on someone more dependable, such as the perpetrator, the gaslighter, for judgments and decisions. The term is derived from a British play from 1938 by Patrick Hamilton called *Gas Light*,¹⁵ which was adapted into a movie twice, in 1940 and 1944.¹⁶ In the play/movie, a man keeps looking for stolen jewels in the attic of a house he has moved into with his wife. Every time he goes searching and turns on the lights in the attic, the gaslights in the rest of the house are dimmed as a result, the wife is puzzled by the changes in the lights, but the husband flatly denies that anything can be going on with the lights and blames this on her imagination. In addition, he resorts to various tricks to undermine his wife’s credibility and to make her think that she is losing her mind, such as hiding items or putting them in odd places and then blaming her for misplacing them.

¹⁴ Abramson 2014 gives a thoughtful philosophical analysis of the phenomenon. Gaslighting is also discussed in Benson 1994.

¹⁵ Hamilton 1938.

¹⁶ A British version was made by Thorold Dickinson in 1940, with Anton Walbrook and Diana Wynard in the leading roles. A US version was made in 1944 by George Cukor, starring Ingrid Bergman, Charles Boyer, Joseph Cotten, and Angela Lansbury.

The context in which gaslighting tends to be presented is usually on an individual level so that we hear about individuals who get abused in this manner. There are occasional mentions of gaslighting in a political context when it is claimed that the public is getting duped.¹⁷ What I think has been neglected, however, is the systemic gaslighting that is very much implicated in the oppression of subordinated groups. Let us return to the passage above where Roberts and Wood are describing vanity.¹⁸ I take it that they are not directing their words at anyone in particular nor that they have any malicious intent, unlike the husband in *Gaslight*. However, the passage does have a gaslighting *effect* on people who are routinely subjected to the kind of disrespect described, which Roberts and Wood so casually imply only a vain person would be more than “a little bothered” by. The effect of such words, whether intended or not, is that readers who recognize feeling distressed in the circumstances described feel a pressure to think of their reactions as unwarranted; in this case, as a sign of vanity. This is not among the worst possible types of gaslighting. In more extreme cases of gaslighting, the perpetrators are guilty of committing an injustice and at the same time they deny that it is taking place and insist that something completely different is going on. This is not going on in the example from Roberts and Wood. But their example does have the effect of making the recipients of the message confused about appropriate reactions to injustices committed towards them and distrustful of their own assessment of how others ought to treat them.

Gaslighting, as described here, involves epistemic injustice. Epistemic injustice can take many forms, such as when members of marginalized groups do not get to be proper participants of knowledge production, do not have full credibility in the social environment, or when they are for various reasons and through various means, often structural, silenced. This has been considered in various forms, not to be confused with one another, such as hermeneutical injustice, epistemic oppression, testimonial injustice, and epistemic violence.¹⁹ An important feature of gaslighting is that those who are victimized by it suffer from several forms of epistemic injustice. They are

¹⁷ Duca 2016 provides an influential example.

¹⁸ Roberts and Wood 2003: 260.

¹⁹ Discussions of some of these forms can be found in Fricker 2007; Dotson 2014; Spivak 1988; Pohlhaus 2016. Kidd, Medina, and Pohlhaus 2017 provides a good overview.

denied credibility and doubly so, in that their credibility is not only doubted by others but they are led to mistrust it themselves. They are silenced and come to have great difficulty making sense of their experiences.

I believe that women in philosophy have endured systemic gaslighting through the ages.²⁰ Before moving forward with that claim, however, I will provide an example of the gaslighting of women as a group taken from another academic discipline.

The American quantum physicist and Nobel laureate Richard Feynman published his autobiography in the 1980's,²¹ which included various anecdotes from his life in the preceding decades. Many who have read this book have been quite shocked by Feynman's sexism; he tends to speak of women as consumer products. Others seem to read it without being concerned about that aspect and just think of Feynman as an eccentric and funny fellow. But on to the example: Feynman took up drawing in the 1960's, and became sufficiently good at it for his work to be displayed in an exhibition in California. Here we have Feynman describing one of his portraits:

One drawing was a portrait of the beautiful blonde model from the art class, which I had originally intended to be a study of shading: I put a light at the level of her legs a bit to the side and pointed it upwards. As she sat, I tried to draw the shadows as they were—her nose cast its shadow rather unnaturally across her face—so they wouldn't look so bad. I drew her torso as well, so you could also see her breasts and the shadows they made. I stuck it in with the other drawings in the exhibit and called it "Madame Curie Observing the Radiations from Radium." The message I intended to convey was, nobody thinks of Madame Curie as a woman, as feminine, with beautiful hair, bare breasts, and all that. They only think of the radium part (p. 251).

The way Feynman makes it sound, he was acting out of concern for Marie Curie's memory. The implied problem is that people only saw Curie as a boring sexless scientist obsessed with "the radium part" and neglected to think about her as a sexual being: "as a woman, as feminine, with beautiful hair, bare breasts, and all that". Surely, this reinvention of Curie's image by Feynman would be a great service to her memory.

²⁰ Scheman 1995 suggests that women in philosophy are being gaslighted. Ruíz 2014 discusses the gaslighting of women of color in philosophy.

²¹ Feynman 1985.

The problem is that Feynman's message can easily be interpreted as patriarchal gaslighting, to be experienced by any intellectually ambitious woman who finds the sexualization and objectification of Curie uncomfortable or offensive. The message conveyed is "If you are a woman, your intellectual accomplishments will remain insignificant. Even if you manage to become a double Nobel laureate, you are still destined to be reduced to a sex object, created for the sheer enjoyment of the male gaze. Even death will not ensure safety from sexual harassment. If you are a woman, you *are* your "beautiful hair, bare breasts, and all that"." If Curie's intelligence is insignificant and her breasts are her defining feature, what hope is there for the rest of us? As is typical in gaslighting cases, the person delivering the message, Feynman, acts as if he is saying and doing something completely innocuous: he is just trying to help!

It is important to consider here that Feynman's is not an isolated voice, but one speaking from a vantage point of authority. A woman feeling uneasy with his treatment of Curie may expect to be met with considerable resistance if she speaks up; not just by Feynman, but by a great many other interlocutors. Because of the social context, she can expect to be discredited and told that she is overreacting, insecure, unfair, envious, imagining things, hysterical, paranoid, or crazy. Feynman is certainly not the first man (nor the last, I'm afraid) to reduce a woman to a sex object. We are accustomed to a social environment in which women are routinely put down in this manner. Women who are trying to get taken seriously in a professional setting have frequently had to endure sexual harassment of various forms, women are harassed simply when they are walking down the street, they are expected to meet certain standards of beauty to please men, etc. It is extremely common that women's complaints about aspects of this are met with incredulity, or worse. Thus, while Feynman's message is delivered by him alone, it is done so in a context in which women who dislike it, and are even outraged by it, cannot expect to be heard if they voice their objections. Feynman, on the other hand, expects the support of his audience.

Thus, women with intellectual aspirations who feel uneasy by Feynman's depiction of Curie are being gaslighted. On the surface, Feynman is doing something nice for Curie's memory by reminding us of her neglected sexuality

(the implication being that this is what all women want).²² But what is really going on is that a brilliant woman is being turned into a sex object; thus her intellectual achievements are made to seem less significant. In a sexist environment, this affects all women, who receive the message that the same is bound to happen to them. But since the message is made to be about something else on the surface, their objections are likely to be silenced, they will not be believed, and are conditioned not to take their own perceptions seriously.

In philosophy, women have consistently received the message that it does not really matter that there are no women in the curriculum. They have been told that it cannot be helped anyway because unfortunately so few women were present in the history of philosophy.²³ Furthermore, why should female philosophy students even care about such frivolous details as the gender of the philosophers they are reading? Aren't women those who keep insisting that gender should not matter when it comes to the right and ability to do philosophy? Surely, women asking to read work by women philosophers are just practising reverse sexism! If women want more women in philosophy, it is up to them to prove that they are good enough to be there. They just have to make sure to work hard, speak up, and then there is nothing that can stop them, is there?

At the same time, many women trying to work in philosophy have felt that there was something seriously off about this message. They have felt as if they were not fully respected and as if they did not properly count; as if they were not smart enough, not worthy, that they did not belong. Philosophy has had and still has recurring problems with sexual harassment. And here I can start a list of what gets in the way of women fitting in. According to a recent study in the US, the belief that innate talent or "brilliance" is crucial for success in their given discipline turned out to be by far more common among philosophers than in any other academic discipline. The same study showed a

²² The lack of plausibility of Feynman's overt claim bears pointing out as well. It ought to seem quite evident that, given Curie's circumstances as one of very few female physicists in France in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it is extremely unlikely that she ever got to spend a day in her life without being reminded in a number of ways of her being a woman. And people who admire her most certainly seem to think of her as a woman, and think of her as a pioneering woman. It may be mainly the sexualized aspect that gets "neglected".

²³ Through reclaiming efforts in recent years, we have been finding out that this was false. There were far more women in the history of philosophy than we were told.

negative correlation between belief in innate talent in an academic discipline and the number of women and black scholars in the same field.²⁴ This should come as no surprise if we consider what kind of thinking this reflects. The stereotypical genius is never a woman.²⁵ If philosophers are to a great degree on the lookout for genius-types, they are hardly very open-minded about women in the profession, let alone if they are far from resembling the stereotype. Here we can also think about stereotype threat²⁶ and what that does to a person's performance and self-esteem. And considering the brilliant genius stereotype, we need to recall our cultural tendency to overestimate men's intelligence and underestimate women's intelligence.²⁷ How likely can it be that women in philosophy will feel just as sure of themselves and well-supported by their peers and mentors as the men?

The point is that women in philosophy have been receiving all kinds of messages telling them that they are incapable of practising philosophy or even thinking philosophical thoughts. Some of these messages have been overt, when they have been told directly that women had no place in philosophy, but mostly they have been indirect and subtle to a varying degree.²⁸ The marginalization of women takes many forms, including a lack of female role models, lack of mentorship, attributions of intellectual inferiority, sexual harassment, hostility from peers, negative reactions to topics considered too "feminine", the male point of view being taken for granted as a universal human point of view, getting talked over in conversations, not having their input acknowledged, etc. At the same time, when women have voiced concerns about any of this, the reactions they have received have frequently consisted in accusations about them complaining over frivolous things, or even things that are simply not there. If they are not happy in philosophy, the problem must be on their side, and they should leave and find something else to do.

²⁴ Leslie et al. 2015.

²⁵ An interesting discussion of the development of the image of genius can be found in Battersby 1989.

²⁶ Goguen 2016; Saul 2013.

²⁷ Rammstedt and Rammsayer 2000; Syzmanowicz and Furnham 2011.

²⁸ For several accounts of women's experiences in philosophy, see e.g. Alcoff 2003.

Thus, the few women who have persevered have been in the situation of receiving constant messages about how they were trying to do something they were not really capable of doing. At the same time, discussions about their receiving these messages have been unwelcome, and even the existence of those messages as something systematically directed at women has not been acknowledged. Each woman has been taught to interpret those messages individually, as an indicator that there might be a problem with her personally: that she might not be good enough. Through the profession's resistance to women's attempts at expressing their discomfort, they have been encouraged to internalize the idea that it was not the profession of philosophy that had a problem that needed to be fixed, but instead that there was something wrong with their unease or even with them personally. I remember being consumed with guilt and shame throughout both my undergraduate and graduate years for not speaking enough in class. At the same time, the atmosphere was such that I felt strongly discouraged in most of the classes to speak at all, terrified of saying the wrong thing and exposing my stupidity to the ridicule of loud men. I had professors who kept telling me that I had to start speaking more in class. It was only towards the end of graduate school that I began to realize that perhaps the problem was not exclusively on my side.

With increased awareness of philosophy's gender problem in recent years, there are some signs indicating that there may be changes ahead in this respect. Even though the gender proportions in philosophy have not changed much yet, there has at least been progress when it comes to acknowledging the problem and beginning research in order to find ways to solve it. Just the acknowledgment of the problem does help in many ways: while many women have all along been talking amongst themselves about these issues, others have felt isolated. Admitting widely that philosophy does have a gender problem caused by a flawed culture is a confirmation for each of the women that it is not she who is the problem, but the culture of philosophy. But of course speaking of the need for change, valuable as it can be, is only a first step. We must find ways to make those changes as well. And there are still many philosophers who remain unconvinced of the need for any change.

The Cult of Intelligence

In a recent paper,²⁹ Maren Behrensen and Sofia Kaliarnta reflect on the prevalence of depression among academic philosophers, prompted by Peter Railton's disclosure of his struggle with depression in a keynote address at the Central APA. They argue that while depression of course has the potential to strike anywhere, there are several contributing factors making academic philosophy what they call a "depression machine", especially for philosophers who belong to some vulnerable group or another or do not fit the stereotypical philosopher mold. They identify four factors: "first, a deeply ingrained tendency to treat learned skills as innate talents; second, a deeply ingrained tendency to treat philosophy as a vocation, not a profession; third, an extremely competitive environment; and fourth, a reward structure that fosters "impostor syndrome.""³⁰ Factors three and four are, as Behrensen and Kaliarnta readily admit, not unique to philosophy but prevalent in the whole academic world and I will not dwell further on them, despite their importance in the grand scheme of things. The second factor has to do with how being a philosopher often becomes integrated with our self-identity so that, for instance, lack of success in the (highly competitive and unjust) profession can seem more of a personal failure than it otherwise would. And the culture of philosophy, according to Behrensen and Kaliarnta, encourages us to identify as philosophers in this manner.

Before moving onto a discussion of the first factor, which will take up the bulk of this section, I want to say a few words about this second factor. First, it seems quite plausible to me that people who practice philosophy are prone to integrating their being philosophers with their self-identity. I do not have any data to back this up, only anecdotal evidence from people I have known. If the culture of philosophy encourages people to think this way of themselves, it presumably has something to do with how we practice and relate to philosophy. Those who become sufficiently enamored with the subject to want

²⁹ Behrensen and Kaliarnta 2017.

³⁰ Behrensen and Kaliarnta 2017: 357–358.

to try for a career in it become so impassioned and find it so consuming that they cease to be able to think of themselves as non-philosophers. This phenomenon is not unique to philosophy. It is very common among artists, for example, and among many academics. This phenomenon in and of itself does not have to be a negative thing. A person who identifies strongly with their chosen profession is clearly passionate about their work and there are many things to be said for that kind of dedication. But the downside is that when something goes wrong, such as when work in that profession is not to be had, the disappointment can threaten one's very self-identity. For that reason, Behrensen and Kaliarnta's hypothesis that this is a risk factor for depression among philosophers sounds plausible.

The first risk factor listed by Behrensen and Kaliarnta in their paper is the emphasis philosophers place on intelligence, or "treating learned skills as innate talents". Their point is that philosophy has a culture that places an enormous emphasis on intelligence, and furthermore that we use quite superficial methods to gauge it. Those who write in a certain way, speak in a certain way, have certain mannerisms, or who look a certain way are perceived as intelligent, and are by the measure of many philosophers thus considered as having the *innate* talent it takes to become good philosophers. Recall what I mentioned above about the prevalent belief among philosophers that having an innate talent for philosophy was important for success. It also seems quite common to hear philosophers speak of philosophical talent as something that people either have or do not have.

According to Behrensen and Kaliarnta, the emphasis on superficially measured intelligence and/or presumed innate talent becomes a risk factor for depression for all those who fall outside the norm or fail to fulfill the criteria against which these things tend to be measured. That means that anyone who is not a self-confident, able-bodied white man from a privileged background will be at risk.

Eric Schwitzgebel points out in a blog post on what it takes to seem smart in philosophy that all those who manage to seem smart seem to be white men.³¹ His point is that while certain behaviors are considered indicators of

³¹ Schwitzgebel 2010.

smartness, such as speaking and writing in certain ways, people's judgments of intelligence are also affected by who it is that is speaking, writing, etc. Studies on implicit bias and stereotypes suggest that people have certain expectations and make judgments about other people on the basis of group membership, even without realizing it themselves. These expectations tend to be in accordance with ruling social norms. In other words, well-intentioned as we may be, through our cultural biases we are likely to have the unintended expectation that the most intelligent people are white men, a perception reinforced by their speaking style, themselves associated with other forms of privilege, such as class. In light of this I would like to point out how the same or similar behaviors can be interpreted differently given existing preconceptions about the person. Take speaking slowly, which could be interpreted as a sign of being deep and thoughtful in a man already perceived as intelligent, while a woman speaking in the same manner might be read as hesitant and insecure.

Myisha Cherry and Eric Schwitzgebel argue in the article "Like the Oscars #PhilosophySoWhite"³² that the appearance of smartness plays a crucial role in evaluations of philosophy because it is difficult to evaluate the quality of philosophical work. As Schwitzgebel points out in his blog post, those who happen to be good at appearing smart and likely to be evaluated as such are white privileged men. The result, according to Cherry and Schwitzgebel, is that their philosophical work tends to be favored over that of others, whose work is more harshly judged. A similar claim is made by Katrina Hutchison in her paper "Sages and Cranks: The Difficulty of Identifying First-Rate Philosophers". She argues that because the evaluation of philosophy is subjective, and therefore judgments about which people are good philosophers are subjective, there is a great risk that philosophers end up basing their judgments in such matters on stereotypes.³³

Let us pause for a moment and contemplate the claims that have been made here. According to Behrensen and Kaliarnta, philosophers from marginalized groups are at risk for depression because of the profession's obsession with intelligence and innate talent and superficial ways of

³² Cherry and Schwitzgebel 2016.

³³ Hutchison 2013.

measuring such things. Cherry and Schwitzgebel are also of the view that philosophy has a culture of emphasizing superficial measures of intelligence and talent and that these measures favor privileged, white men. Furthermore, they claim that the reason why philosophers place this importance on the superficial appearance of intelligence is that evaluation of philosophical work is difficult. Hutchison makes a similar claim. Thus, we have two main claims to consider: that philosophers have a culture of evaluating work on the basis of superficial measures of appearance of smartness, and that the reason for this is that philosophical work is especially difficult to evaluate by other standards.

The first claim is clearly empirical and can only be evaluated as such. Is it really the case that the philosophical profession has the kind of culture described? I have already mentioned the study done by Sarah-Jane Leslie and others that showed that philosophers were more likely than others to consider innate “brilliance” important for success in their field.³⁴ In the absence of empirical studies on the value philosophers place on the appearance of intelligence or their way of measuring we must rely on anecdotal evidence for further support of these claims. There has been plenty of that, in my own experience and in the experiences reported by many colleagues. Whether these values are more or less prevalent in philosophy than elsewhere is, of course, impossible to say. There seems to be a strong association with reason and deep thinking within philosophy, which of course is strongly associated with intelligence, but such associations may to a varied extent be in place in other disciplines as well. The part of the claim that judgments made about appearances of intelligence tend to be carried out in a superficial and biased manner is something for which we have good support, from work on implicit bias of various forms.

The second claim, if true, provides some support for the first one. That is, if it is the case that it is very difficult to evaluate philosophical work through objective methods, then philosophers will surely have to resort to some other methods of evaluation. And this will at least lend plausibility to the idea that they may sometimes rely on the outwards credibility of the messenger.³⁵ It

³⁴ Leslie et al 2015.

³⁵ There may be reasons for hesitation here. For instance, when papers are submitted to journals, they are evaluated through anonymous peer review. In such cases, the evaluators

seems clear that philosophy does not provide measurable results in the same manner as natural or empirical sciences often do and the success of philosophical ideas cannot be measured or quantified by their application. This, however, is generally the case for humanistic disciplines. We may wonder, then, whether philosophical methodology is somehow especially difficult to evaluate. I think we can return here to what I said at the beginning of the paper about the fuzzy borders of philosophy and how philosophy can be about almost anything. It may be that these features make it more difficult to distinguish good from bad philosophy. Of course there are other areas of life where objective evaluations are difficult. Art of various forms comes to mind, and in fact there may be similar problems in place there when it comes to what it takes to get ahead. Often, what matters for getting ahead as an artist are superficial traits such as having the right look or being the right “type”.

I am not claiming that evaluations of work in art, or in philosophy, are only made on superficial grounds. Nor do I think that Cherry and Schwitzgebel or Hutchison would want to make such a strong claim about philosophy. Someone who believed that whenever they evaluated the work of another philosopher, be it a student or a peer, their judgments were solely determined by how strongly they could associate the person in question with the stereotype for “intelligent person” or “talented philosopher”, might as well give up now. And the same goes for art, of course. Someone who believes that their appreciation for music is determined solely by how cool the musicians appear can hardly feel like they really appreciate music. The point is, rather, that even though we do our best to be fair in our evaluations of philosophical

do not know the author’s identity although there may be ways around that in some cases (some peer reviewers admit to doing web searches of papers they review and finding the authors’ identities that way, and in some cases it may be easy to guess the author’s identity if they are well-known and the subfield is small). It hardly seems possible for reviewers of an anonymously submitted paper to use the author’s appearance, and thus credibility, as a measure. On the other hand, there are plenty of other occasions where evaluations are not of anonymous works, such as of monographs, book chapters, and student work, reactions to talks given at conferences, decisions about whom to invite to participate in various events, publications, etc. And there are parts of the journal submission process that are usually not anonymous, such as when the editor decides which papers to send out for review and which to reject right away. At any rate, the claim should remain that the author’s appearance, reputation or other superficial traits are likely to affect the evaluators’ judgment some of the time rather than all the time. After all, the reason why we feel there is a need for an anonymous evaluation process for journal submissions in the first place is presumably that we worry that people’s judgments may be influenced by external factors otherwise.

work, and though we have shared ways of evaluating it, noticing when someone has made progress, etc., our evaluations are for the reasons described also influenced by the philosophical culture's admiration for intellectual genius, via implicit biases shaped by prevailing social norms.

Conclusion

An overemphasis on humility or a misapplication of it, the gaslighting of women, and an emphasis on appearing intelligent and/or innately talented are all different phenomena. However, the self-image of philosophers as philosophers, and the traits they come to expect in one another, are key components in all of them. Each of these phenomena contributes to what we can call philosophy's diversity problem. As I mentioned earlier, I believe this diversity problem is twofold, i.e., that there are two forms of sequestration that take place. One is that those practicing philosophy are demographically monolithic. The other is that the range of topics and methods deemed worthwhile within philosophy has a tendency to become narrow. These two problems are interconnected, as each of them is likely to feed into the other.

Each of the three phenomena I have discussed contributes to lack of diversity in the philosophical community. I have argued that a wrong kind of emphasis on intellectual humility can be discouraging for prospective philosophers from underprivileged groups, the gaslighting of women (and of other minority groups) is obviously not likely to attract them to the field, and the culture of intelligence is mostly encouraging for those belonging to groups well-fitted for appearing smart. Another effect of the emphasis on appearing smart is that many philosophers may be scared off from working on problems that are unusual, or from using unusual methods, since straying away from already sanctioned methods and problems can come at the risk of seeming unintelligent. It seems safer to stick to the things that have already been accepted by those who have already been accepted as good philosophers.

This is worrisome for philosophy as a discipline. It loses the people who

turn away from philosophy because they do not fit in;³⁶ methods that might be fruitful are not used for fear that colleagues might find them silly; and interesting and important problems are under-studied because they are unfashionable. A discipline represented by a homogenous elite using a narrow set of standards to congratulate one another on their outstanding intelligence does not fulfill its potential as a discipline dedicated to deep and urgent questions, nor does it reflect the full capacities of the human mind. This does not show philosophy at its finest.

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³⁶ Park 2014.

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