**Letter published in Times Literary Supplement Aug 7 2015**

Sir, —

I was pleased that none of your letters about my review of *Women in Philosophy: What Needs to Change?* (July 17) disagreed with its intended central point, which was that, while the peculiar underrepresentation of women in philosophy is no doubt a symptom of ills in the discipline, it would be wrong to aim for a population-matching proportion of female (or male) philosophers as an end in itself.

Kate Manne (July 24) took me to be urging that the underrepresentation might have a “benign explanation”. The explanations that I took seriously were (a) implicit bias against women, (b) that women are put off by the aggressive style of philosophical debate and (c) that they are put off by scholastic silliness designed to display “brilliance”. I wouldn’t have thought that any of these explanations were “benign”. Manne herself favoured an account, following Sally Haslanger, in terms of women having “less social permission to engage in the kind of aggressive intellectual combat which remains . . . standard in our discipline”. This seems in line with my second explanation.

Catherine Wilson (July 31) was concerned with the idea that women might regard the kind of “brilliance” admired in philosophy in the way that they regard excellence in snooker, and observed that the criteria for brilliance in philosophy are not clear-cut. However, I did not propose, nor do I believe, that women are disenchanted with “brilliance” per se, but only with the kind of scholastic work that is fostered by overenthusiasm for “brilliance”. This is in accord with Wilson’s own research findings that “women as a group were more reality-oriented”.

As for the criteria for brilliance in philosophy, or more generally for good work in the subject, Paul Wallace (July 31) was explicit in attributing current standards to a history of male domination. This may be right, but I doubt that the best solution is for women to “develop their own ‘philosophies’”, as he urges. All philosophical issues matter to both genders: they need to be subject to reasoned debate between all, not power struggles (currently male-dominated, we might note) between biased gender perspectives.

Amia Srinivasan (July 24) took issue with my assertion that “familiarity with the problems of marginalized groups” is of no relevance to philosophy, pointing out that “theorizing well about inequality, pornography or racial hate crimes . . . might require one to know something about being poor, a woman, or non-white”. This is a good point. My original thought was that philosophers do not have duties towards members of marginalized groups, unlike politicians, lawyers and doctors, and so need not be representative of them. But I accept that there are other ways in which marginal group membership might contribute to philosophical worth. Perhaps I can add—I don’t expect Srinivasan to disagree—that this is a case for preferring people because they will do better philosophy, not because of their group membership as such.

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