Women occupy 25 per cent of the posts in United Kingdom philosophy departments. The figures are similar throughout the Anglophone philosophy world. In the United States the proportion is 21 per cent, while Canada, Australia and New Zealand all have fewer than 30 per cent. For women philosophers. This makes philosophy an outlier among humanities subjects. Half a century ago, all university departments employed far fewer women than men. But this kind of imbalance has all but disappeared from areas such as English literature and history, and is nowadays largely restricted to the so-called STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics). Philosophy stands out in continuing to appoint about three times as many men as women to academic posts.

What is the explanation for this peculiarity, and should it be a matter of concern? These two questions are interlinked. How far philosophy’s gender imbalance is bad depends on its causes. If it were the result of simple discrimination against women, for instance, then it would not only be unjust, but it would also be preventing some of the best-suited people from working as philosophers. But it is not obvious that discrimination is the right explanation, and it should not be taken for granted that any other causes for the imbalance would be similarly unacceptable.

There certainly was a time when prejudice kept women out of philosophy. When I was a student in Cambridge at the end of the 1960s, we agitated for various academic changes, including the replacement of unseen examinations by some form of discussion. But this kind of imbalance has all but disappeared from areas such as English literature and history, and is nowadays largely restricted to the so-called STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics). Philosophy stands out in continuing to appoint about three times as many men as women to academic posts. The suave senior philosopher deputed to serve on our reform committee was sympathetic, but felt that there was no way round what he was pleased to dub the “boyfriend problem” – what was to stop some female undergraduate getting her cleverer male companion to write her papers for her? Another of our teachers was blunter. “Women are not good at philosophy,” he told one of my female colleagues, who understood standably well the field to forge a career as a distinguished journalist.

That was then, and thankfully it is now no longer acceptable to voice such thoughts in public. Are they nevertheless still harboured by a significant number of established philosophers? This is a trickier question to answer. I have no doubt that the majority of academic philosophers take themselves to be untainted by prejudice and quite capable of judging women by the same criteria as men. However, as Jennifer Saul stresses in her measured contribution to Women in Philosophy, there is a wealth of evidence to show that many well-meaning people, including academics, display “implicit bias” against historically unprivileged groups even when they are trying to treat them fairly. There is no direct evidence of this in philosophy, but it would be surprising, as Saul observes, if philosophers were somehow peculiarly immune to the surtineous influence of historical prejudice. Her point is amplified by Samantha Brennan’s article on “micro-inequities”, which details the ways in which implicit bias can lead to an accumulation of small harms inflicted on women philosophers.

In the nature of the case, it is difficult to know whether or what kind of surreptitious partiality is responsible for philosophy’s gender imbalance. Still, there is a level at which this doesn’t matter. In her article in this volume (“Women and Deviance in Philosophy”), Helen Beebee calls implicit bias an “easy answer” to what she calls a paper’s “pointed stick”. As Davis sees it “practising philosophy is to put snooker balls into pockets with a point stick”. As Davis sees it “practising philosophy is the primary task of the philosopher, no none is ranked in the top hundred. The sixtimes world champion Steve Davis has no doubt about the reason. It is not that women are incapable of the highest levels of skill. It is rather that they are less likely to attract the rewards for the top snooker players are considerable. But, if they come at the cost of a lifetime spent hitting coloured balls, and if women are less ready to pay this price than men, then who is to say they are wrong?

In some sought-after areas of employment, membership of a disadvantaged group can itself be a qualification, alongside any other abilities candidates may have. There are obvious reasons for wanting political institutions to include a suitably proportion of women and other under-represented groups. A similar case for affirmative action can be argued more widely, even for such technical professions as law and medicine. Good practice in these areas often demands familiarity with the problems of a certain group, as well as pure theoretical expertise. However, this line of thought has no obvious application to philosophy, or to snooker for that matter. On the face of things, neither profession has the function of representing particular groups.

Even if we assume that women are voluntarily selecting themselves out of philosophy, as snooker, and that there is no special social need that warrants affirmative action, as there may be in law and medicine, it does not yet follow that philosophy’s gender imbalance is benign. The crucial question is whether the costs that are turning women away are essen-

tial to the philosophical enterprise. Hours of practice may be a sine qua non for high-level performance in snooker. But the hoops that the would-be professional in philosophy has to jump through may be irrelevant to philosophical excellence, and be serving only to reduce the supply of able philosophers.

One thing that distinguishes academic phi-

losophy from nearly all other disciplines is its relatively easy access to doctoral training. As it is, the gender question is an ordeal by criticism. When I started philosophy, no halls were barred. If you thought a speaker had erred, you were encouraged to persist with your questions until he (it was rarely she) knocked under. Nowadays we Periscope this kind of surreptitious partiality to attend to. The gender imbalance now seems entirely proper to be levelled in the paper. But visitors from other disciplines still typically express surprise at the combative atmosphere of our proceedings.

This gender imbalance is a challenge for many young philosophers, but it seems to put women off far more than it does men. A number of papers in this collection explore this issue, including Marilyn Friedman’s “Women in Philosophy: A Brief History” and Cynthia Towney’s “Women in and out of Philosophy”. For Helen Beebee, philosophy’s macho style of debate is another easy issue. Reason and analysis may matter more in philosophy than in subjects that answer to empiricism, or are fundamentally about social, cultural, or psychoanalytic expertise. However, this line of thought can be pursued a little further. It is easy to see that there is no special social need that warrants affirmative action, as there may be in law and medicine, it does not yet follow that philosophy’s gender imbalance is benign. The crucial question is whether the reasons for wanting political institutions to include a suitably proportion of women and other under-represented groups. A similar case for affirmative action can be argued more widely, even for such technical professions as law and medicine. Good practice in these areas often demands familiarity with the problems of a certain group, as well as pure theoretical expertise. However, this line of thought has no obvious application to philosophy, or to snooker for that matter. On the face of things, neither profession has the function of representing particular groups.

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a purely topic-based attitude to curriculum design might mean that philosophy will be left with a continuing minority of women. But I wouldn’t count on it. Mores are changing, within philosophy as well as without, and it is hard to predict what men and women will come to want. Fifty years ago, who would have thought that women doctors would come to outnumber their male counterparts? In any case, aiming for gender balance as such seems a misguided strategy. The first task is to deal with the easy issues, and make sure good women philosophers are not being turned away for bad reasons. Then there is the admittedly harder task of deciding which topics deserve sustained philosophical attention and which do not. But once these matters have been dealt with, there seems no further reason not to let the gender numbers fall where they may.