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 WOMEN IN PHILOSOPHY
 What Needs to Change?
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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 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 assessed coursework. 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 no good at philosophy", he told one of my female friends, who understandably left 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 vast 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 surreptitious 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 how far this 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 Beebe calls implicit bias an "easy issue". What she means is that there is good reason to take steps to prevent it, whether or not it is the main cause of philosophy's anomalous numbers. There is little cost to anonymizing elements of selection procedures, for instance, or having minimum quotas of women on longlists, and it would be surprising if such measures did not do at least some good.

Still, implicit bias is unlikely to be the whole story. After all, there is no obvious reason why philosophy professors should be more susceptible to its effect than professors in history or English. Something peculiar to philosophy must be keeping the numbers of women down. We need to find out what this is, if we want to know whether it is a bad thing. To take an analogy – which I hasten to add is limited – consider professional snooker. Even though women are eligible to compete as professionals, none is ranked in the top hundred. The six-times 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 as a group they are disinclined to devote obsessive effort to "something that must be said is a complete waste of time – trying to put snooker balls into pockets with a pointed stick". As Davis sees it "practising eight hours a day to get to world championship level" ranks high among the "stupid things to do with your life".

Perhaps Davis has a rose-tinted view of his colleagues. It would be surprising if the world of professional snooker were uniformly welcoming to women aspirants. And no doubt a few successful role models would swell the number of women in the professional game. But suppose that there is something to Davis's theory, and that, even if these problems were solved, the mind-numbing rigours of practice would still dissuade most women. Would this be bad? It is hard to see why. 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 suitable 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 marginalized groups, as well as purely 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 in 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 essential to the philosophical enterprise. Hours of practice may be a sine qua non for high-level performance in snooker. But the hoops that women philosophers need to go through may be irrelevant to philosophical excellence, and be serving only to reduce the supply of able philosophers.

One thing that distinguishes academic philosophy from nearly all other disciplines is its adversarial style. To deliver a paper is to suffer an ordeal by criticism. When I started philosophy, no holds were barred. If you thought a speaker had erred, you were encouraged to persist with your questions until he (it was rarely she) knuckled under. Nowadays we affect a veneer of civility, and it is no longer considered entirely proper to bludgeon the speaker into submission once you have made your point. But visitors from other disciplines still typically express surprise at the combative atmosphere of our proceedings.

This gladiatorial element is a challenge for many young philosophers, but it seems to put more women off than it does men. A number of papers in this collection explore this issue, including Marilyn Friedman's "Women in Philosophy" and Catriona Mackenzie and Cynthia Townley's "Women in and out of Philosophy". For Helen Beebe, philosophy's macho style of debate is another easy issue. Reason and analysis may matter more in philosophy than in subjects that answer to empirical or textual data, but that is no reason to ignore ordinary standards of civility. A spirit of mutual exploration rather than animosity would serve philosophy just as well, and might have the added virtue of keeping talented women in the subject.

Earlier this year some striking data about the representation of women across the full range of academic subjects were published in *Science* by Sarah-Jane Leslie, a philosophy professor at Princeton, and her research associates. Variations in the proportion of women are not peculiar to the humanities. Just as philosophy employs unusually few women, so too does economics among the social sciences, and mathematics, physics and engineering among the STEM subjects (by contrast, both molecular biology and neuroscience employ as many women as men). Leslie and her co-authors found a common feature to all the subjects with fewer women. These disciplines are distinguished by the view that "brilliance" is necessary for success. Where other subjects allow that determination and hard work can take you to the top, established practitioners in the male-dominated subjects insist that there is no substitute for raw, native talent.

According to Leslie and her associates, this attitude discriminates against women in the brilliance-prizing fields: since raw talent is stereotypically associated with young men rather than women, selection committees in these fields are disinclined to pick women, and moreover women are discouraged by these expectations. However, commentators on the blogosphere were not slow to point out that there is a possible alternative explanation for the data. Perhaps men are getting the posts not because they are thought to be more brilliant but because they *are* more brilliant, at least by the time the jobs are handed out, and by the standards of the talent-requiring disciplines. In truth, the data presented in Leslie's study did little to rule out this alternative explanation.

I wonder whether a yet further mechanism might not be doing most of the damage. Philosophy and economics are both distinguished from similar disciplines by a marked tendency

towards scholasticism. Much work in both subjects focuses on technical minutiae whose relevance to larger issues even the experts are hard-pressed to explain. Of course, serious academic work need not always be transparent to the general public, but much in philosophy and economics isn't even of interest to those in adjacent sub-disciplines. One doesn't have to be an enthusiast for "impact" to suspect that the main point of much of this technical work is to enable young scholars to display the kind of super-smartness that their elders so prize. Placing a premium on brilliance creates a strong pressure to work in a style that requires it.

This may turn women away from the brilliance-prizing disciplines, not because they can't play the game, but because they won't. Most young people come into philosophy and economics because they want to address important issues, not to make the next move in a technical exercise. When they discover that they need to dance on the head of a small pin to get a job, women and men are likely to react differently. Where many men will relish the competitive challenge and enjoy the game for its own sake, a lot of women will see it as the intellectual equivalent as putting balls in pockets with pointed sticks, and conclude that they could be doing something better with their lives.

If this is the right diagnosis for the scarcity of women in philosophy, it raises fundamental questions about the nature of the subject. Philosophy has more choice about its curriculum than medicine or physics, say, or even history. The topics that have been studied under its name vary widely across time and culture. So one response to the disenchantment of women with the existing curriculum would be to reform it in a direction explicitly designed to bring more women into the subject. This strategy is effectively advocated by Fiona Jenkins in her "Notes for a Critique of Academic Meritocracy", where she urges that more prominence be given to philosophical topics that can be informed by the distinctive experience of women, and less to the supposedly objective exploration of subjects like epistemology and metaphysics. Similar suggestions are aired in the introduction to this volume by Jenkins and her co-editor Katrina Hutchison.

However, this gender-first approach is not the only way to think about changes to the philosophy curriculum, and it arguably has things the wrong way round. The alternative would be first to decide which topics are really worth studying, and then to see who wants to study them. It is a pity that there is no explicit discussion of this issue in *Women in Philosophy*. By implication, though, it is clear that a number of the contributors would view an explicit gendering of the curriculum as a step backwards. Apart from anything else, categorizing traditional topics as distinctively masculine in order to free up more of the curriculum for women's interests would seem singularly unhelpful to those women who do want to work in epistemology or metaphysics.

It should not be assumed that a topic-first approach to the curriculum would necessarily preserve the intellectual status quo. There is plenty of reason to stamp out unnecessary scholasticism, quite apart from a desire to keep able women in philosophy. Similarly, a strong case can be made for expanding the curriculum to include explicit discussion of gender (and race, class and other power asymmetries), as has already happened in many philosophy departments, even before we consider what sort of people these subjects will attract. True,

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.