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Philosophy in a Different Voice

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PHILOSOPHY IN A DIFFERENT VOICE*

We tell our students philosophy will do valuable things for them: teach them how to think and express themselves clearly, make them more critical of customary beliefs and assumptions, give them a general framework with which to help them make sense of their experiences, give them guidance in everyday life, and the like. But I wonder whether philosophy delivers on these promises.

I shall concern myself with the situation of women students in particular, though at least some of what I have to say will have application to men of color and, ultimately, all men as well. The question I want to raise is: What can our women students get out of their philosophy courses? Now surely, you may say, this is a very strange question to raise, for surely our women students get out of their philosophy courses whatever our men students get, and surely, exactly what that is varies with the person, the teacher, the course, and so forth. But questions like the one posed have proven very significant in other academic fields, for example, in history and English literature. Thus: What can women students get out of their history courses, when the questions and concepts and categories and methods those courses are concerned with are so profoundly geared to men's experiences, leaving women almost wholly invisible? And: What can women students get out of their English literature courses, when so few women writers appear on the course reading lists and when so many of the works that do appear on those lists present women in sexually stereotyped ways—as “whores, bitches, muses, and heroines dead in childbirth,” to quote Annette Kolodny. In the cases of history and English literature, women students can get something very different from men students out of their courses, something a lot less relevant to their lives and something a lot less worthwhile.

So what about philosophy, which has traditionally been thought to be concerned with the fundamental questions of human existence in a universal, timeless, and gender-neutral way, to be concerned with such issues as the nature and justification of morality, the nature of truth and beauty, the nature of human knowledge and its justifica-

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tion, and so forth. What can our women students get out of their philosophy courses? Scholars now working in the area assure us that there have been women philosophers throughout the history of Western civilization and probably in other cultures as well, representing every subspecialty of philosophy save for the history of philosophy (at least prior to this century).¹ Almost all of these women philosophers were part of larger intellectual circles that included other philosophers and learned persons, a few had large followings, and some ancient ones even directed or co-directed schools of philosophy. Some were royalty or aristocrats or had wealthy patrons, though some were self-supporting. Most were trained by their male and female predecessors, though some were self-taught, some educated by their parents, some trained in academies, and some trained in monasteries, usually by other women. And, like men, they wrote in a variety of literary forms, published and unpublished, including formal essays, books, and articles, as well as dialogues, poetry, epic novels, letters, and diaries. All of these women philosophers contributed to the development of philosophic thought. But with very few exceptions, all very recent, women philosophers do not appear on students' reading lists, or in their textbooks, anthologies, histories of philosophy, or encyclopedias of philosophy—all of which include reference to many exceedingly obscure *male* philosophers. If women philosophers are uniquely fitted to contribute to an understanding of women's experience, our women students have never been able to benefit from their contributions. Nor have women students been able to get a sense of themselves as philosophers or as capable of doing philosophy from them. Indeed, women philosophers' absence from courses has signalled to women students that women simply do not or cannot do philosophy.

So women students do not get women's contributions to philosophy out of their philosophy courses. But they *do* get *men's* contributions to philosophy out of their courses. Many of these men's contributions, however, leave much to be desired. For one thing, they contain very negative characterizations of women. Even Plato, one of the most egalitarian of philosophers—who holds that women and men possess the same virtues (though, generally speaking, women possess them to a lesser degree), and, as a consequence, should have the same opportunities for education and governmental

¹ See, e.g., Linda Lopez McAlister's "Some Remarks on Exploring the History of Women in Philosophy," and Mary Ellen Waithe's "On Not Teaching the History of Philosophy," in *Hypatia's Special Issue: The History of Women in Philosophy*, iv, 1 (Spring, 1989).

and other positions in an ideal state (*Republic* V)—even Plato characterizes women in very negative terms. For example, he suggests that women, unlike men, are incapable of controlling their emotions. (Thus, he says: “When in our own lives some affliction comes to us you are aware that we plume ourselves . . . on our ability to remain calm and endure, in the belief that this is the conduct of a man, and [giving in to grief] that of a woman.”²) Again, Plato suggests that women have more concern for their bodies than for their souls, whereas men have more concern for their souls. (For example, he says that the most proper penalty for a soldier who surrenders to save his body, when he should be willing to die out of the courage of his soul, is for him to be turned into a woman.³) What Plato seems to mean by these claims⁴ is that *womanly* men and women—that is, people who behave in the ways we expect women to behave—are incapable of controlling their emotions and have more concern for their bodies than for their souls; whereas, *manly* men and women—that is, people who behave in the ways we expect *men* to behave—do not have these problems. In short, it is the womanly natures (souls) imprisoned in (some) male and (almost all) female bodies that are inferior, according to Plato, not simply all women.

Aristotle⁵ is more negative. According to him, all women have the same inferior womanly nature—it is given by biology. Indeed, women are simply “misbegotten males,” the result of failures in the “concocting” processes involved in reproduction. Had the failures not occurred, women would be men, genuine human beings; as it is, they are deformed men—deficient human beings—rather like eunuchs, except that the deficiency in this case lies in the rational part of their souls. Whereas in men the rational part of the soul naturally rules over the irrational part, in women the deliberative capacity of the rational part is easily overruled by the irrational part. As a consequence, women must be ruled by men.

Aquinas⁶ is more negative still. Not only are women physiologically inferior to men, misbegotten males, but from the relative weakness of their reason follows their greater susceptibility to the disorder of sin. Women are thus men’s moral, physical, and intellectual inferiors, and are thus always subject to them, with no possibility of

² *Republic* 605c–d; and cf. 395d–e, *Phaedo* 60a and 112d, and *Apology* 356.

³ *Laws* 944e; and cf. *Timaeus* 42b–c, 76e, 91a.

⁴ See Elizabeth Spelman, “Hairy Cobblers and Philosopher-Queens,” in *Inessential Woman* (Boston: Beacon, 1988).

⁵ See *De Generatione Animalium* 728a 17, 766a 26, 768a 6 seq, 775a 15, 788a 5, and *Politics* I.

⁶ See *Summa Theologica*, Part 1, Question 92.

escape. Alas, whereas the end and essence of man is intellectual activity, the sole reason woman was created was for purposes of reproduction, and it is only woman's reproduction and care of offspring that is of real assistance to man. In all other things man is better served by other men.

Kant⁷ is hardly less negative. For him, the entire character of woman is an embodiment of beauty, while man's nature is essentially noble or sublime. What is more, woman's understanding is a facile understanding as opposed to the deep understanding of man. Deep reflection and sustained contemplation, laborious study and rigorous disciplines like philosophy, are not suitable to her, and destroy the excellences peculiar to her sex. Virtue is best instilled in her when it is equated with beauty, vice with ugliness.

Nothing of *ought*, nothing of *must*, nothing of *due*. All orders and all surly compulsion are to women insupportable. They do something but because they are pleased so to do, and the art consists but in making that which is good pleasing to them. I hardly believe that the fair sex are capable of principles. . . . Instead of which, however, Providence hath implanted in their breasts humane and benevolent sentiments, a fine feeling for becomingness, and a complaisant soul (*ibid.*).

And Nietzsche:⁸ Woman is boring, stupid, deficient in taste, and insensitive to the truth. "Her great art is falsehood, her chief concern is appearance and beauty. . . ." She is "a possession . . . a being predestined for service and accomplishing her mission therein. . . ." Her first and last function is to bear robust children.

And the list of negative characterizations of women in men's contributions to philosophy goes on and on.

Note that these negative characterizations of women are each tied to a correspondingly positive characterization of men. Man is, for example, more concerned with the soul while woman is more concerned with the body, or man is directed by principle while woman is directed by sentiment, or man is intelligent while woman is stupid. Note also, that there is a strong air of unreality in these sets of descriptions. Surely there are individual differences among men and among women, occasioned by differences of upbringing and education, individual aptitudes and experiences, and so forth, but such individual differences are not allowed to mar the neat contrasts. In short, we are being given ways to think about the sexes which have highly questionable descriptive force but potentially powerful prescriptive force nonetheless.

What connections do these ways of thinking about women and men have to other views of their authors? If there are *close* connec-

⁷ See *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, sect. 3.

⁸ See *Beyond Good and Evil*, 232, 234, 238, and 239.

tions, if, that is, the unacceptable views of women and men of Plato, Aristotle, and the rest are somehow inscribed in fundamental ways in their ethical or political or metaphysical or epistemological views, then this will suggest a very negative answer to our question of what women students can get out of their philosophy courses. For then it will turn out that major classics of philosophy very deeply denigrate women and valorize men even while they adequately capture neither. And this is by no means an implausible possibility. To be sure, even a casual perusal of the philosophical views in question discloses interesting similarities between them and the unfortunate views of the sexes. Consider, for example, Plato's view of justice expressed in the *Republic*. Just as justice in the state is the performance by each individual of the work for which that individual is best suited, Plato tells us, justice in the individual is the performance by each part of the individual's soul of the work for which that part is best suited, where this internal order of the soul necessarily results in right behavior. And injustice, whether in the state or in the individual, is simply the opposite state of internal discord and faction. Thus, in the perfectly just person the rational part of the soul, with its wisdom grounded on immediate knowledge of the good, rules over the bodily appetites, which form the greatest part of each person's soul; and it rules over that part of the soul with the other, spirited, part as its auxiliary. And correspondingly, in the perfectly just state these perfectly just persons, whose deliberations and wise counsel, remember, will be grounded on immediate knowledge of the good, rule over all other persons in the state with the aid of the executive persons, the auxiliaries.

But, as we have seen, control over bodily appetites characterizes a *manly* soul, not a *womanly* soul (whether in a man's or a woman's body). Remember, womanly persons (whether male or female) are incapable of controlling their emotions, are more concerned with the body, and the like. Thus, manly and not womanly persons are just, and justice is a manly trait. Of course, only a few aristocratic persons *are* manly, and not all the unmanly may be womanly. As Plato says:

. . . The great mass of multifarious appetites and pleasures and pains will be found to occur chiefly in children and women and slaves, and, among free men so called, in the inferior multitude; whereas the simple and moderate desires which, with the aid of reason and right belief, are guided by reflection, you will find only in a few, and those with the best inborn dispositions and the best educated (*Republic* 431).

Thus, only a few aristocratic persons are manly because only such persons have the requisite superior inborn dispositions and superior

education to enable them to obtain the immediate knowledge of the good that allows them to rule themselves and others with wisdom. And thus, knowledge of the good and wisdom are also manly characteristics, along with justice.

Notice how similar these patterns of thinking are to some of the ways in which many (most?) people currently think. Women are not really capable of rational thought. They are only intuitive. Moreover, they are too emotional and flighty, and too concerned with how they look and other trivial matters to have anything really intelligent and deep and insightful to offer. The uneducated, also, do not have anything worthwhile to offer, and certainly no *knowledge*. Knowledge is something obtained at universities, or reported in research papers or at conferences. Knowledge is not possessed by persons who have spent relatively little time in school, no matter how many practical life experiences may have enriched their understanding. Knowledge, above all, is possessed by professionals and the learned, scientists and judges and scholars, and the like, and they remain predominantly male.

But this is unfair, you will say. What is wrong with suggesting, as Plato does, that justice and knowledge and wisdom are characteristics of manly, not womanly, persons? It has absolutely no ill effects for women. After all, women can be manly too, as we have noted, and most men are *not* manly. So nothing is denied to women in affirming that justice and knowledge and wisdom are characteristics of manly persons. I have two replies. What is wrong with suggesting that justice and knowledge and wisdom are characteristics of manly, not womanly, persons is, first, that we thereby associate justice and knowledge and wisdom with men and the ways we expect men to behave, and dissociate them from women and our expectations of them; and, second, and relatedly, that we thereby suggest that the manly is all good and the womanly all bad. Let me clarify this second reply, taking justice as my example. Plato's concept of justice in the *Republic* does not seem to eschew what we might call traditional feminine virtues—concern for others, nurturance, cooperativeness, the willingness to make compromises, self-sacrifice. Indeed, the guardians, we are told (*Republic* 462–3), will look upon each other “as brother or sister, father or mother, son or daughter, grandchild or grandparent,” and treat them all accordingly. And they “will have all their feelings of pleasure or pain in common”: “In our community, then, above all others, when things go well or ill with any individual everyone will use that word ‘mine’ in the same sense and say that all is going well or ill with him and his.” And “the people will look upon their rulers as preservers and protectors.” So we end with a category system in which the manly seems to include all positive

virtues and the womanly includes none, is simply a lack, an absence of the manly.

This is exactly the category system that occurs in Aristotle, though in a more damaging form. For now, the lack that is womanliness extends to all and only, not just most, women. It is, as I said before, a matter of biology. Women are simply “misbegotten males,” the result of failures in the “concocting” processes involved in reproduction. Their reason is defective, stunted, and limited, in comparison to men’s full reason. But the good life for human beings, Aristotle’s subject in such books as the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics*, lies in the proper function and full development of that which distinguishes human beings from all other beings, that which makes them human. And this is their reason. As a result, women, along with those who most resemble them, children and slaves, are not capable of the human good that Aristotle describes. The *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics* do not even apply to them.

Again, consider Kant on the subject of what gives actions moral worth.⁹ According to Kant, the moral worth of an action resides in the motives out of which the action is performed. More particularly, to have moral worth an action must be done out of duty. Thus, for Kant, concern for others, sympathy, compassion, loving self-sacrifice, and the like are all irrelevant to the moral worth of an action and, ultimately, to the moral worth of a person’s character, the highest worth a person can have. Indeed, it is only insofar as a person acts out of duty that a person can be described as moral at all. To act out of duty, moreover, necessarily involves acting out of principle, and it is one of the main aims of Kant’s moral philosophy to identify a universal principle that can serve as the cornerstone for all morally right action.

But of course, according to Kant, this moral philosophy can only apply to men. For according to Kant, as we have seen, women are not capable of acting out of principle; they act out of “humane and benevolent sentiments” or out of a sense of “becomingness” or out of complaisance, but never out of duty or deep reflection. Thus, only men can have moral worth, the highest form of character there is. Kant’s idea of moral worth, in fact, simply encapsulates his idea of the masculine, and excludes his idea of the feminine. And in a society like ours, in which women are still encouraged to be emotional and caring and concerned with others, and men are still encouraged to be unemotional and uninvolved and abstractly rational, Kant’s evaluations of moral worth can be very damaging indeed.

⁹ This example is taken from Jean Grimshaw, *Philosophy and Feminist Thinking* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1986).

I have been suggesting that the unacceptable ways of thinking about women and men that characterize many of the male philosophers of our philosophical tradition may have significant connections to their other philosophical views—may, in fact, be inscribed in fundamental ways in those other philosophical views. But what if I am wrong about this? What if there are no very significant or extensive or numerous connections between our male philosophers' unfortunate views of men and women and their other philosophical views? What if, in fact, their views of women and men have no conceptual connections at all to their other philosophical views? This may not be a happy result for our philosophers either, since a neutral stand toward the unacceptable views of men and women may be a condemnation in itself (compare: What if the ethical, or political, or epistemological, or metaphysical philosophies in question were neutral—as Plato's and Aristotle's are *not*—with regard to racism?) The only happy result for our philosophers, it seems, would be if the rest of their philosophies required a *negative* stand toward their unacceptable views of women and men. But alas, that possibility is the most implausible of all!

What is the upshot? We tell our students philosophy will teach them how to think and express themselves clearly, make them more critical of customary beliefs and assumptions, give them a general framework with which to help them make sense of their experiences, give them guidance in everyday life, and the like. Our women students, especially, *need* these skills. For the message is there in children's stories and textbooks (where women are the nurses, the mothers, the farmers' wives, but never the farmers, or where women are simply invisible), in advertising (where women are depicted as completely absorbed by the appearance of their nails or the appearance of their bathroom bowls), in the positions of greatest authority and status and power in society (all occupied by men), and even in our language (where *he* constitutes humanity, and *she* constitutes his little helpmate). Women and men are *still* raised in our society to see women as less capable and less valuable than men, intellectually, physically, and frequently even morally. And women must *deal* with that message of inferiority, and *combat* it, in themselves as well as in those who underpay them, fail to employ or promote them, sexually harass or rape them, and patronize and belittle them. But philosophy does not give women the wherewithal to do this. Indeed, far from pointing women toward a more adequate set of conceptions, philosophy—at least a goodly number of the classics of philosophy—*may* simply *further reinforce* the same message of women's inferiority. Nor does contemporary philosophy seem to do much better,

since the issues it deals with so frequently have their roots in this same tradition, or have so little clear practical consequence (contemporary philosophy, for example, explores, too frequently, issues like whether I am free at time t to wiggle my finger at time t , or whether I am the same person as Smith even if I and two others were just constructed with Smith's old brain traces and exact copies of his body, or whether I know that Smith is at the library even if my belief is based on Jones' telling me what he thought was a falsehood, and . . . but you get the picture!)

Well, what can we do? I think if we are going to continue telling our students how enriching and valuable philosophy is, we are going to have to make some substantial changes in the philosophy curriculum. For one thing, I think we will have to include some of the recent feminist critiques of our philosophical tradition within our history of philosophy course reading matter, or at least devote class time to surveying this material. This will at least make our students aware of, and thereby somewhat immune to, but also analytically equipped to deal with, some of the misogyny and androcentrism operating within the philosophical tradition, though it will not give students any kind of alternatives to this tradition. To give them such alternatives, whether in terms of female role models or in terms of female-positive perspectives and valuings, I think we will have to integrate into our history courses some of the new scholarship now appearing regarding women philosophers from various periods in history. Notice, however, that including within our courses feminist critiques of our tradition as well as work by women philosophers will have to mean *excluding* some of the *men* philosophers who used to be included, or at least some of their work—there just will not be enough time to do it all! We will thus have to ask ourselves very seriously what our aim is in teaching the history of philosophy, and philosophy in general, what we hope to accomplish with our students, why the works we have covered in the past were thought to be truly valuable and enriching, and what is truly valuable and enriching about them, especially for contemporary students, female as well as male. We shall, of course, have to ask these questions of any possible new inclusions as well. We shall also have to consider the relations among our various thinkers—who influenced or further developed whom, who is needed to understand whom, who needs to be dropped or added because someone else has been dropped or added, and the like. Bringing in particular women figures, after all, may necessitate bringing in other women or men before them whom we never included in the curriculum before, just to prepare the way for the women. The result, I think, will be significant changes in the history of philosophy curriculum.

At this point, some of you might be feeling a little queasy. Leave out some of the most important names and/or some of the most important works in philosophy—for those are the only works we ever assigned, right?—for some heretofore unknowns, just to right the gender message and the gender balance in the curriculum? Is it really worth it? So let us try a little thought experiment: What if you were visiting for the term at a predominantly Black university? Would you include, say, *only* Plato and Aristotle on your syllabus? Imagine yourself, for example, standing day after day in front of fifty young, African-American women and men, the only white in the room, giving explanatory accounts of such topics as Plato's allegorical myth of the metals (the "noble lie," remember, that everyone is born either golden, silver, or iron and brass, and hence, needs to be promptly and permanently assigned to a corresponding station in society), or Aristotle's metaphysical principle that there is in the constitution of the universe a hierarchy in everything—there is always a ruler and a ruled. And imagine that such topics are all that you ever did. No critiques focused on racial issues, rather than the usual metaphysical and epistemological issues. No alternative perspectives. No African or African-American thinkers. Just Plato and Aristotle. Would you be at all uncomfortable, embarrassed, or ashamed teaching a philosophy of subjugation and nothing else to those who suffer from it? And if you would, then why do you now choose to teach only the likes of Plato and Aristotle to women? Perhaps you will say you can teach these works, and leave the really bad parts out. But that just gives students the thought patterns (or reinforces the thought patterns already in them) without showing them the logical consequences of those thought patterns. Is that really what you want?

But history of philosophy courses are not the only ones that could profit from change. Philosophy of science courses, for example, need to stop portraying scientists as disembodied minds, free of all human characteristics like gender, race, class, and political outlook, who experiment, explain, theorize, and validate in a perfectly detached, dispassionate, "objective" manner. They need, among other things, to inform students of the subtle and not so subtle ways in which women have been largely excluded from the scientific enterprise, and the epistemological and other consequences this has had. Philosophy of mind courses need to consider not only the question of what a person fundamentally is, but also, what men and women fundamentally are, to what extent and in what ways they are similar and different, and to what extent, as a result, women and men should fill the same roles in society, or to what extent the whole role structure should be changed. Metaphysics courses should consider,

along with the abstract issues pertaining to the question of freedom and determinism, such concrete issues as the effects on self-development and action of gender socialization and interrelated race, class, and age stereotypes. Political philosophy courses need to give prominent attention to issues of gender and the family and their relations to the more traditional concerns covered in such courses. The proposals could go on and on.

Note that I am suggesting these curricular changes for *every* philosophy program: it is just no good to say, therefore, that *we* (in this or that department) should not make these changes because then we would not be adequately preparing our students for the other philosophy departments in which they might study. And note some of the other changes that would or might ensue. The students who become attracted to philosophy and then go on in philosophy might become more diversified, and philosophy might be enriched thereby. At the very least, recruiting women philosophers may become an easier task, since more women may become committed to philosophy. The ways in which we evaluate and fund philosophical research (e.g., in the history of philosophy) will have to change in order to support the new curricular requirements. And so, with that, the focus of doctoral research, hiring policies, and the like.

In everyday speech people distinguish between those issues and concerns which are of genuine interest and importance and use, and those issues which are "merely academic." With notable exceptions, philosophical issues and concerns have tended to be assigned an honored place within the latter category. One needs only to recall with what scorn and sarcasm newspaper journalists have reported the goings-on at American Philosophical Association annual meetings. For their part, philosophers, when they have agreed at all with this less-than-glowing assessment of philosophy, have tended to consider it the result of such things as philosophy's forever spawning new areas of science and becoming impoverished thereby. And, at any rate, philosophers have extolled the valuable critical contributions they have made and continue to make to their students and whoever else will listen. What I have been suggesting, however, is that philosophy may be less "merely academic" than people have thought, though relatedly, it may also be less critically valuable than philosophers have thought. I have also been suggesting that philosophy *can* be, ultimately, a powerful force for the good, not "merely academic" or impoverished at all. This is what I mean by "philosophy in a different voice," philosophy in a more inclusive, more responsive, *set* of voices.

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