

Katrina Hutchison and Fiona Jenkins (eds): Women in Philosophy: What Needs to Change?

**Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013, 271 pp, \$24.95,
ISBN: 9780199325610**

Anna Leuschner

Published online: 20 December 2014

© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2014

The current situation of women in philosophy is not rosy at all. There are a raising number of complaints from female philosophers about their working situation, about getting harassed, discouraged, isolated, or simply ignored. Numerous anecdotes are posted in online forums and weblogs, such as beingawomaninphilosophy.wordpress.com/ or feministphilosophers.wordpress.com/. Apart from that, one can simply observe that much more men than women are employed in philosophical departments, give talks at philosophical conferences, and have articles published in philosophical journals. Katrina Hutchison and Fiona Jenkins have reacted to these problems and published a representative selection of essays on possible causes and remedies. Mainly, the book seeks to answer two questions: How does the exclusion of women in philosophy work? And what are we to do in order to improve the situation?

Before I start the discussion, three preliminary remarks must be made. First, it is mentioned more than once in the book that the problems women in philosophy face are probably well-known to members of other underrepresented groups as well, such as people of color, disabled people, or homosexuals, and it is also stressed that people belong to more than one social group. Though the focus of this book is on the situation of women, it casts a light on the difficulties of other disadvantaged groups, too.

Second, it is emphasized that these problems are well-known to women in other scientific disciplines as well. As mentioned right in the beginning, “the perception of a problematic gender gap is only focused on the STEM disciplines, while areas perceived as less socially important, such as philosophy, slip under the radar and lack targeted responses from wider agencies despite having highly comparable underrepresentation and lack of seniority of women.” (3, n4)

Third, it is not only for social reasons such as fairness, equality, and freedom that women should have the same opportunities to work (under equally good conditions) in

A. Leuschner (✉)

Institut für Philosophie, Karlsruher Institut für Technologie, 76021 Karlsruhe, Germany
e-mail: anna.leuschner@kit.edu

academic philosophy as men but also for scientific and epistemic reasons. Marilyn Friedman points to a number of philosophical fields that have been introduced or substantially developed by women, e.g., care ethics, ecofeminism, feminist bioethics, embodiment, intersectionality, standpoint epistemology, and feminist science studies (32). Thus, there would have been a serious scientific loss if the contributions of women philosophers had not the chance to come to live. Moreover, as Jennifer Saul points out, the systematic exclusion of women is a general epistemic problem: there are “talented philosophers not being encouraged to continue, not getting grants, not getting jobs, not getting promoted, and not getting their work read. Moreover, talented and committed women philosophers are producing less good work than they otherwise would” (50). It is a waste of epistemic resources to exclude women from the philosophical debates. Tackling the problem of the underrepresentation of women in philosophy is, hence, required also for the sake of philosophy itself.

Let’s now turn our attention to the two main questions that are treated in the book. Regarding the first question on how the exclusion works, there are a huge number of explanations. It is a bit unsatisfying that the book lacks a clear overview of the different kinds of causes and the ideas on how to tackle the problem. There is an introductory chapter that seeks to provide such an overview but it is in itself tangled and somewhat overloaded with additional information. Hence, while reading the book chapter by chapter, one sometimes loses track of the rich amount of aspects, anecdotes, sources, and data. Every contribution draws on different explanations and case studies, while others are repeated in several chapters. Some are analyzed and discussed in detail more than once; some are mentioned only randomly and remain underdeveloped.

Particularly, all contributors draw on gender schemas, i.e. “hypotheses shaping expectations about performance and behavior that vary for men and women” (2) and which, consequently, also have an effect on the behavior of marginalized groups. Such schemas are reinforced by stereotype threats, i.e. “ways that a person’s (awareness of their) own group membership may negatively affect their performance” (40), and by unconscious biases “that affect the way we perceive, evaluate, or interact with people from the groups that our biases ‘target’” (ibid.). This general nexus is well documented by social psychological studies. But how exactly do these psychological effects work in current academic philosophy? The book thoughtfully addresses this question. It sheds light on the fact that philosophy is characterized by a significantly aggressive, combative working environment. Though this finding might not appear surprising to any experienced philosophers, it is sad enough as it tends to compromise the quality of philosophical discussion (88). But for female philosophers the situation is even worse; being underrepresented in the field they find themselves in a situation in which their performance attracts particular attention. Especially Helen Beebe underlines that the underrepresentation of a group leads to the situation that any behavior or interest of the underrepresented that differs from those of the major group is casted as “deviant” from established norms. Hence, those being underrepresented might often feel as if there was something “wrong” with them. Additionally, it is empirically confirmed that women in academia have to face special disadvantages, e.g. a lack of encouragement in the early career stage (as compared to male colleagues). There also is a general disqualification of philosophical areas that are specifically of interest to women (consider, e.g., what counts as “hard” and “soft” areas of philosophy, and why it does so) (91 and 159; cf. also Haslanger 2008). Thus, women often tend to underperform due to their miserable situation which again leads to a reinforcement of biases, stereotype threats, and deviance.

These are convincing arguments based on well documented facts, and all contributions draw on them more or less strongly. What appears underdeveloped, however, is the question to what extent the exclusion of female philosophers is due to methodological, justificatory standards. This would mean, as Jenkins writes, that there are standards of evaluation that “secure broad, indeed typically unquestionable purchase, and are confirmed and reconfirmed by the practises and processes they authorise” (85). It is argued in the book, particularly by Susan Dodds and Eliza Goddard, that the underrepresentation of women in philosophy is not just a “pipeline problem”, i.e. a problem such as more women at the lower levels would lead to more women at higher levels. The problem rather arises from attitudes, norms, and standards that are deeply entrenched in the work of academic philosophy (143–144). This sounds plausible, but while specific attitudes and norms that have the effect to exclude are well explained in the book, it remains far from obvious what standards are at play in philosophy and how they allow for a disqualification of female philosophers. Correspondingly, Hutchison stresses that “we ought to pay more attention to our interpretative methods and the role of interpreting, understanding, and explaining in philosophy” (117). I agree and want to add that methodological standards that are used in philosophy (and particularly the ways in which they are usually interpreted and weighed when it comes to the evaluation of philosophical work) should be investigated in order to reveal their gender-related content. This question seems essential for understanding the mechanisms of social exclusion in philosophy. It certainly is a subject worthy of further (empirical) research.

The second big question the book addresses is what ought to be done to improve the situation. Again, some ideas are repeated over and over again while others are mentioned only in passing; a more systematic overview would have been helpful. As a suggestion, it could make sense to divide the ideas into two categories.

First, there are ideas that affect our scientific social and cognitive practices, i.e. our behaving, acting, and thinking in the academic every-day life: stereotypes could be challenged, e.g. by inviting more women to conferences and colloquia (50). In classes, the work of women philosophers should be more often discussed (158–159). We should stop labeling people as “smart” as the widely accepted concept of smartness in philosophy is usually attributed to “confident young white males” (54 and 166). Hence, even if we award this label to, say, a black woman, we do it with reference to the “ideal” of a white man. And female philosophers should more often experience encouragement both direct and indirect. Indirect encouragement means, as Samantha Brennan points out, *micro-affirmations* (in contrast to *micro-inequities*, i.e. little and unconscious acts of disrespect such as gestures, specific language, treatment or tone of voice, etc.), such as “opening doors to opportunity, gestures of inclusion and caring, and graceful acts of listening [...], providing comfort and support when others are in distress, when there has been a failure at the bench, or an idea that did not work out, or a public attack” (194).

The second category contains a type of ideas that Brennan appropriately names “mechanical solutions”. For example, review procedures should be triple-anonymous, i.e. submission systems should provide anonymity of authors not only to referees but also to editors (or organizers) (e.g., 53). There could be salary anomaly funds at universities to compensate for unequal salaries (193). People at departments could be trained to serve as bystanders who highlight positive acts or redirect or de-escalate negative acts (194). We can have mentoring programs that are “crucial for supporting and encouraging the members of underrepresented groups”, as Catrina Mackenzie and Cynthia Townley suggest (175), or we can carefully schedule important department meetings, colloquia, lectures, etc. so that parents are not excluded (still, the timing problem affects mothers much more often than fathers) (220).

These suggestions all make sense but I am afraid that some of them remain often ineffective due to a principal problem. Brennan raises the very relevant question of

“why in the face of goodwill and political commitment [...] philosophers [have] failed to meet goals to which we have collectively committed” (182). Similarly, Saul points out that “[m]any admissions and hiring committees have a commitment to improving gender balance and perhaps even to choosing a woman over an equally qualified man—but implicit biases may well prevent them from seeing which women are equally qualified” (52). However, in the same way such biases can also influence our choice of keynote speakers and literature (even if we are committed to equality); they can prevent us from being encouraging and micro-affirming (even if we actually want to be supportive); they can influence our behavior and shape the way we reflect the standards of our discipline (even if we intend to be critical in an egalitarian sense).

In a nutshell, many of the suggestions in the book are implicitly based on the premise that we are able to become aware of our biases. Correspondingly, the authors, most of the time, speak of “implicit biases” which seems to suggest that the biases that are at play here can in principle be made explicit. It is unclear what motivates this optimism, especially as it is sometimes remarked in the book that the biases work in a subtle, tacit, unconscious way. Thus, the problem that unconscious biases may block many of the ideas the book presents to improve the situation is not appropriately taken into account, and so I find myself wondering why a discussion about quota regulation is more or less excluded in the book.

At least Adriana Rini concludes that “[f]or a start, we can advertise positions as open rank and open specialty in order to catch the widest possible interest. We can then make diversity an explicit priority in our appointments. It may be that at least in the short term, these must be enforced by some sort of quota system. I am aware that some will resent having quotas. Indeed I am myself unhappy that it seems the only solution. But surely everyone must agree that we have a problem. We don’t want the hiring ratio to become 25:1, or 30:1, or 35:1, or ..., with everyone still agreeing that there is a problem” (142).

Apparently, most people consider quota regulation a taboo. Often it is argued that women certainly do not want to be hired just because they are women. It is clear that this objection seems to miss the point. Of course women do not want to be hired because they are women but because they are good at what they do. However, too often they aren’t hired despite being qualified. Yet, even if such ongoing disadvantage gets empirically confirmed people seem to find it virtually indecent even to discuss the idea of quotas, even in a book like this which presents overwhelming evidence not to be ashamed (or “unhappy”) to call for quotas. Jim Brown, in my opinion, sets things straight here by laconically stating that often “[i]t may turn out that on close inspection, academic freedom and excellence require something like speech codes and hiring quotas” (Brown 1997, 381).

Apart from these two points of criticism—the negligence of both a proper analysis of methodological standards and a thorough discussion of quota regulation—there are only details about which I disagree. For example, I doubt that the consumption of pornography blinds people and makes them deaf for the issues of women just as I am not convinced that playing violent computer games necessarily make people violent (205–206). I also do not agree that intuitions are “the data” of philosophy as I would rather say that philosophy does not produce any data but rather draws sometimes upon data produced by other disciplines, and, yes, sometimes also on intuitions, but then intuitions are still just that: intuitions (104, 112, and 124). And I cannot see why the (philosophical) concept of time is of higher importance in this context (though I agree that the inappropriate time pressure that is often asserted on academics is problematic, in particular for women who do not want to give up having children) (215–221). But these points are certainly open to debate. In sum, this is a readable book on one of the most urgent problems threatening our discipline. It should be widely circulated and discussed.

References

- Brown, J. R. (1997). Academic freedom, affirmative action, and the advance of knowledge. *Interchange*, 28, 381–388.
- Haslanger, S. (2008). Changing the ideology and culture of philosophy: Not by reason (alone). *Hypathia*, 23, 210–223.