

Inequality, Internet likes, and the rules of philosophy, by Rent* S*lecl**

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Abstract. How can we explain why certain historically discriminated groups are under-represented in English-speaking analytic philosophy? I present a hypothesis which appeals to rules, rather than relying upon the social theories of Pierre Bourdieu. I do by means of an attempted pastiche of Renata Salecl, my third attempt.

My rationale for this pastiche is: for introducing the hypothesis I find it better to present it like this and then move out of “pastiche mode,” to briefly discuss it.

During one of my lectures I suddenly decided to ask my students a question – what if I didn’t turn up today? what would they do? what would happen if one Wednesday I just didn’t care about my contract? – and I was deeply moved by their response. They said they would sue the university. It matters to us that there are rules and that if we break a rule, there is a price!

We are all subject to rules, but what are rules? I have to give a lecture to undergraduates at 11 am every Wednesday. That’s a rule and it is in my contract. But are there other kinds of rules? When I go to the bookshop, I find books of rules, for dating and for managing and for having power. But are these really rules? They are not like the rules I agreed to when signing a contract. No legal action will be taken against me if I break them, because it is so morally wrong. They are more like instructions for achieving a goal. If you follow these instructions, then you can achieve this goal, but if you don’t, then you cannot. They are what Kant calls hypothetical imperatives: if this is what you desire, then you must perform certain

actions, and you are not being rational otherwise. They are rules of rationality for people with certain desires.

But maybe these books are not even making such a strong claim. Maybe they are just saying if you don't follow them, you can still achieve the goal, but the chances are much lower.

Recently there has been a lot of discussion of why some groups, which have a long history of being discriminated against, are under-represented in English philosophy departments, especially philosophy in the analytic tradition (Beebe and McCallion 2020). Why are there few women and so few ethnic minorities? Is it because they don't know the rules? Of course, they know rules of philosophy, such as rules of logic, not to deny the antecedent or affirm the consequent, but they don't know the rules for succeeding in philosophy. It is not like dating, in which some people have had a lot of failures and written books about what works and what doesn't, and everyone reads these books. Nobody has written that book for analytic philosophy.

So, for example, you have noticed that philosophers write about what does this word mean and what does that word mean and you decide to write about what likes on Internet websites mean. You can click that you like an online video or a remark, but what does that mean? If you want to introduce this topic, you can just introduce it, explaining what you think that means; or you can introduce it as a paradox. You can find a paradoxical example, where clicking like is used to mean dislike, or appears to mean that, and then consider solutions to it.¹ If you do not find that paradox, probably your work will be eclipsed by someone who thinks, "Worthwhile choice of topic, but I can introduce it in a much better way." If you don't follow this rule, you are still

¹ [This does not seem to be the same as sarcasm, by the way. Even if it is, that would be of interest if sarcasm seems impossible within this sign system.]

doing philosophy, but the chances of succeeding in this competitive market are much less.

Also it is a good idea if the example is accessible, because everyone wants to know, “What do likes mean? Do people really like what I am putting online?” When I was travelling on the London Underground, I heard some football fans chanting “No one likes us, we don’t care.” They had shaven heads and looked a bit frightening, but not as frightening as some hooligans in my home country. I imagined a strange video. The fans are chanting “No one likes us, we don’t care,” and the video is amassing views online, but no one likes it. Then a rival fan clicks like – a single irritating like.

A famous attempt to explain inequality in various fields, including philosophy, is by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. He was actually trained as a philosopher, but not in England. Bourdieu especially emphasizes stylistic factors which are not clearly relevant and are difficult to codify. One student and another both write on the same question, “Is the mind the brain?” and they make the same arguments and both write clearly, but the other student has an elegant writing style. The other student is favoured because of this, but how do you achieve such a style? A Bourdieusian approach has these commitments:

1. You cannot explain how to achieve elegance by presenting a set of rules to follow.
2. It is a stylistic extra,² rather than essential for philosophy.
3. But it plays decisive role in who is successful in this field.
4. It correlates heavily with class background. People from some class backgrounds find it easier to achieve this quality.

Maybe Bourdieu is right,² but there is another hypothesis: being successful in

² [In the preface to the English edition of his book *Homo Academicus*, Bourdieu raises the question of

philosophy is like dating in that there are rules for success; but nobody has explained the rules in a book for everyone and a lot of newcomers, especially people from discriminated groups, don't know the rules. It doesn't even occur to them that it is better to look for a paradoxical case when introducing a new topic. Of course some people will say that there are no instructions for how to find a case, and "This is no better than saying: write elegantly." But a paradoxical case seems more relevant to philosophy than elegance, and it is one thing if you don't know that it is a good idea to look for this case and another if you do. Some people from discriminated groups, if they know that, will stand a much better chance of making it in philosophy. Anyway, there is more information we can give about how to uncover a case – it won't guarantee success but it may help a bit: when examining Internet sites, keep an eye out for unusual likes, and consider what is that doing there?

Concluding Note. Moving out of pastiche mode (if I can), the topic example of Internet likes was taken from a paper by Lucy McDonald, which analyses them. But I found some of the information in her paper very useful and it won a prize and I am writing about her paper here, so it seems out of place to respond to it with "This is how you actually achieve success with your topic"! Nevertheless, and foolishly even, the hypothesis introduced in the pastiche strikes me as worth considering. If a family member or friend is already acquainted with the profession, they might warn you, "Someone is probably going to devise a different example there, which a lot of people will feel is better"³ or "Someone with the appropriate expertise can borrow quite a lot from you there without referring to you and still avoid a charge of plagiarism; that

whether his theories are specific to the French context. I think I would find France much like England.]
³ Perhaps professional philosophers mostly prefer McDonald's counterexamples. The omission of symbolic capital when presenting Bourdieu seems a more basic problem. Horribly, I shall say, "It is as if one ordered a standard rice dish and it was missing some diced meat that usually comes with it."

will probably happen.” As an alternative to Bourdieu’s theory, I think there are people who can provide more information, including presenting things which it makes sense to call rules,⁴ but people from under-represented backgrounds may well not be told these, with predictable consequences when they try to compete.⁵ (Competition is, of course, something bad in some people’s eyes. I am not sure they are entirely right. Next essay writing competition: competition – good or bad?!)

References

- Beebe, H. and McCallion, A-M. 2020. In Defence of Different Voices. *Symposion 7*: 149-177.
- Bourdieu, P. (translated by P. Collier) 1988. *Homo Academicus*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- McDonald, L. 2021. Please Like This Paper. *Philosophy* 96: 335-358.

⁴ How to clarify this sense? “These are rules because the chances of succeeding by any other way are so low,” “These are rules relative to this research community,” “These are rules in normal circumstances,” etc. Around 2017, a graduate student told me to just make paradoxes.

⁵ When I taught plagiarism, I did not show my students they-got-away-with-it cases. But I have the impression that a number of people from elite universities know about these.