

The “Feminist Killjoy” in the Room: The Costs of Caring about Diversity

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I agree wholeheartedly with my co-panelists that white, male philosophers *ought* to care about the lack of diversity in philosophy. However, I am skeptical that most of them do care. To be sure, *some* do and perhaps some others can be persuaded to care. However, in philosophy as in other arenas, the labor of caring about the well-being of others – women, minorities and the discipline itself – has been largely relegated to women. As feminist scholars have observed, diversity work is a form of “institutional housekeeping” typically relegated to women.¹

That diversity work is largely relegated to women is problematic on several levels. First, as Sadler points out, substantive institutional change depends on the support of the majority. Secondly, diversity work (like housekeeping) is largely unpaid work: it is not compensated financially, nor is it apt to lead to professional promotion or increased status. Indeed, quite the opposite is true. Diversity work is risky: if pursued in earnest, such work may and often does divert one’s attention from the sorts of endeavors that are valued by one’s colleagues, thereby leaving one marginalized by and perhaps even alienated from one’s colleagues and one’s chosen profession.

In my brief remarks here, I want to focus on the figuration of two types of women who care about the “diversity problem”² in philosophy: 1) the happy woman of reason and 2) the unhappy feminist philosopher. My interest here is not in reifying two (actual) types of women; obviously, these are stereotypes. Yet they are stereotypes that matter. In sketching the contours of these happy and unhappy figures, I am attempting to identify two “rhetorical spaces” or “gendered locations” from which female philosophers are allowed to speak about the issues of diversity.³ To speak from the first gendered location renders one’s caring philosophically acceptable, whereas speaking from the second location renders one’s caring philosophically suspect. This means that the position from which one speaks – and just as importantly, the position from which one is *perceived* to speak – matters very much to one’s credibility as a philosopher (and thus also to one’s professional and psychological well-being). These gendered locations of speech also matter to one’s efficacy as a caregiver for diversity in the profession – although, as I will suggest below, both gendered locales undermine one’s ability to bring about transformative change in the discipline.

A quick sense of the two gendered locations of which I speak can be gleaned from the “impressions of women in philosophy” shared by an anonymous “male philosopher:”

I have just as much respect for women philosophers in any area of philosophy as I have for men in an area of philosophy, except for one area: feminism. I am very suspicious of feminism for several reasons. First, I think a lot of it . . . is very poor quality, often an embarrassment to the profession (most male philosophers think the same, even if they won't admit it publicly, and so do many women philosophers who don't work in feminism.). Second, I think feminism is too political . . . more political than it is philosophical. Third . . . it is also very, very radical, often being anti-men, anti-family, even anti-children . . . Fourth . . . whenever I meet [a feminist, I suspect] . . . they might be angry, disagreeable bitches, no matter how they appear on the surface. This puts me off wanting to discuss my views with them, or wanting to read them. This is a pity because I agree one hundred percent that women have to put up with a lot of terrible harassment, discrimination, and other problems detailed in earlier posts.⁴

While more explicitly and crudely stated than most, this male philosopher's conception of feminist philosophy is (as he suggests) quite commonplace in the profession. So too is his strategy of distancing the (embarrassing, politically radical, bitchy) feminist philosopher from the (non-feminist) women philosopher for whom he expresses respect and sympathy for their predicament as the victims of harassment and discrimination. Note that there is no third position made available to the woman philosopher. She is either a respectable (read: moderate, agreeable, reasonable) philosopher or she is a feminist (read: radical, disagreeable, unreasonable) philosopher. If she is the former, both her intellectual work and her testimony concerning discrimination are to be greeted with respect. If she is the latter, neither her intellectual work nor her testimony regarding the resistance she may encounter to her full participation in the field need be taken seriously.

This prevalent reaction to the feminist philosopher is captured by Sara Ahmed's description of the "feminist killjoy"—a configuration of the female troublemaker who kills the joy of others by failing to find "the objects that promise happiness [to them] to be quite so promising." The word *feminism*, she suggests, is thus "saturated with unhappiness:"

Feminists, by declaring themselves as feminists, are already read as destroying something that is thought of by others not only as being good but as the cause of happiness. The feminist killjoy "spoils" the happiness of others; she is a spoilsport because she refuses to convene, to assemble, or to meet up over happiness.⁵

In myriad ways, the feminist philosopher “spoils” the happiness of her colleagues by questioning the alleged universal appeal of philosophy as it is practiced by a select group of people in a particular part of the world.⁶ To raise questions about the retention and recruitment of female and minority students in department meetings marks one as “difficult;” to fail to see the humor in a colleague’s sexist or racist joke marks one as “humorless;” to question the lack of attention to race, class, gender, nation, disability, and so forth in textbooks and at conferences marks one as “disagreeable.” The feminist philosopher is a killjoy.⁷

Note how the trope of the feminist killjoy undermines the feminist philosopher’s ability to be heard on issues of diversity. In each of the examples listed—as well as in our anonymous male philosopher’s blog post, the feminist philosopher’s critical reflections on the harassment, exclusion or marginalization of women and minorities is deflected by changing the subject from philosophy’s lack of diversity to the feminist philosopher’s lack of happiness: “situations of conflict, violence, and power are read as *about* the unhappiness of feminists, rather than being what feminists are unhappy *about*.”⁸ We have seen this play out on the national stage in recent years. Consider, for example, Brian Leiter’s 2011 skewering of Linda Martín Alcoff for her attempts to address the diversity problem in philosophy. For her role in developing “The Pluralist’s Guide to Philosophy”⁹—a guide for prospective female and minority graduate students seeking departments with climates hospitable to them and their potentially “non-traditional” interests—Alcoff was subjected to public ridicule, character attacks and calls for her resignation as Vice President of the American Philosophical Association.¹⁰ Ironically (but not perhaps incidentally), the very attacks that brutalized the APA’s first Latina President elect, served to silence her concerns about philosophy’s diversity problem. In Leiter’s hands, the target of anger and subject of needed change shifted from the discriminatory exclusions of philosophy to the discriminatory exclusions of the Pluralist Guide.

A similar rhetorical strategy has framed the discussion around the reports of sexual harassment in philosophy departments on various campuses. The findings of the APA’s 2013 site visit to determine the climate for women in Philosophy at the University of Colorado Boulder—that the department maintained “an environment with unacceptable sexual harassment, inappropriate sexualized unprofessional behavior and divisive uncivil behavior”¹¹—were quickly eclipsed by criticisms of the site team itself.¹² The rapid shift in attention from the hostile climate for women in philosophy to the alleged feminist ideological biases (and thus tainted findings and recommendations) of the site team illustrates how quickly “the *exposure* of violence becomes the *origin* of violence.”¹³ Like Alcoff, the members of the UC Boulder site team—Valeria Hardcastle, Peggy DesAutels, and Carla Fehr—were subjected to character attacks for being alleged feminist ideologues whose biases harmed members of the philosophical profession, specific departments of philosophy, and the discipline of philosophy itself. In both cases, a series of *ad feminism* attacks

functioned to silence feminist philosophers' accounts of philosophy's institutional harms to women at the same time as they perpetuated new harms.

As Marilyn Frye suggested over three decades ago, "it is a tiresome truth of women's experience that our anger is generally not well received;" it generally fails to get uptake.¹⁴ This is especially true, perhaps, of the anger of the feminist philosopher. Insofar as philosophy values impartial reason, the anger of the feminist philosopher at the harassment, marginalization, and exclusion of women and minorities in philosophy marks her as someone incapable of being dispassionate and reasonable. Moreover, her desire to *do* something about the under-representation of (and suffering of) women and minorities in the field marks the feminist philosopher as having "a political agenda." In other words, the feminist philosopher is marked *from the start* as something other than a philosopher. In a remarkable feat of circular reasoning, the feminist philosopher is discounted as a philosopher by virtue of the fact that she cares about philosophy's diversity problem. Thus, what she has to say about philosophy's diversity problem can be discounted because of her lack of philosophical credentials.

The professional female philosopher who recognizes the risks of being perceived as an unhappy feminist philosopher—including the risk that her concerns about the homogeneity of philosophy will remain unheard and unaddressed—may work very hard to be happy or at least feign happiness. This is not to suggest that no women in philosophy are ever genuinely happy. I suspect some are at least some of the time; perhaps some are much of the time. However, as Beauvoir notes, "there is no possibility of measuring the happiness of others, and it is always easy to describe as happy the situation in which one wishes to place them."¹⁵ It is important to remember that there are enormous pressures on women to smile *even when they are not happy*.¹⁶ To be a good woman is to be a happy woman; moreover, it is to be made happy by that which makes others happy, that which others deem good.¹⁷ In the case of philosophy, then, to be a good woman philosopher is to align one's happiness with the dominant norms of the profession. Only by doing this can one "pass" as a real philosopher—pass one's graduate examinations, finish one's dissertation, get a job as a philosopher, keep a job, be published in the right journals, get promoted and so forth.¹⁸ Given the dismissals of the feminist killjoy, a plausible argument can also be made that being happy or feigning happiness about the goodness of philosophy may also be the key to success in solving philosophy's diversity problem. As the saying goes, perhaps we can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.

The difficulty with positioning oneself as the "good" (happy) woman of reason is, first, that it demands a considerable amount of affective labor to conceal, bracket, or transform one's hurt and outrage in ways that permit the outward signs of happiness that produce harmony with and among those by whom one has been marginalized, excluded, dismissed, or otherwise harmed. It is emotionally taxing, time-consuming, and self-alienating to pretend to be happy (or even

dispassionate) when one is not—for example, when one is conscious of one’s second-class status in one’s department or in the profession at large.¹⁹ Second, by concealing (bracketing, ignoring, downplaying) the harms to oneself and others for the sake of appearing reasonable, one risks becoming complicit—even if this is not one’s intention—with those who will try to position you as evidence that (*contra* the claims of the angry feminist philosopher) reasonable women enjoy philosophy’s normative practices.²⁰ Finally, and related to the last point, one’s success at becoming (or passing as) the happy woman of reason neutralizes one’s ability to address philosophy’s diversity problem. Insofar as one accepts and succeeds in—or *seems to* accept and succeed in—the place in which one has been placed, one reinforces the notion that business should proceed as usual, that philosophy is a happy place for women. Once philosophy is re-established as a happy place for women, the diversity problem in philosophy becomes merely a strategic and not an ethical one. All that is needed is better marketing strategies; no substantive reforms to the discipline are necessary to improve philosophy’s demographics.

I emphatically do *not* intend to criticize any female philosopher—feminist or non-feminist—for her strategic choices. Instead, I raise these issues here to illustrate the classic double bind facing women who care about philosophy’s diversity problem. If we speak as the happy woman of reason (genuinely, strategically, or otherwise), “we signify our docility and our acquiescence in our situation. We need not, then, be taken note of.” On the other hand, if we speak as the unhappy feminist philosopher, we will be “perceived as mean, bitter, angry or dangerous” to individuals in the profession and to the profession itself.²¹ If a characteristic feature of oppression is the double bind,²² then philosophy is oppressive to women. Insofar as we are permitted only two rhetorical spaces from which to speak and insofar as both of these speaking positions put us at personal and professional risk and, moreover, neutralize our efforts to address the very problems we (and other Others) face, we are damned if we do care about diversity and damned if we don’t.

To make this observation, of course, reveals me as a feminist killjoy. This label—and along with it the accusation that I am not a “real” philosopher—is something with which I have learned to live. As a killjoy, however, it is not in my nature to live with such things happily.

Endnotes

¹ See Bird, et al. 2004 and other articles on the work of diversifying institutions in that same issue.

² I find this locution problematic for several reasons—among them that it suggests that diversity (rather than *lack* of diversity) is the problem. Nonetheless, as it has become the convenient shorthand for the issue under discussion here, I will use it without scare quotes for the remainder of this paper.

³ Code 1995.

⁴ See “[One man’s view of women who do philosophy](#),” What is it like to be a woman in philosophy? (November 10, 2010).

⁵ Ahmed 2010, 65.

⁶ Alcoff 2011, web.

⁷ A close relative to the feminist killjoy is the “angry person of color.” On the difficulties for people of color who do diversity work, see Ahmed 2012. Ahmed 2010 also talks about “unhappy queers” and “melancholic migrants.” We could expand this list of unhappy troublemakers to include the stereotypically unhappy members of other disadvantaged groups (e.g. “complaining cripples”) as well. I focus on the “feminist killjoy” here both to keep my remarks brief and because, as the only group to approach anything close to a critical mass in philosophy, women have suffered visible backlash.

⁸ Ahmed 2010, 68.

⁹ For example, see the [Pluralist’s Guide](#).

¹⁰ This went on for several weeks on the Leiter Report and would take considerably more space than I have here (or am inclined to give Leiter) to detail. See “[Should Linda Alcoff resign?](#)” for an example. Please also see The [Pluralist’s Guide](#) for Alcoff’s responses and “The Statement of Feminist Philosophers Concerning the Pluralists’ Guide” at the [Feminist Philosopher’s Blog](#).

¹¹ [Summary Report of the APA to University of Colorado Boulder](#), January 31, 2014.

¹² See e.g. “[Criticisms of the site visit report on Colorado](#),” Leiter Report, February 11, 2014. The site team was also accused of leaking the report to the media, an accusation that was revealed to be false.

¹³ Ahmed 2010, 68 (emphasis added).

¹⁴ See Frye 1983.

¹⁵ See Beauvoir 1997.

¹⁶ This is a classic feminist insight receiving renewed attention in recent years. See, Firestone 1997 and Marianne LaFrance et al. 2003.

¹⁷ Ahmed 2010, 56.

¹⁸ This demand for normativity, of course, is the difficulty with reducing the problem of diversity in philosophy to a “pipeline” problem. We need to look at philosophy’s plumbing and not merely at how to recruit women and minorities into its pipes. See Ahmed 2012, 157ff on “institutional passing” or “passing as the ‘right kind’ of minority.”

¹⁹ To wit: the extraordinary amount of time it took me to write this paper is completely out of proportion with its exceedingly small contribution to the debates at hand. Many, many versions ended up in the electronic wastebasket before anything resembling a “reasonable” analysis could be produced.

²⁰ See e.g. the ways in which Brian Leiter uses the (typically out of context) comments of selected women philosophers to challenge feminist philosophy on his blog or his quoted remark that “some women dislike the suggestion that the field’s too combative for delicate women” in Wilson 2013.

²¹ Frye 1983, 2.

²² Frye 1983, 2.

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