

INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE “WOMEN IN PHILOSOPHY: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE”

Guest Editor

Elly Vintiadis¹ 

¹ Deree - The American College of Greece

ABSTRACT

This article is an introduction to the special issue on Women in Philosophy: Past, Present and Future. Over the past decade, there has been increased attention given to the underrepresentation of women in academic philosophy, as well as the lack of diversity in philosophy more broadly. While there has been some progress in the demographics of philosophy, as evidenced by recent surveys and empirical studies, women are still significantly outnumbered by men and disparities persist. This special issue aims to address the ongoing problem of inclusion in philosophy by exploring the contribution of women in the field. The contributors have been given freedom to write on topics they consider important, with the hope of stimulating further discussion and generating new ideas for addressing this issue.

Keywords: *women philosophers; diversity; inclusivity; representation; philosophy.*

For the past ten years or so the underrepresentation of women in academic philosophy, and the lack of diversity in philosophy more generally, has received considerable attention. Though in the past decade some progress has been made in the demographics of philosophy and different surveys and large-scale empirical studies have recently provided evidence for this, the underrepresentation of women is still regarded as a problem by most people in our field where women are still significantly outnumbered by men and disparities persist. In fact, women are more underrepresented in our discipline than they are in other humanities and, interestingly, many of the STEM disciplines with which they seem to have more in common in this regard.

But this is not news. The fact is that philosophy has always been exclusionary—as Linda Martin Alcoff has put it, our discipline is demographically challenged. The history of philosophy has been comprised of the ideas of (white, cis, Western) men. As a result, the content of philosophy has been very narrowly circumscribed and its canon is small and very resilient. One might think that this is simply because women did not do philosophy—after all, women did not have access to philosophy or education in general—or because whatever they happened to occasionally contribute was not of good quality. But that is not the case. Women did do philosophy as they still do and do well. Nonetheless, what is true is that historically, and until recently, women were given few chances for their engagement to be taken seriously and for them to succeed in philosophy, and women’s voices, just as those of other groups in philosophy, were systematically ignored. For instance, it was commonplace for anthologies and university syllabi to not include anything written by women, and conferences and seminars to include few, if any, women.

All this is a problem for a number of reasons—not only reasons of justice but also for reasons that have to do with philosophy itself and its progress. Ultimately, how you define what philosophy is, and by extension what it is not, can affect who is interested in it—both in terms of the audience of philosophy but also in terms of who becomes interested in doing philosophy. By narrowing circumscribing what philosophy is allowed to be, it is becoming irrelevant to a large number of people who feel it does not have a lot to offer in an ever-changing and increasingly multicultural world. However, if we manage to open up philosophy to include more

people and thus more and different ways of thinking and doing philosophy, we can be hopeful since the people and perspectives that have so far been systematically ignored can now become a source of new ideas to be explored.

As a response to the recognition that there has been a long tradition of epistemological injustice towards philosophers who have been systematically marginalized, part of the discussion around the underrepresentation of women in philosophy has focused on incorporating in the discipline the philosophical voices of those who have been ignored. Thus, following Eileen O'Neill's seminal and agenda-setting paper "Disappearing Ink: Early Modern Women Philosophers and Their Fate in History" in 1997, a number of publications have aimed to bring to light the contribution made by women to philosophy both historically and today. Such publications are, either explicitly or implicitly, a statement against philosophical elitism which considers only one tradition, one kind of voice or one kind of method to be of value or conducive to good philosophy. This, in addition to the increasing attention that has been given in the past decade to issues of diversity and inclusivity around the world, has helped to shift the ground a bit and to bring to light the different ways that can keep certain groups underrepresented.

However, showcasing women's work is one part of the response to the problem of representation in philosophy but it is not enough. Another part has aimed at proposing solutions to address the source of the problem. The difficulty here is that though there has been work done on why there is gender inequality in philosophy there is no one agreed upon answer to this question. Indeed, it can plausibly be argued that there are a number of different factors that contribute to underrepresentation. This is one of the reasons why visibility—in the sense of promoting women's work, hiring more women for faculty positions, accepting more women to graduate programs in philosophy and so on—is not enough. We are also now aware that there are systemic structures that make it difficult to recruit and keep women in philosophy and that there are things like bias, stereotype threat and sexual harassment that keep women from enjoying equal status and representation in our field. We are also well aware that the content and the way that philosophy is presented is rigidly gatekept in such a way that many issues that matter to people, and philosophers, are dismissed as not 'real philosophy'.

Given this, what also needs to be addressed is what can be done to further improve the situation for women and other underrepresented groups. A number of suggestions have been made and as a result some good practices schemes have been put together—e.g., in 2014 by the *British Philosophical Association* (BPA) and the UK chapter of the *Society for Women in Philosophy* (SWIP) and more recently by the *American Philosophical Association* and the *Demographics in Philosophy Project*. The aim of such guidelines is to address factors that affect gender inclusion (as well as inclusion of the other, many, underrepresented groups) in philosophy including but not limited to the methods of practicing philosophy, how it is taught, the content of philosophy and the workings of philosophy programs and their practices (e.g., regarding hiring and promotion, the organization of conferences and other events, student surveys etc.).

The aim of this special issue is to continue the exploration of the problem of inclusion in philosophy in the context of ongoing debates of women's contribution in philosophy. With this in mind and with the hope that the ideas presented here will stimulate further discussion and more ideas about what is to be done might emerge, I intentionally left considerable liberty to the contributors of this special issue to write about what they deem important in relation to this topic in the manner they consider appropriate. I asked philosophers to contribute to this special issue their different perspectives on the role and position of women in philosophy both in the past and today in the way they seem fit. The result is an issue with varied and thorough contributions. Some focus on what it is like to be a woman in philosophy, others are empirical studies on the representation of women in philosophy and others focus on what should be done to overcome the current predicament.

Hopefully the papers will encourage further work in this area, serve as a source of inspiration for women to see a future in philosophy and also, possibly, encourage new ways of doing philosophy both in form and in content.

THE PAPERS

Anita Allen opens this special issue with her paper “Vowing Moral Integrity: Adrian Piper’s Probable Trust Registry” on the award-winning work of art, *The Probable Trust Registry #1-3*, by the artist and analytic philosopher Adrian Piper. Piper undertook a career in academic philosophy when there were few women of any race teaching philosophy full-time in the United States and through Allen’s description of the difficulties that Piper faced in her career we not only get a sense of the serious problem of inclusivity in our field, but also of the narrowness of how philosophical work must be presented. Beyond an insightful analysis of Piper’s work and her historical importance to the field of philosophy, this paper, in which Allen argues that Piper’s work is catalytic, affirming and informed by philosophy, offers an important perspective on Piper’s experiences and achievements, as a black woman philosopher, within philosophy but also without it. This paper, which also incorporates Allen’s personal perspective, will be of interest to philosophers, especially in the fields of aesthetics and social justice, to scholars interested in issues surrounding gender representation in various disciplines as well as scholars working at the intersection of race, gender, and philosophy.

In their paper entitled “Women philosophers in communist socialism: The case of Croatian women philosophers in years 1945–1989” **Ivana Skuhala Karasman and Luka Boršić** focus on the position of women philosophers in the Socialist Republic of Croatia (SRC) during the period 1945–1989 in order to assess whether communist socialism was better for women in academia than capitalism. Presenting empirical and historical data, the authors argue that the number of publications authored by women in SRC are significantly higher than in contemporary philosophical journals in the (capitalist) West and correspond roughly to the number of publications by women today in the world’s leading philosophical journals. They also argue that the percentage of women faculty in the Socialist Republic of Croatia corresponds to the percentage of women today at universities and institutes in capitalist countries, including present-day Croatia. This piece is probably the first paper tackling the question of women philosophers in Croatian communist socialism empirically and thus offers an original contribution to debates in a number of disciplines regarding the position of women philosophers in the Socialist Republic of Croatia.

Sherri Lynn Conklin, Michael Nekrasov, and Jevin West in their paper “Where are the Women: The Ethnic Representation of Women Authors in Philosophy Journals, by Regional Affiliation and Specialization” document the continuing underrepresentation of women in philosophy globally by presenting systematic data on the publication rates of women in philosophy journals from 1950 through 2020. Though there have been other studies documenting the representation of women in philosophy this piece covers a range of international journals making international comparisons—in contrast with other studies that focus on North America—and systematically compares how authorship gender in philosophy compares to that of several other disciplines since the 1950’s. The authors find that not only are women underrepresented in philosophy compared to other academic fields as they have been for decades, but they also highlight the fact that the gender publication gap is not limited to North America and Western Europe but exists beyond prestigious journals and the U.S. context. This paper also addresses previous methodological issues and contributes to the literature on gender publication and philosophy both in terms of improving the methods of this research and by providing key findings that require further research.

In “Vices, Structures, and Explanatory Pluralism” **Ian Kidd** addresses through vice epistemology the phenomenon of resistance to understanding and responding to the demographic problem, that is, to attitudes and behaviors that tend or intend to resist attempts to understand and respond to the problem of the underrepresentation of certain groups in philosophy. Kidd proposes a plausible and attractive analysis to the demographic problem and defends ‘explanatory pluralism’. His main claim is that in order to understand such resistance to efforts to improve things for women in philosophy we don’t need to choose between either individual-level or structural-level explanations. Rather, we need a methodology that includes both individual and structural-level explanations—that is, vice and structural explanations that are mutually entailing—and Kidd offers a way to balance them using Dillon’s critical character theory.

Rebecca Buxton and Lisa Whiting’s “Women in Philosophy: What Is To Be Done? Interrogating the Values of Representation and Intersectionality” is a highly compelling paper that calls for philosophy to do more in terms of diversifying the field. Looking at levels of employment,

publishing, and sexual harassment in philosophy Buxton and Whiting focus on representation and intersectionality and identify the problem facing philosophy as both one of lack of ambition and one of attention. They ultimately argue that philosophy as a discipline is uniquely well-positioned to think through the marginalization suffered by women and other minorities but that more radical steps towards inclusivity need to be taken if things are to change. In order for that to happen, it is necessary to address the multiple disadvantages that many women face that go well beyond the domain of gender alone.

Suki Finn in “Being-from-Birth: Pregnancy and Philosophy” also claims that though progress has been made in both descriptive and substantive representation of women in philosophy, there is still a long way to go. Finn discusses the case of pregnancy as a topic that is significantly under-explored and under-analysed in philosophy arguably because of its (near-universal) association with women. Though she does not want to make the essentialist claim that there is a correlation between this and the underrepresentation of women in philosophy, Finn tackles both in an original combination of arguments in an attempt to redress both imbalances.

In the closing paper of this special issue, “Is Consciousness Gendered?”, **Sophie-Grace Chappell** argues that consciousness is gendered since the political and physical realities of being female and male, as well as masculine and feminine, are distinctively different. Chappell moves from Nagel’s question of what it is like to be a bat, to what it is like to be a man or woman and in her discussion highlights core concepts of consciousness, subjective points of view, and the private/public distinction. She brings together the political dimension of any discussion about consciousness with gender or sex by linking oppression and perception and, by also addressing the question of what it is like to be transgendered, she introduces her own experience to make the case that there is something distinct in consciousness. In arguing thus, she brings forth another way, other than just the question of inclusion, in which gender matters to philosophy.

