

## **Does Tompkins' paradox affect women in analytic philosophy?**

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*Abstract.* I think Tompkins' paradox, as I call it, probably does affect analytic philosophy, particularly analytic political philosophy, and maybe other parts as well. There are female philosophers who have a number of symbols of status, such as posts at prestigious universities or professorships and publications in high ranking journals, yet there is a question of whether they are not regarded as players in the big leagues, to use Jane Tompkins' metaphor, even if "big leagues" does not refer to particularly impressive leagues. I propose that avoiding certain errors would help.

*Draft version:* Version 5 (21st November 2022, Corrections: "Afraid of," "2021").

*"It's a league, it's a league*

*But it doesn't leave us with fatigue!"*

I call it "Tompkins' paradox" but that may not be the most accurate guide to who devised the paradox (Edward 2022a: fn. 1). I think it was me, but also that this is a good name, as I shall soon explain. Tompkins writes:

Women... are, understandably afraid. Afraid of being confused with the weaker sex, the sex that goes around whining and talking about itself in an unseemly way, that can't or won't do what the big boys do ('tough it out') and so won't ever be allowed to play in the big boys' games. I am sympathetic with this position. Not long ago, as organizer of an MLA session entitled 'Professional politics: women and the institution', I urged a large roomful of

women to ‘get theory’ because I thought that doing theory would admit us to the big leagues...

The paradox is that all this puzzling over how to get into the big leagues is done by the author in the prestigious journal *New Literary History*. Isn't Tompkins already in the big leagues then?!

I called it “Tompkins’ paradox” because... well, it’s difficult to explain, though I confess I felt a satisfaction with the reason as nice and clever, but I shall try. The name of a paradox often indicates who devised it, but in this case it doesn’t and so there is this gap between the symbolic stuff – “It’s her name that gets a place!” – and the reality and when you look into the paradox, you are probably going to encounter such gaps. There’s some convergence between the name and “the world” of the paradox. (By the way: imagine if letters are usually mobile things when combined but the letters of “Zeno’s paradox of motion” fail to move.)

I wonder whether a Tompkins’ paradox situation obtains in analytic political philosophy. There are, or is, a set of women who have first class degrees from elite universities; professorships; publications in leading journals – all this symbolic capital, to use the language of Pierre Bourdieu – but somehow no one outside a circle of friends holds them in high regard. It is quite natural for one of them to ask, how do I get in the big leagues? In this context the big leagues does not have to be that of the great philosophers, like Plato and Kant. It could be quite an ordinary league, from many people’s perspective.

There are at least two questions that arise:

- (a) Why are they not yet in the big leagues (or even this league)?
- (b) And: how did they amass so much symbolic capital if they are somehow not big league level (or this league level)?

Regarding (a), and the case of (my friend???) Laura Valentini, she is well-known for a conceptual analysis (2012; 2018), but I suppose to be a big league conceptual analyst she would have to independently recognize the distinction between being feasible and being feasibility-sensitive (or “she would have had to have independently recognized it”; see Edward 2022c). That is a necessary condition. In the case of Anca Gheaus, she would have to independently do a premise-by-premise reconstruction properly (Gheaus 2018; Edward 2022b).

Regarding question (b), I am not sure what is going on. When you go to school, there are grades and prizes and these represent who is doing better and who is doing worse. And you develop a sense of an official system of accreditation that is accurate about a student’s level, or at least that is the simple story. And you cannot run a school responsibly without that accurate system: that is also part of the simple story. And as a student you care about the official rewards that are available and also look forward to such symbolic capital from the adult world beyond school: a Nobel prize, being prime minister, etc. (“My school was nothing like this!”) And now, years afterwards, you find that things are very complicated! It is possible that *you* as an adult are regarded as placing too much weight on the system of qualifications and other symbolic capital and someone has set out on a project of character transformation: “We give everything of this kind to you until you realize that these don’t mean that much,” though they may have meant more before. You will now get all this symbolic capital while “everyone” notices various problems in your work. “Essentially we crash the official accreditation system as an accurate system.” And you carry around this symbolic capital, signalling to every insider what you are: a person who cared too much about this stuff. That’s really bad! (By the way, Tompkins’ paradox can affect men as well.<sup>1</sup>)

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<sup>1</sup> The book *The Oxford Brotherhood* describes how the narrator did not have a lower opinion of the number 2 in intelligence because, from reading English novels, he knew that 2 was often 1 (see chapter 2!).



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