

### Introducing the Elephant in the Room

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In order to elevate discussion on the (euphemistically coined) “diversity problem” in philosophy (i.e., the significant under-representation of women and minorities in the discipline) philosophers must step outside their comfort zones. We have to ask direct questions, such as: “What are the most effective approaches that departments can take to tackle this issue head on?” and “How do we develop effective measures to assess the rectification of climate issues that undermine our efforts to secure diversity in the profession?” As to the latter question, it is reasonable to suspect that a department’s success rate in the recruitment and retention of a diverse student and faculty body would partly constitute such a measure. Yet, who wants to drop that suggestion at the next department meeting? As the process of consciousness-raising about women’s and minorities’ experiences in this profession accelerates, many of us feel determined to understand exactly how we have been complicit in the perpetuation of some serious problems and determine how we can become part of the solution. I suspect that meaningful social change can be fueled even at the individual level, especially by those philosophers who take as a point of pride (or at least have made peace with) their social awkwardness. That’s right, folks! We can use our social awkwardness for good! We can be vehicles for respectful, positive, and productive discussion about any one of a number of serious problems the profession faces. Below, I suggest just some of the ways you can draw attention to one of the elephants in the room: the diversity problem.

Step one: Let’s “talk shop!” Get a fellow philosopher’s intuitions on the diversity problem. You can stipulate its definition as formulated in the introductory paragraph and frame the discussion with the typology provided below. Just ask which of these attitudes towards the diversity problem your colleague identifies with most:

Option 1. **Skepticism:** this attitude is that of a general unwillingness to acknowledge that such underrepresentation presents a problem for the integrity of the department, the field, or its body of knowledge. Skepticism can range from a passive to active denial that the issue constitutes a problem (e.g., the view that the state of philosophy is not compromised by the lack of diversity in its constituency).

Option 2. **Acceptance:** this attitude is that of a general willingness to acknowledge that this under-representation presents a problem for the integrity of the department, the field, or its body of knowledge (though the respondent can provide few, if any, examples of an effort they have taken to address the problem). Acceptance can range from a passive to active *acknowledgment* that the issue constitutes a problem, though exclusively from a social justice standpoint (e.g., the view that it is *unfair* that women and minorities do not have their interests, concerns, and values adequately represented in the field).

Option 3. **Affirmation:** this attitude is that of an open willingness to identify this under-representation as *prima facie* problematic for the integrity of the department, the field, and its body of knowledge; and this position is accompanied by the ability of the respondent to provide concrete example(s) of their own effort(s) to address the problem. Affirmation is an active attitude that identifies the issue as problematic, not merely from a social justice standpoint, but from a standpoint of concern for the methodological and epistemological integrity of the discipline (e.g., the view that such under-representation negatively affects the quality of knowledge produced by the field).

No matter where your colleague falls along this continuum, you are now, at the very least, strategically situated for a potentially positive, productive, and philosophically oriented discussion on the diversity problem. If your colleague's attitude is that of acceptance, for example, what are the reasons used to justify their position on the matter? Do they feel their position on the matter is constrained by (or at odds with) the more general ethos displayed by their department toward the diversity problem? Alternatively, more philosophically interesting still, do they fail to see how the lack of diversity in the discipline compromises the integrity of its epistemological claims?<sup>1</sup>

Bracketing the skeptics for now here is something you can try with those who fall under options 1 or 2. Get their thoughts on this (or some similarly motivated) analogy between political inquiry and philosophical inquiry:

It was not long ago that a senate committee, comprised of exclusively male representatives, was working to pass legislation regarding female reproductive health issues, controversially attempting to censor the contribution of at least one woman on the grounds that she lacked proper epistemic authority. Memorably, a number of these male politicians publically expressed their reservations on the government

funding of birth control (inadvertently fueling the already mounting concern over the committee's ostensible lack of diversity). For example, at least one republican representative urged against government funding of contraception for women—specifically, birth control pills—based on his (empirically unsubstantiated) intuition that such funding would cause women to engage in more sexually promiscuous activity, thereby causing the government to be forced to increase spending on contraceptive pills. Sadly, male republicans as notoriously influential as Rush Limbaugh, are peddling this same flawed logic. However, these males' reasoning reveals something perhaps more worrisome than their misogynistic biases; it makes evident their fundamental ignorance of how this form of contraception in fact works (i.e., they mistakenly presume that women must take a pill prior to each sexual encounter in order for the contraception to be effective, versus researching the reality- women take one pill a day, regardless of sexual activity). The moral of the story (one of them, anyways): When the diverse interests, concerns, and values of different social groups (grounded as they are in their distinctive, lived experiences) are not adequately represented in a relevant domain of discussion, the content and outcome of the discussion are, rather predictably, less likely to pass epistemological or methodological muster.

Now, if a homogenous demographic subset of politicians' claims are more likely to suffer from a lack of epistemological integrity, why – or in what ways – might one suppose that a homogenous demographic subset of philosophers' claims would be any different? Those who fall under option 2 owe some sort of story as to why they stop short of adopting the attitude of affirmation. My strong suspicion is that philosophers are in no way immune to the same epistemological pitfalls cited as endemic of our political or scientific practitioner-counterparts.

However, there may be room for dialectical resistance for those inclined to pursue it. One could, for example, advocate for some form of philosophical exceptionalism in the domain of epistemology (e.g., the methodology of philosophical inquiry is sufficiently dissimilar to  $x$  mode of epistemological inquiry because  $y$ ). I see no promise in this philosophical maneuver, but it is an option. *Sans* empirical evidence to the contrary, the challenge stands. That is, to the extent professional philosophy remains disproportionately dominated by middle to upper class white heterosexual males, we may safely assume non-trivial experiential “blind spots” undermine the epistemological foundation of our theories of knowledge and society. Again, the idea here is that we create space for philosophically-oriented conversation about the diversity problem, wherein we challenge the discipline on some of its taken-for-granted methodological assumptions, and nudge

our more sympathetic colleagues out of their (superficially) “apolitical” comfort zone. In other words, part of the task is to show *how* the methodological *is* political.

Regarding the cultural climate of the discipline, Sally Haslanger famously remarked, “There is a deep well of rage inside of me. Rage about how I as an individual have been treated in philosophy; rage about how others I know have been treated; and rage about the conditions that I’m sure affect many women and minorities in philosophy, and have caused many others to leave.”<sup>2</sup> Those of us who feel empowered by Haslanger’s candid appraisal of our profession’s climate, as well as those of us who are absolutely determined to do more than survive in this discipline (*those of us who insist on thriving in it*), need to continuously build our own professional power bases, while simultaneously working to undermine the power bases that undercut us. To this end, another step that any ally can take is to start a Minorities and Philosophy (MAP) chapter at their home department. And what is MAP?

MAP is a collection of students in North American philosophy departments that aims to examine and address issues of minority participation in academic philosophy. Though primarily led by graduate students, MAP also relies on faculty support and encourages undergraduate participation. Through MAP’s network, students can exchange ideas on topics related to minorities and philosophy, meet and support peers, and learn from other philosophy departments. MAP chapters can choose to provide their respective departments with regular feedback on department climate. Though the format of MAP varies from school to school, each chapter aims broadly at addressing (a) minority issues in the profession, (b) theoretical issues regarding philosophy of gender, race, sexual orientation, class, disability, etc., and (c) philosophy done from minority perspectives. Meeting formats include: external or internal speakers, reading groups, film screenings, mentorship events for undergraduates or graduates, panel discussions, practical workshops (e.g., on communication techniques, navigating stereotype threat or implicit bias)...In the short term, MAP provides a forum for students to discuss these topics and connect with interested peers. In the long term, we hope that MAP will contribute to improved departmental cultures and facilitate increased participation of underrepresented groups in philosophy.<sup>3</sup>

If we continuously strive to seek each other and our allies out with a generosity of spirit, to create safe spaces for candid dialogue about serious problems within the profession, and to promote more inclusive professional power bases (e.g., the MAP initiative, the Pluralist Guide to Philosophy

Programs, the APA Committee on Diversity and Inclusion, and the Directory of Women Philosophers), then I think there is reason for cautious optimism about a number of serious problems endemic in our profession. I, like so many others, want to experience the *profession* of philosophy the same way I experience philosophy proper – as empowering, not alienating. Moreover, I, like so many others, will settle for no less.

### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> There exists strong evidence for the positive impact diversifying scientific research teams has had on the quality of scientific knowledge they produce. For example, see Vedantam and Greene 2014.

<sup>2</sup> See Haslanger 2008.

<sup>3</sup> See [Map for the Gap](#).

### Bibliography

Haslanger, Sally. "Changing the Ideology and Culture of Philosophy: Not by Reason (Alone)." *Hypatia* 23.2 (2008): 210-223.

Vedantam, Shankar and David Greene. "[Does Diversity on Research Team Improve Quality of Science?](#)" *NPR.ORG*. Posted: March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2014.