Problems and Solutions: Diversity in Philosophy

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With respect to many complex problems, we proceed to enact solutions even when we are not certain what the precise causes of the problem are and even when we lack sufficient information to guarantee that our attempts to solve the problem will work. Proceeding in the light of such uncertainties is part of being a responsible agent in the world, whether moral agent, political activist, social reformer, medical doctor, or engineer. If a bridge collapses, we may well need to rebuild even if we do not know whether the problem was ultimately faulty design, poor construction, or eroding materials. If a patient is suffering, we try to diagnose and cure the disease, or at least alleviate the symptoms, even when we do not know the precise etiology of the disease. If we recognize famine as a problem, regardless of the complex overlay of socio-political and environmental factors that cause it, we might well find both immediate and long-term solutions to it. So if it is said that the discipline of philosophy has a problem with diversity, let us not be stopped short by the retort that we cannot be sure how much of the problem is due to the discipline itself and hence cannot proceed to address the problem.[1]

However, perhaps the worry about causes is just a red herring. Perhaps the real worry is that it is not sufficiently clear that there is a problem in the first place, or what the problem is. So what is the problem about diversity in the discipline of philosophy? The problem appears in several ways. Foremost is the fact that women and minorities are under-represented as members of the profession[2]: our numbers decline dramatically as we progress from undergraduate philosophy majors, to graduate students, to tenure-track faculty, to tenured faculty and full professors. We are also under-represented in professional activities such as conferences and editorial boards—even under-represented relative to our numbers in the profession. Our work is under-represented in journal publications, scholarly citations, textbooks, anthologies, and syllabi.[3] The exclusion of the

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[1] There are surely contributing causes from outside the discipline, i.e., larger social, cultural, and economic issues. However, many of these issues would seem to be equally relevant to other academic disciplines, which have yet managed to do much better than philosophy to include women and minorities and their work.

[2] We have good data on the representation of women and racial minorities among Ph.D.'s in philosophy at American universities and among faculty. We do not have the same data regarding other minorities, including some ethnicities, those with a minority sexual orientation, persons with disability, and transgender persons. Although I believe some of my remarks about the discipline of philosophy pertinent to these other groups, I focus on women and racial minorities.

[3] Consider the following examples. One popular textbook contains excerpts from the works of 48 different authors divided across 17 topical sections; of these, there are only four women, whose work is addressed under only four topic

work of women and minorities from syllabi, especially, tends to perpetuate our under-representation since graduate students tend to teach the same texts, authors, or styles of philosophy that they themselves were taught—what they take to be important, central to the discourse, legitimate, rigorous, or real philosophy (normative assessments that are rarely subject to any critical scrutiny)— thereby recapitulating the same unexamined prejudices or stale conceptions of what philosophy is and should be. Further, philosophy textbooks, syllabi, and program curricula often exclude or marginalize topics that have been addressed primarily by women and minority philosophers: feminist theory, gender, race, sexuality, disability, and non-Western philosophy.[4] These topics are highly pertinent to ethics and political theory, social philosophy, epistemology, the history of philosophy, and even metaphysics and the philosophy of mind—all mainstream, recognized areas of philosophy. Their exclusion and marginalization in philosophy is intellectually suspect, to say the least. When compared to other humanities disciplines in which these topics have been integrated into the curriculum, their absence in philosophy appears all the more conspicuous.

In addition to the under-representation of women and minorities in the discipline and the exclusion or marginalization of our work, substantial evidence suggests that implicit bias is operative in evaluating the intellectual and professional contributions of women and minority colleagues. The research on implicit bias suggests that when search committees say that they are looking to hire the best philosopher, as well as when tenure-and-promotion committees are evaluating the work of their colleagues, even good intentions are unlikely to guarantee a fair assessment of the work of women and minorities. Given this combination of factors—under-representation, exclusion and marginalization, implicit bias—it is not difficult to see how philosophy departments and conferences can create a professional climate that is anywhere from "chilly" (unwelcoming, unsupportive) to hostile (ostracizing, unjust, demeaning). Recently, much media attention has been focused on the problem of sexual harassment in philosophy. But as much disputation and difficulty as surrounds the problem of identifying and addressing the problem of sexual harassment, it is nonetheless often easier to deal with than the more diffuse but also very damaging problems of sexism, misogyny, racism, and racial injustice that are widespread in professional philosophy (and which partly account for the prevalence of sexual harassment). When the professional climate so discourages, devalues,

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areas, specifically Kantian ethics, Aristotelian ethics, justice, and existentialism. (I have excluded from my count the section of the book on puzzles and paradoxes, for which the table of contents does not list authors or the titles of texts.) The book is *Introduction to Philosophy: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, 6th edition, edited by John Perry, Michael Bratman, and John Martin Fischer (Oxford, 2012). The *Routledge Companion to Ethics*, edited by John Skorupski (Routledge, 2012), contains 68 commissioned articles on various topics in ethics; of these, only four articles are by women. It is often said (without substantiating evidence) that many or most women philosophers work in ethics. If that is true, women's under-representation in the *Routledge Companion* is even more glaring and diagnostic of the problem of diversity in philosophy.

[4] This is not to say that all women or minority philosophers work on these topics, nor that others cannot do so. Quite the contrary, I would like to suggest that we all benefit from exploring these topics in our research and teaching.

silences, or otherwise dis-empowers women and minority participants, it makes it all the more difficult for us to form effective strategies of resistance, whether to particular transgressors (e.g., a sexually-harassing dissertation director or a racist department chair) or to larger institutional or systemic issues (e.g., hiring procedures, curricular design, sexism in job assignments). As I have said, the problem of diversity in philosophy is not just about the under-representation of women and minorities as members of the profession. However, when our numbers are so low, we lack the critical mass needed to form social allies and networks of professional support, and to shift the problematic attitudes and beliefs of the white, male majority. Without a critical mass, our concerns will often be disregarded as individual complaints or peevishness, our struggles be perceived as mere "personality conflicts," our exclusion from key professional outlets (conferences, editorial boards, citations) be taken as further evidence of our inferior abilities, and our intellectual work be discredited. When we do speak up in protest of our unjust treatment or in an attempt to advance our work, we will often be treated to a backlash of redoubled tactics or an entrenchment of negative attitudes. The problem of diversity in philosophy is thus a complex one in which many different factors interlock to form a massive structure of resistance to the full participation of women and minorities. As with many issues of social justice, change will only be possible with the support of the (white, male) majority. If you are not a part of the solution, you are, *ipso facto*, a part of the problem.

Sadly, many philosophers are not convinced that philosophy's homogeneity constitutes a problem. I suspect many white, male philosophers enjoy the homogeneity of the discipline; it feels familiar and comfortable to them in the way that their experience of summer camp, or the boy scouts, or athletic teams, or, well, college philosophy classes felt comfortable to them. The presence of women or racial minorities or others threatens to disrupt the "boys' club" atmosphere that is part of what has made them feel at ease. Is this speculation on my part? Maybe so, but I prefer to say that it is observation, rather than speculation—observation of an ordinary, non-scientific, yet perfectly respectable sort. After all, I have spent approximately 20 years pursuing a career in philosophy in the company mostly of white, male philosophers, and I have had many conversations with them about these topics. But saying that many philosophers enjoy the homogeneity of the discipline (whether consciously or unconsciously) does not imply that they are damnable racists or sexists. It is psychologically normal to feel at ease around people whose social situation, life experiences, or styles of communication and norms of conduct are familiar to you.

To see, then, that philosophy's homogeneity is a problem requires seeing it in a certain light. One must see it as an instance of injustice, an ethical problem that reveals the practitioners of philosophy to be complicit in creating disciplinary norms and institutional practices that function to exclude, undervalue, or discredit qualified women and minorities. To become convinced that such norms and practices exist may require philosophers to pay attention to their norms and practices, to

listen to women and minority philosophers, and to become educated about feminist theory, critical race theory, queer theory, and implicit bias. Once educated, caring about the problem of diversity in philosophy requires that one employ basic concepts of justice, fairness, and respect.

Or, one might see the discipline's homogeneity as a problem insofar as it creates an intellectual and epistemic obstacle to the production of knowledge within the discipline or to the genuine exercise of philosophical scrutiny, the activity that constitutes the core of the discipline. Understood in this way, the fundamental problem is not an ethical one; rather, the progress or success of the discipline itself—its scholarly integrity—depends upon recognizing the contributions of a subset of its practitioners whose work has been neglected and incorporating the insights of philosophical topics and arguments that have been kept at the margins. In other words, addressing diversity may help us to become better historians of philosophy, better metaphysicians, better moral philosophers, better epistemologists, better philosophers of mind, etc. There is not space here to do justice to this idea. Suffice it to say that the best proof would be to engage in a sustained fashion with the work and topics in question and see if one's philosophical acumen, conceptual repertoire, and argumentative facility is thereby improved.

A third possibility is that one might see the problem as a professional one: Homogeneity limits the professional prospects of the discipline—its social recognition and influence, its access to funding, its academic status. Nationwide, women constitute a majority of college students. Moreover, the number of racial and ethnic minorities in college is steadily increasing. In an era in which funding for humanities disciplines is in decline, and in which many state institutions tie resources to the number of student credit hours departments serve, it makes good sense to attract students. If our texts and syllabi appear retrograde due to their exclusion of women and minority authors, as well as their inattention to topics such as race, gender, sexuality, and disability, we may well alienate the majority of college students. Likewise, if diverse students are inspired and mentored by faculty role models whose gender or racial identities are similar to their own, a predominately white, male faculty will not serve the interests of all students and will tend to perpetuate the preponderance of white, male philosophy students. Outside of academia, as women and minorities increase their representation in a variety of professions, the homogeneity of philosophy will make the discipline appear all the more irrelevant or socially and politically regressive. Concerns of justice and scholarly integrity aside, it just makes good professional sense to advance diversity in philosophy for the sake of keeping afloat a discipline that is already considered by many to be somewhere between anachronistic, irrelevant, elitist, and esoteric (despite its success in developing skills useful to careers as different as law and medicine).

I see all three of these ways of looking at the problem as connected. Like many complex problems, the problem of diversity in philosophy is multi-faceted; the causes are interconnected;

responsibility for the problem is diffuse; and the problem is sustained through a combination of deliberate strategies, unconscious or implicit biases, and policies and norms that function to perpetuate it (regardless of anyone's intentions or biases). It is a shame that in 2014, at many American universities, philosophy majors can graduate with a respectable degree in the field without ever having read the work of a woman or a member of a racial minority, or without ever engaging with topics central to the contemporary methodologies of many disciplines in the arts, humanities, and the sciences (e.g., issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality). Even graduate students seeking a Ph.D. in the field can get by with the same limited exposure, despite the fact that some of the best work on these topics has been done by philosophers. And many students will have little or no exposure to women or minority philosophy faculty, reinforcing the cultural trope that rationality and wisdom are the exclusive purview of white males.

To effect positive change in the discipline, we need the support of the white, male majority. But it may be difficult for some (white, male) philosophers to perceive that the homogeneity of the discipline is a problem in part because the discipline feels comfortable, welcoming, and supportive to *them* and because to do so threatens to disrupt their own personal or professional equilibrium. It can be professionally risky, intellectually unfamiliar or destabilizing, and pedagogically challenging to make changes to one's practices in department meetings, in one's own research and writing, or on syllabi and in the classroom. To stand with women or minority colleagues fighting for equal respect and opportunity can require one to put one's own privilege on the line—to risk losing favored appointments, discretionary raises, positive evaluations, or inclusion on professional committees. Worse, joining with women and minorities seeking fuller recognition and equal opportunity in the profession can subject one to the same backlash we experience.

The injustices of professional philosophy are small by comparison to the many evils the world sees on a daily basis. Perhaps that is why it is so wearisome and deeply disappointing to see how fiercely many philosophers refuse to acknowledge the problem or to address it. Philosophers, *of all people* (one might think), would be keen on critically examining their own discipline and rooting out injustice. Like me, many women in philosophy entered the discipline because we found philosophy uniquely empowering: At its best, nothing beats philosophy for its sheer critical acumen, its potential for exploding myths, debunking false claims, exposing bad arguments, and bringing out constructive new ways of thinking about the world. Alas, this skillfulness has not been employed to accommodate the full participation of women and minorities.