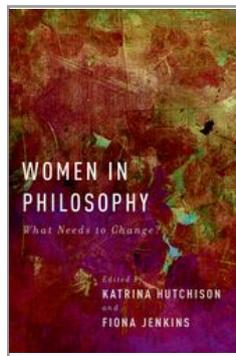


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## Women in Philosophy: What Needs to Change?

Katrina Hutchison and Fiona Jenkins

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## Women in Philosophy

### Why Should We Care?

Marilyn Friedman

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### Abstract and Keywords

This paper explores whether philosophy or women would benefit if women participated in philosophy in equal numbers to men. After reviewing the problem of women's underrepresentation in professional philosophy, I identify some aspects of professional philosophy that seem relevant for explaining women's low participation in the field. This includes a look at the way philosophical activity is portrayed in some introductory philosophy textbooks and a reminder of the adversarial style that is common throughout philosophy. Then I offer some reasons why it would be good to increase women's numbers in the field. Among other things, philosophy involves reflecting critically on fundamental concepts both of everyday life and of specialized professions, and gender diversity enriches these endeavors.

*Keywords:* women, professional philosophy, gender discrimination, philosophical method, autonomy, philosophy textbooks, adversarial style, feminist philosophy, gender diversity, wisdom

### 1. Introduction

Why should we care whether women participate in professional philosophy in roughly equal numbers to men? Would philosophy be better for it? Would *women* be better for it?

Philosophy has not always been regarded in a favorable light. Nietzsche, for one, regarded philosophy and philosophers "half suspiciously, half mockingly" and suggested that philosophers lied about the deepest matters (1966: 12). What each philosopher presented as truth and the result of logic and

reason, wrote Nietzsche, was “at bottom” nothing more than “an assumption, a hunch, indeed a kind of ‘inspiration’—most often a desire of the heart that has been filtered and made abstract” and defended “with reasons they have sought after the fact.” Despite pretensions to the contrary, “in the philosopher...there is nothing whatever that is impersonal; and above all, his morality bears decided and decisive witness to *who he is*—that is, in what order of rank the innermost drives of his nature stand in relation to each other.” All was not lost, in Nietzsche’s view, for philosophical deceptions might be a foolishness<sup>1</sup> that was “necessary for the preservation of just such beings as we are.” To grasp this, it might, Nietzsche suggests, be useful to suppose that “not just man is the ‘measure of things’” (1966:11–14).

Borrowing Nietzsche’s words, though not his meaning, we might say that this volume is devoted to the idea that “not just *man* is the measure of things.” Philosophy should certainly reflect that insight. Even if philosophical works express merely the “innermost drives” of philosophers, there may still be good reasons to promote women’s increased participation in the field. I return to my (p.22) original question: Would philosophy or women benefit if women participated in equal numbers to men?<sup>2</sup>

Sally Haslanger has recently written of the rage she feels about the treatment of women and minorities in the field of philosophy (2008:210–212). Haslanger’s recent discussion and others like it are highly critical of professional philosophy.<sup>3</sup> One wonders: If philosophy is riddled with such problems for women, why should we bother to enter the field? Why not simply abandon it and encourage women to go into fields that welcome us and value our work properly? Haslanger suggests that her “deep love for philosophy” kept her in the field despite the disrespect, devaluation, and mistreatment she either endured or witnessed (2008:210). This is a crucial point to mention. If we are warranted in encouraging more women to enter professional philosophy and changing the field to make it more welcoming and respectful toward women, then there must be something worth salvaging about professional philosophy. One way to encourage more women to join the field is to tell them what there is about the activity of philosophy that is worth their while.

I will not try to tell that story here. Instead, I try to single out aspects of philosophy that may be sources of the *problems* that Haslanger and other women have experienced in philosophy. In the next section, I comment briefly on what I term the “business” side of philosophy, and the extent to which difficulties faced by women can be attributed to it. In section 3, I survey some introductory philosophy textbooks and articles that discuss the nature of philosophy in order to see whether there are hints of anti-female bias in what philosophers say about our discipline when reflecting on what it is that we do. In section 4, I return to the question of whether we should care if philosophy marginalizes women, and if so, how we might go about changing those exclusionary practices.

## 2. The Business of Philosophy

Philosophy is the love of wisdom. But, in what sense is it this today?

In the *Republic*, Plato draws a famous distinction between what people do in their roles as the particular tradespeople and professionals they are from what they do to earn *income* from their trades and professions. Philosophers as income-earners are not acting in their capacities as lovers of wisdom. Instead, today, they are acting as ordinary paid employees who work for non-profit but (p.23) still corporate-like enterprises, usually colleges and universities. This is the business side of philosophy,

complete with its own corporate (in this case, academic) politics. The environment is competitive, and everyone's self-interest is at stake.

Many of the criticisms levelled at the professional field of academic philosophy are about the business side of the field. Much of the discrimination against women in philosophy occurs in the course of the business practices that maintain the philosophy profession. These include hiring, firing, salaries, promotions, tenuring, adding new positions, cutting old positions, teaching assignments, departmental budgets, departmental administration, and the conversational dynamics of departmental life.

Unfortunately, the business side of philosophy is unavoidable for nearly all those who enter the field. To be sure, people can do philosophy without academic employment. Philosophy is not a strictly regulated profession like medicine or law. Anyone, whether employed in a school or not, whether holding a post-secondary degree or not, can legally engage in the activity of philosophy and try to publish or broadcast their ideas somehow to the wider world. However, philosophy has an informally closed nature that is apparent to anyone who wants to practice philosophy in the academy. Existing members of the profession determine who else will be admitted to academic employment, granted tenure, and published in refereed publications. Thus current members of the philosophy profession act as de facto gatekeepers who largely determine which persons do—or do not—carry on the future academic work of the field.<sup>4</sup>

The business side of philosophy gives people power over the careers of those lower than they are on the academic totem pole, and tempts the more powerful players to use that power in ways that serve their own interests and desires. It is tempting to criticize or vote against someone whose philosophical perspective threatens one's own, who espouses a philosophical position one detests, who outshines one as a teacher, or whom one simply does not personally like. In making these decisions, philosophers as employees, or in some cases as administrators or program heads, can be as cutthroat as employees at any large for-profit corporation.

Discrimination against women, prompted by the business side of philosophy, may be a large part of what discourages women from continuing in the field. It is certainly not as an income-earning activity that there is anything special to love about philosophy, nor does anyone love the academic politics of professional philosophy, unless they are a bit demented. Unfortunately, the academic rat race of philosophy will not go away anytime soon. (Of course, this does not provide an excuse to ignore the problem of discrimination, and the subsequent discussion does not ignore it.)

### **(p.24)** 3. Methods of Philosophy

The problems with philosophy as a business cannot be the whole explanation, however, for women's underrepresentation in the field. There are other academic fields that are equally business-like yet in which women participate in roughly equal numbers to men or even in greater numbers than men (see Walker, 2005:158). Also, students of philosophy do not typically become aware of the business side of philosophy before graduate school. So this aspect of the field would not help to explain why women as undergraduate students do not pursue advanced studies in philosophy in particular. It is legitimate to wonder whether something about the nature of philosophy itself is also at the root of the problem of women's relatively low numbers in the field.

Of course, things have changed over time for women in philosophy. After 2,400 years of

philosophical practice, the lovers of wisdom no longer formally exclude women from the field of philosophy, including its business side. As noted earlier, women amount to about a quarter of professional philosophers now in some countries. Writings by women are published, cited, discussed, and sometimes influential. Yet women remain underrepresented in sheer numbers and in their publication rates in “top-ranked” philosophy journals (see Haslanger, 2008:220–221). Thus, it still makes sense to wonder whether features of the practice of philosophy as such are covertly (or overtly) inhospitable to women.

It is not hard to find aspects of philosophy, unrelated to the rat race of academia, that provide an inhospitable environment for women. As Margaret Walker explains, women have tried to participate in philosophy in all historic periods in which the field has existed, but their male philosophical contemporaries seem to have paid little attention to them and did not take up the women’s concerns as important philosophical issues (Walker, 2005:154). Many men in philosophy, like many men everywhere, have historically not engaged respectfully and attentively in serious intellectual interchanges with women. This practice seems connected to the informally closed nature of philosophy and the way those already in the profession act as gatekeepers who determine who gets to enter and stay in the academic field, whose voices are heard in prestigious refereed publications, and so on. Most of the historically acclaimed men of the philosophical canon, in their philosophical writings, criticized women’s abilities to reason and do philosophy (see Tuana, 1992). Philosophy has a small but very resilient canon, so the misogynist attitudes of these important historical figures remain alive in the philosophical canon today.

We are looking for at least two sorts of problems. First, some features of philosophy might lead philosophical gatekeepers to devalue women or otherwise make it difficult for women to engage in philosophical work. Second, some features of philosophy might alienate women from philosophy and prompt them (p.25) to avoid the field. These two sorts of problems might coincide but they need not. The likeliest aspects of philosophy that might deter or alienate women are (1) the contents of philosophy, its distinctive questions, issues, and ideas; (2) the methods, broadly construed, that are used in philosophy to deal with that content; and (3) the way in which philosophy is taught and communicated. The canonical philosophers, as noted above, who deprecated women’s philosophical or rational abilities were thereby contributing to the contents of philosophy. In the rest of this discussion, I focus on the second and third of the three areas: philosophical methods, and the way in which philosophy is taught and communicated.

Stephen Toulmin discusses what he calls a “familiar” characterization of philosophers, one that seems to reveal a philosophical method or approach that could alienate women from the field. According to this characterization described (and disparaged) by Toulmin, philosophers are

just logic-choppers and paradox-mongers who trade on the confusions produced by playing word games with tricky abstract nouns; hence their claim to achieve profound insights, whether into the nature of the world or into the workings of people’s minds, is simply presumptuous rubbish. They ought, rather, to leave the material cosmos to the physicists, mental activities to the psychologists, and keep their pointless word games to themselves.

(Toulmin, 1976:11)

If this is philosophy, no wonder women have relatively little interest in entering the field. It is not clear why men would enter the field either, unless men were more enamored than women of “logic-chopping” and “paradox-mongering.”

However, we should keep in mind that philosophy is not well understood in the popular imagination, as any philosopher can report who has ever tried to tell a non-academic group of people what she does for a living. The characterization that Toulmin rejects is merely a caricature. Philosophers in general do not accept Nietzsche’s view that their philosophies are nothing more than rationalizations for their “innermost drives.” Similarly, they reject the caricature of their reasonings as “pointless word games.” Philosophers, for the most part, continue to advertise their theories as the results of reason. In that case, however, the age-old schema of woman as defective in reasoning ability could be working its evil magic still today. It could be a major part of the explanation for the underrepresentation of women in philosophy.

I suggest, however, that this is not a helpful insight. It is too crude. The ways of reason are many, complicated, and nuanced. It might be more helpful to see if there are *specific images* of reason and reasoners in philosophy that are discouraging women from entering the field and leading those already in the field to regard and evaluate women as less than fully capable of philosophical activity. Perhaps there are particular manifestations of reasoners and reasoning (p.26) ability in philosophy that are especially antithetical to women (see, for example, Rooney, 2010).

Introductory philosophy textbooks provide illuminating windows into the views of professional philosophers about the methods of reasoning in philosophy. Consider Robert Solomon’s textbook, *Introducing Philosophy: Problems and Perspectives* (1977).<sup>5</sup> In his introduction to the book, Solomon makes the familiar claim that philosophy “is a critical approach to all subjects.” It is “a life of ideas or the life of reason. It is thinking, about everything and anything. But mainly, it is living thoughtfully.” So far, so good. Solomon also suggests that philosophy enlarges “our view of ourselves and our knowledge of the world, allowing us to break out of prejudices and harmful habits which we have held since we were too young or too naïve to know better.” Philosophy enables us to defend our positions with arguments and learn about alternatives to them. We secure our positions “on intellectual ground in place of the fragile supports provided by inherited prejudices, fragments of parental advice, and mindless slogans borrowed from television commercials and televised demagogues” (Solomon, 1977:7–8). This view, too, is not particularly troublesome, as long as we do not equate problematic “parental advice” with “old wives’ tales.”

A possible problem arises, however, with what Solomon’s says is his particular approach to philosophy, namely, that it is focused on “the autonomy of the individual person.” He elaborates:

This means that each of us must be credited with the ability to ascertain what is true and what is right, through our own thinking and experience, without the usual appeal to outside authority: parents, teachers, popes, kings or a majority of peers. Whether you believe in God or not must be decided by you, by appeal to your own reason and arguments which you can formulate and examine by yourself....This stress on individual autonomy stands at the very foundation of contemporary Western thought. We might say that it is our most basic assumption. (Accordingly, we shall have to examine it as well; but the obvious place to begin is to assume

that we are—each of us—capable of carrying out the reflection and criticism that philosophy demands of us.)

(Solomon, 1977:10)

Further elaborating his view, Solomon writes that Descartes is “the ideal starting point” for “anyone beginning to study philosophy today” because he helped to inaugurate the modern version of the emphasis on individual autonomy by locating the “ultimate authority” to decide matters of belief and rightness “in our own thinking and experience, nowhere else” (Solomon, 1977:11).

Perhaps an emphasis on individually autonomous reason, not reason as such, has been a factor that has discouraged, and continues to discourage, some (p.27) women from entering philosophy. Feminist philosophers have recently challenged the ideal of autonomy, particularly its individualist version. Social, relational, or intersubjective accounts of autonomy have become common among feminists (see, for example, Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000). To be sure, not all female philosophers are feminist, and not all feminist philosophers are female. There probably were female students of philosophy who were not put off by a Solomonic emphasis on individual autonomy. Some women did enter the field of philosophy in recent decades, so an emphasis on individual autonomy might have discouraged only some women from entering the field. Yet perhaps this sort of emphasis is *part* of the explanation why there are fewer women than men in philosophy today.<sup>6</sup>

Granted, only some philosophers and textbooks in recent decades have emphasized Solomon’s individually autonomous approach. A quick survey of other textbooks of the same period as Solomon’s does not turn up other mentions of autonomy or the image of the isolated philosophical reasoner.<sup>7</sup> Other textbooks give more emphasis than Solomon does to engaging in dialogue with others. Robert Paul Wolff’s textbook, *About Philosophy*, for example, refers to philosophy explicitly as “a dialogue between two people” (Wolff, 1976:7). So the image of an isolated reasoner appealing to her “own reason and arguments” cannot be the whole story about why many women might have found philosophy unappealing.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, even the textbook references to philosophical dialogue might seem inhospitable to women. Wolff focuses specifically on the Socratic method in philosophy, which he characterizes as a *hierarchical* dialogue between a “novice” and a philosopher, in which the philosopher must use irony and other “tricks” to get around the “enormous” resistance each novice will put up to learning what “he needs to learn” (Wolff, 1976:7). This model of asymmetric, competitive dialogue sounds more like a contest of wills, a verbal smackdown, than a mutually supportive or respectful interchange.

This image leads us to perhaps the most important and pervasive feature of philosophical practice that could be alienating women: the adversarial style of philosophical dialogue. Many years ago, Janice Moulton chastised philosophers for their adversarial style and for treating this style as the single most important paradigm of philosophical method (Moulton, 1980, 2003). According to this paradigm, philosophical work is to be subjected to the strongest possible criticism, and only the work that can survive such opposition is to be considered philosophically worthwhile. Moulton does not reject (p.28) the adversarial method entirely. However, she argues both that there are other methods that should not be neglected and that the adversarial method may distort our understanding of the issues involved in any philosophical interchange (Moulton, 1980:419–421).

What is of special note about the adversarial method in the present context is that it operates by way of criticism and opposition. Philosophical dialogue in the adversarial mode consists of objections and counterexamples to which the best responses are *refutations* of objections and counterexamples followed by *more of the same*. The competitive attacks are unending. Fledgling philosophers have to learn the hard lesson of “not taking it personally” when their favourite theory is destroyed by others. They have to learn not to invest themselves too heavily in a particular philosophical position lest it be shot out from under them in the next philosophical go-round. They have to learn to distance themselves from their philosophical positions and not to care about them too much if they are to avoid regarding a philosophical defeat as a personal humiliation. This promotes a superficial and shallow attitude toward philosophical ideas. All that matters is the gladiatorial skirmish.

To be sure, there are other fields in which scholars criticize each other’s work and are expected to be responsive to objections to their own work, fields such as those of art and literature. However, in those fields, the actual work done does not itself have the nature of critical reflection in an adversarial style. The actual work is a painting or a poem, say. In philosophy, by contrast, the actual work done features a great deal of dialectical engagement with objections raised by others. This is a substantial part of the ground-level work that philosophers do. Students are taught that an important part of the presentation and defense of their view is to rebut objections. Advanced students are taught that a typical philosophy paper ends with a section on “Possible Objections to My View.” This constant responsiveness to objections and criticism, integrated into the very nature and presentation of philosophical work, may promote an atmosphere in which philosophers tend to avoid investing themselves too deeply in their philosophical positions lest they have to give those up at the next go-round. In this way, it is easy to regard philosophy as a game or contest rather than a genuine search for wisdom.

Apart from its effects on philosophers’ commitments to their work, the adversarial style of philosophy likely contributes also to an inhospitable atmosphere in philosophy for any persons who do not enjoy combat and have not been raised to fight. Does this not evoke a familiar gendered script? Although some women clearly engage in and enjoy the adversarial style in philosophy, the pervasiveness of this practice may well account for the relatively low numbers of women who find the field appealing. To be sure, it is possible that recent changes in gender roles are promoting a more adversarial character in young females today than females used to have. Girls’ involvement in competitive sports is certainly (p.29) increasing as is that of adult women.<sup>9</sup> However, female sports are usually played by female individuals or all-female teams against all-female opponents. It is an open question whether females are becoming generally more combative toward all potential opponents in general, as they would have to be in philosophy.

The adversarial style underlies another familiar image of philosophical reason presented by Haig Khatchadourian, who argues that philosophers should strive to do work that is relevant to the world’s people by becoming social gadflies; by critically examining people’s fundamental values, attitudes, assumptions, and lifestyles; and by developing an “enlightened secular-humanistic, normative ethic and moral code” that would promote human rights and social justice (Khatchadourian, 2005:326). In this otherwise benign account of philosophy, the image of the gadfly is what I wish to single out. The gadfly does not seem gender-neutral.

The gadfly appears also in William P. Alston and Richard B. Brandt’s textbook, *The Problems of*

*Philosophy*, where they tell us that the gadfly is one of two “popular images” that people already have of the philosopher (Alston & Brandt, 1974:9). (The other image is the “sage.” More on that in a moment.) The gadfly, according to Alston and Brandt, is

the philosopher as the skeptic, the man who questions basic assumptions and concepts. The gadfly goes around asking people what they mean by “good” or “know.” He challenges comfortable common-sense assumptions....This is the clever reasoner, the man with a sharp eye for distinctions, and a quick wit for objections. He is more adept at tearing down than at building up, and he delights in reducing his interlocutors to confusion.

(Alston & Brandt, 1974:9–10)

For those who do not see themselves as social gadflies, there is the image of the philosopher as sage:

the man of wisdom, he who by dint of long reflection and deep experience has attained a synoptic view of things, a profound understanding of the universe and of the good for man.

(Alston & Brandt, 1974:10)

Alston and Brandt write that both these images are “deeply imbedded in the philosophical enterprise” and that “the greatest philosophers have always exemplified both to a high degree” (1974:10).

Gadfly or sage? In Alston and Brandt’s portraits, both are described in terms of male nouns and pronouns, but that is not a decisive point, as the use of male nouns and pronouns to stand for all people was the norm in the 1970s when their textbook first appeared. (Such uses are regrettably not gone yet.) **(p.30)** It is the contents of the images that are more revealing. A gadfly is someone who has a “sharp eye for distinctions,” “a quick wit for objections,” tears down rather than builds up (arguments? people?), and “delights in reducing his interlocutors to confusion.” These specific uses of reason are not parts of any common schemas for women. That is, they are not included in the expected traits by which women tend to be represented or to represent themselves. Nor does the image of sage match the schemas for women any better. Women are not associated with “long reflection,” a “synoptic view of things,” or a “profound understanding of the universe and the good” for human beings. This is not to say that women should not be regarded in those terms. The point is descriptive, not normative. Female students and their (male or female) teachers may have more trouble seeing women than men as gadflies or sages. This could account for Walker’s comment, noted earlier, that men through the centuries have failed to pay attention to women’s philosophical contributions.

It should be noted, of course, that not all philosophers advocate the adversarial method. Bernard Williams, for example, suggests more modest methods for philosophy, such as “offering arguments and expressing oneself clearly” (Williams, 2000:477). Williams does suggest that the discipline of philosophy is characterized by right and wrong ways of doing it. However, Williams rejects “the well known and highly typical style of many texts in analytic philosophy which seeks precision by total mind control, through issuing continuous and rigid interpretative directions.” Williams cautions against this style of philosophy, which “tries to remove in advance every conceivable misunderstanding or misinterpretation or objection, including those that would occur only to the malicious or the clinically literal-minded” (Williams, 2000:480).

Thus, these various contingent features of solipsistic or adversarial philosophical practice are not utilized by all philosophers. As well, their impact on both male and female students is surely a matter of degree. Not all women will be alienated by them, and not all men will be drawn to them. I propose them merely as possible (and partial) explanations for women's lesser participation in philosophy compared to that of men.

In this section, I have suggested that women might not be turned off by the image of philosophy as the activity of reason generally conceived. What women might find inhospitable, however, are the specific manifestations that philosophical reason might take or the social roles in which it might be expressed. These include individually autonomous reason, the role of social gadfly, the role of sage, and the adversarial style of philosophical dialogue.

A final thought about method: Sometimes philosophers deride ordinary non-philosophical ways of thinking as riddled with problems such as vagueness, ambiguity, and self-serving bias. Here, for example, is Bertrand Russell:

I regret to say that all too many professors of philosophy consider it their duty to be sycophants of common sense, and thus, doubtless (p.31) unintentionally, to bow down in homage before the savage superstitions of cannibals.

(Russell, 1958:145)

If these attitudes become known to students, would women be more put off by them than men? Do women feel more identified than men with "common sense"? Those are questions for further thought.

In the final section, I discuss why we should care if the conceptions of reasoning that are associated with philosophy and reflected in undergraduate textbooks are alienating to women.

#### 4. Arguments for Increasing the Number of Women in Philosophy

All persons should be evaluated fairly and respected equally in all classrooms and workplaces. We should not need to argue that outright discrimination against and exclusion of women are wrong. Intentionally denying jobs and tenure to people who have earned those rewards fairly is unjust. However, suppose that women's relatively low participation in philosophy is due substantially to unconscious bias on the parts of current philosophy faculty or to methods of philosophy that alienate women. Some studies show that in general, women's achievements are judged to be of lesser worth than identical achievements thought to be done by men (Haslanger, 2008:213; Valian, 2005:202–204). Suppose the evidence suggested that unconscious bias against women by philosophers is likely. Such evidence would call for positive effort to examine all assessment practices in philosophy to determine whether bias actually is present and, if so, to eliminate or compensate for it.

If philosophical methods are what tend to alienate women from the field, these methods should be assessed to see if they are worth the cost. We would have to balance the costs and benefits of increasing women's participation in philosophy against the costs, benefits, and necessity of the methods in question. I have already suggested that there are alternative methods (as defended by Williams) to the pervasive adversarial style of doing philosophy. I will not say anything more about whether current philosophical methods are beneficial or necessary. In this remaining section, I consider

the other part of the equation by asking: What are some of the counterbalancing benefits of promoting women's greater participation in professional philosophy?

First, current female students in philosophy classes might be more likely to be attracted to the field if women were recognizably present in substantial numbers, most importantly as teachers and authors.<sup>10</sup> Valian argues that we should increase the number of women who are professional philosophers in order to have more female teachers of philosophy. This would lead to more classroom (p.32) environments in which female students will feel that philosophy welcomes their participation. The result would be that more female students would be drawn to enter the field in the future (Valian, 2005:208).

Second, most women who are already professional philosophers would likely benefit from an increase in their numbers in the field. Female philosophers isolated in their departments often tire of being the lone woman at department meetings who has trouble being heard or taken seriously by her colleagues. With more women in the field, there would be less likelihood that departments would have only a single woman on the faculty. Thus an increase in the numbers of women will probably increase the professional confidence, standing, and regard for women who are already in the field, as well as those who can join them subsequently.

The first and second reasons above are not yet independently relevant answers to the question about why to care whether women's participation in philosophy increases. Those reasons tell us that having more women in philosophy will both attract still more women to the field and improve the professional standing of those who are in the field. Thus, the first two reasons argue in a circle, already presupposing that it is valuable to increase the numbers of women in philosophy. We still need *independent* reasons for thinking that an increase in the number of women in philosophy will, at the very least, improve philosophy and, it is to be hoped, also be good for women.

My third and most important suggestion is thus presented as an independent reason to increase the number of women in professional philosophy, namely, that doing so would improve philosophy.<sup>11</sup> This suggestion has two parts. Improvement would arise, first, from the particular contribution that feminist philosophy makes to philosophy and, second, from the general methodological improvement to philosophy that would arise from (the continuing expansion of) gender diversity.<sup>12</sup>

First, feminist philosophy makes a particular contribution to philosophy as a sub-specialization. Feminist philosophy has opened philosophical thought in many philosophical areas to issues of gender and the moral and political standing of women. And feminist philosophy is very largely the product of female philosophers. As Margaret Walker observes, had it not been for the numbers of women in philosophy reaching a minimal critical mass, there probably would have been no feminist philosophy (Walker 2005:159). Feminist philosophical contributions include the introduction and/or substantial development of work on care ethics (Held, 1995, 2006; Slote, 2007; Noddings, 2002; Robinson, (p.33) 1999), ecofeminism (Warren, 2000; Cuomo, 2002), feminist bioethics (Scully et al., 2009; Mahowald, 2006; Donchin & Purdy, 1999; Sherwin et al., 1998), embodiment (Butler, 1990; Butler, 1993; Grosz, 1994; Young, 2005), intersectionality (Collins, 2003; Bilge, 2010), standpoint epistemology (Alcoff & Potter, 1993; Harding, 2004, 2009), and feminist science studies (Kourany, 2010; Harding, 2008; Longino, 2001; Creager, 2001). This list is by no means complete. Philosophers

will not all agree with these contributions, but they nevertheless represent critical expansions and enrichments of philosophical thinking in their respective subfields. A further increase in the numbers of women in philosophy promises to extend these developments and their contributions to the field.

Second, the (continuing expansion of) the gender diversity of philosophy, like any kind of socially significant group diversity, promotes a general methodological improvement in philosophy. To appreciate this point, let us consider the overall nature of philosophy. Many philosophers consider it the special role of philosophy to reflect on the foundations of human thought. J. N. Findlay, for example, characterizes philosophy as

a critical examination of fundamental concepts and principles, that is, concepts and principles which structure all or nearly all of our experience, all of our language and its essential grammar and every thing or fact or theme that we can know or think of: It also in some of its exercises attempts to revise and to simplify and tidy up such fundamental concepts and principles, so as to rid them of unclarities and ambiguities—and also to free them of inner conflicts....

(Findlay, 2005:141)<sup>13</sup>

Haig Khatchadourian suggests that philosophy today should reinvigorate its ancient tradition of offering wisdom to human beings in the living of their lives. Philosophical wisdom should concern the “ends that humankind ought to strive to realize” and “insight into who and what we really are” (Khatchadourian, 2005:325).<sup>14</sup> Bernard Williams suggests that philosophy is “part of a more general attempt to make the best sense of our life, and so of our intellectual activities, in the situation in which we find ourselves” (Williams, 2000:479). Williams suggests that “philosophy might play an important part in making people think about what they are doing,” that it is part of the “whole humanistic enterprise of trying to understand ourselves...” (Williams, 2000:495–496).

Broadly speaking, there are at least two different ways in which philosophy can examine our fundamental concepts and principles, explore human (p.34) ends, and promote human self-understanding. First, philosophy can seek a direct connection to the daily practical concerns of ordinary people. Some areas of philosophy, ethics for example, seek to understand ordinary human beings and the everyday world they face and to explore how ordinary people can best live in that world. Philosophy is in part the search for the practical wisdom of how to live human lives in the world as we find it, given humanity as we find it. In this way, philosophy aims at preparing human beings to make the best they can of their lives. Whatever else it does, philosophy should do this job of aiming at deep understandings and practical guidance for the whole panoply of ordinary lives that people can live. Toward this end, philosophy should be translatable into common discourse, and philosophers should spend some time on “applied” issues that have direct relevance to everyday lives.

The second way in which philosophy can examine fundamental concepts and promote human ends is to play a critical and foundational role with respect to other specialized fields and professions. This philosophical aim connects with philosophy’s age-old capacity to give birth to empirical sciences (Williams, 2000:495–496). In this role, philosophy should include critical assessment and foundational understanding of the scientific enterprise, medicine, law, the arts, and the other professional fields and disciplines to which philosophy connects. Among other things, the philosophers of science, the arts, and so on should engage in critical inquiry to be sure those fields are not distorted by bias and are

otherwise serving the interests of diverse segments of society. Toward this end, questions and challenges are not out of place; however, they can be rendered in a collaborative spirit that is free of hostility and personal acrimony.

Allen Wood recognizes both of the above philosophical roles when he argues that philosophy should be continually engaged with “the results of the sciences,” “the practical life of society,” and “its own history.” It should hold all social practices and belief systems to “the proper rational norms and standards that apply to them,” as well as subjecting those norms to continual re-examination. Philosophy should not represent human life simply as people wish it to be or as authorities dictate. Conceived in this way, Wood writes, “philosophy is a painful, anxiety-provoking, and socially dangerous, and often thankless activity” (Wood, 2006:135). Against the prejudices and superstitions of today, philosophy represents critical thinking, which is “very much in decline” (Wood, 2006:136).

Whether by connecting directly with ordinary lives or indirectly through critical reflection on other professional fields, philosophy seeks to understand profound matters. Borrowing somewhat from Nietzsche, I suggest that, in either case, the philosopher’s own personal perspective plays a crucial role in shaping her philosophical work. Philosophers work from their own (p.35) perspectives, however filtered and reconfigured these are by the collective interchanges of the field. Nietzsche speculated that philosophers expressed their “innermost drives,” which he thought might be necessary for “such beings as we are.” Some contemporary philosophers agree that philosophers’ standpoints have a perspectival nature. Bernard Williams, for example, rejects the idea that there could be a perspectively independent conception of the world (Williams, 2000:483–484). Our history made not only our outlook; it also made us, argues Williams. We are no less contingently formed than our ideas (490). Williams also notes that it makes a great difference who the “we” is for which the philosophical enterprise is carried on. Contemporary ideas can often seem to be timeless and “simply there” (493–494). Williams thinks we should abandon the illusion that we can find ideas “which would be the best from an absolute point of view, a point of view that was free of contingent historical perspective” (491).

John Ryder, similarly, writes that both geographical and historical conditions determine the way in which philosophy is done (Ryder, 2007:389). If these sorts of conditions affect the way philosophy is done, it does so through the perspectives of the persons who are engaged in professional philosophical work. If philosophers’ methods are affected in significant ways by the time and place in which they live, then it is a small step to the conclusion that other determinants of human perspectives, such as gender, are also determinants of how philosophy is done.

If there are major social groups that are underrepresented in philosophy, then the collective understanding achieved by philosophy will express the perspectives only of those groups that are well represented. When seeking *direct* practical wisdom for the living of ordinary lives, philosophy might easily miss the concerns or interests of many ordinary people if it does not adequately represent the diversity of its public. Critically exploring the foundations of *other* professional fields is another task in which philosophy might fail to represent the significant diversity of its public. The underrepresentation of women could thus lead to a serious gap in the collective understanding of a society. The diverse interests and perspectives among women themselves are especially likely to be overlooked when women in the aggregate are not well represented in professional philosophical

activity.

I have suggested three reasons why it matters to increase the numbers of women in professional philosophy. It is crucial for philosophers to strain toward the ideal of increased female participation and against the “business” side of philosophy that, as noted earlier, constantly tempts its practitioners to act out of self-interested other-disregarding profit motives. Against these tendencies, an increase in the numbers of women would be likely to (1) further increase the number of female students who would be attracted to the field; (2) promote a more hospitable environment and enhanced professional standing for (p.36) women who are already in the field; and, most important, (3) improve the quality of philosophy both by promoting more work in feminist philosophy and by enriching the philosophical quest for the wisdom to guide the enormous variety of human lives.

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Notes:

<sup>(1)</sup> Nietzsche uses the French word *niaiserie* (stupidity) (1966:11).

<sup>(2)</sup> It can also be asked of any other group that is currently underrepresented in philosophy whether its members should participate at near the rate of its percentage in the surrounding population. This chapter concentrates on the category of women, assuming this group to contain ethnic, racial, and other

forms of population diversity.

(<sup>3</sup>) See, for example, the essays in the “Symposium: Women Philosophers, Sidelined Challenges, and Professional Philosophy,” *Hypatia*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (Summer 2005), 149–213.

(<sup>4</sup>) Some commentators on this issue have suggested that women are more disadvantaged than men by this aspect of philosophy. See the chapters by Hutchison, Jenkins, and Rini in this volume.

(<sup>5</sup>) Although this textbook dates from 1977, the textbooks of that era might provide especially useful clues as to why women are underrepresented at advanced ranks in philosophy today.

(<sup>6</sup>) Diana Meyers summarizes research that suggests that traditional female socialization makes women less likely than men to achieve autonomy competency; see Meyers, 1989, Part 3.

(<sup>7</sup>) See the references below to other philosophy textbooks.

(<sup>8</sup>) I should say that it may not be part of the story at all. My suggestions are speculative and intended to encourage dialogue among philosophers about the causes of women’s underrepresentation in the field.

(<sup>9</sup>) See, for example, American Association of University Women, “Position on Equity in School Athletics,” [http://www.aauw.org/act/issue\\_advocacy/actionpages/titleix\\_athletics.cfm](http://www.aauw.org/act/issue_advocacy/actionpages/titleix_athletics.cfm); accessed 21 January 2011.

(<sup>10</sup>) I owe a great debt to my own first philosophy teacher, Sandra Bartky.

(<sup>11</sup>) The same can obviously be asked and answered with regard to ethnic, racial, and religious groups, among other significant social categorizations.

(<sup>12</sup>) As indicated in the preceding note, other sorts of population diversity are also beneficial for philosophy. My focus on gender diversity certainly does not rule out the value of those other sorts.

(<sup>13</sup>) This essay was based on full notes by Findlay from a course he taught in the 1970s.

(<sup>14</sup>) As a reviewer of this chapter pointed out, these remarks and some of those that follow could fit the model of philosopher as sage. None of my previous comments was intended to suggest that the model of the philosopher as sage was inherently problematic. Rather, my worry was that it is not a model women tend to associate with themselves as thinkers.