

## What Do Philosophers Look Like? Encountering Diversity in Philosophy

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### The Question

“Looks Philosophical” is the name of a website. It is largely a series of pictures of contemporary philosophers. Here are some of them. The website opens the space for us to ask this question: What do philosophers look like? What I love about this question is that it asks us to think about the **visible identity** of philosophy. Visible identity is a concept with two parts. For the visible part, obviously, we mean what something looks like. The identity part is slightly trickier. Without being too technical, an identity is a feature of a thing that tells us what that thing is. You have an identity as a student: when I know that you are a student, I know what you are and I would identify you as such. A visible identity, then, is a determination of what a thing is based on how it looks. Even students have visible identities: there you are, sitting in chairs in a classroom at a university, facing forward, listening to a lecture. Anybody could identify you as a student by how you look right now.

Let’s delineate four features of visible identities. We could say a lot more, but we have limited time and this is enough to get us going.

1. Visible identities are social identities. What you look like is available to almost everyone. In fact, others help to define our visible identities. The meaning of being a student is a meaning that you do not just get to choose for yourself. It’s a meaning that is commonly known and associated with certain contexts, and sometimes is given to you by someone else, like I just did.

2. Visible identities are nonexclusive in two ways: A. you can have more than one; B. you don't necessarily have to have a specific visible identity in order to be part of that group. So on the one hand, you are not just a student, but an American teenager, living in a warm climate, included in a certain socio-economic class. Someone can see all of these things by looking at you. On the other hand, you don't have to look like a student to be a student.
3. Visible identities reveal and conceal simultaneously. What I mean is that when you start to think about someone according to one identity, you learn a lot about that person, but you start to neglect her other identities. Put another way, when you present yourself according to one visible identity, other features of your life get covered over. Going further, visible identities conceal that they conceal. That is, not only does emphasis on one visible identity lead us to neglect others, but also we forget that the predominant visible identity covers over the others.
4. Race and gender are the most important visible identities. They have the biggest impact on our lives, and when philosophers talk about visible identity, they often do so to address race and gender.

We want to talk about the visible identity of philosophy. With what we've got, let's first start thinking about what philosophers look like. Take a moment to form an image of a philosopher in your mind. Maybe he looks like this: Plato, Socrates, Aristotle. He's an old white man with a beard.

Of course, that's an outdated look. Throughout the more recent history of philosophy, philosophers have looked like this: Descartes, Rousseau, Hume, Kant, and Nietzsche.

Now this poses the question badly again. We don't judge other disciplines by how their ancient practitioners look. No one says psychologists look like Freud or sociologists look like this Durkheim.

Let's try some of the most famous 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophers: Russell, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Chomsky.

Hmmm, maybe this is a trend: more old, white men. But to be fair, I stacked the deck a little bit there: we know about famous female philosophers like de Beauvoir and Anscombe. But honestly, it's just a little bit stacked, as I'll explain in a moment.

What about some true contemporaries, the faculty in this department who could be here tonight? Ahlberg, Palmer, Westmoreland, Witmer.

If we put these contemporary images together with what we saw on "Looks Philosophical," we get a better idea of the look of contemporary philosophy. Maybe philosophy's visible identity is not as homogeneous as it seemed at first. But, even now, white, male, straight philosophers dominate the discipline of philosophy as well as its visible identity.

When we look for diversity, philosophy in the United States does not fare well. From 2000-9, women garnered between 23% and 30% of philosophy PhD's. Racial and ethnic minorities garnered between 6% and 11% over that same time span.

### **Why does philosophy look like that?**

Why does philosophy have a white, male visible identity?

There are so many ways of approaching a question as complex as this one. I cannot even try to give a fair accounting of the many plausible reasons for the visible identity of philosophy. Many of the reasons commonly given are political and social ones: the aggressive, masculine

attitude of philosophical questioners, gender norms devaluing research done by women, etc. I am not going to worry about those reasons right now. This talk is a philosophical talk. What I can do, for this brief talk, is point to *philosophical reasons* why philosophy has a male, white visible identity. A philosophical reason would have something to do with the actual content of philosophical ideas. Is there something about the content of philosophy that gives it its visible identity? I'll look at some arguments about that topic. I will then use Frantz Fanon, an unlikely source, to argue that philosophy has the resources to address visible identity philosophically and its own visible identity as well.

First, let's consider a philosophical reason for the **continued presence** of the white male visible identity of philosophy. I will start with a bad version of the argument, so we can see what a good version would look like by comparison.

The bad version goes like this: We can construct a long narrative about what philosophy is that deemphasizes, disregards, or even denies appearances and the external world as philosophically relevant. With Plato we get the position that Ideas are "realer" than appearances. Thus we should study Ideas. Medieval philosophers took a Christian God made flesh and converted it into something whose existence is demonstrated from ideas we have about it. Descartes privileges the mind over the body. Kant argues that a real world is ultimately unknowable and that morality is purely rational.

Philosophers have thus systematically excluded the realm of the visible from study. Philosophy, as a discipline devoted to abstract ideas to the point of abstraction, is thus blinded to the topic of visible identity. Philosophy's white, male visible identity persists because

philosophy failed to address its visible identity, and it failed to address its visible identity because philosophy is constructed not to address visible identity at all.

Now, I think this conclusion and the bit of argument just preceding it may be right, for reasons I'll discuss in a minute. But the "theory-only" narrative I just gave, while it might seem apt or true, is bogus. It is bogus because it is incomplete. We can show its incompleteness with this simple and well-known counter-narrative: Plato's greatest works are devoted to practices of justice. Christian philosophers pursue the way to bring God's kingdom to presence on earth. Descartes worries incessantly about how mind and body interact. Kant spends hundreds of pages on how to live the moral theory he produces and the relevance of empirical study. That is: Every philosopher the first narrative detaches from the "real world" in fact has a deep appreciation of it. The most well-known theoretical philosophers in the history of philosophy have had serious concerns about practical affairs. Indeed, these concerns often drive their theorizing.

Let us remember as well: Philosophers are real people in the world. They see issues of visible identity in their daily lives all of the time. Being a philosopher does not make you blind, and it does not make you blind to social issues.

And yet, it is the case that, historically, philosophy has not taken visible identity as a philosophical problem. Let's revisit the first narrative. If the problem is not that philosophers disregard the real world, perhaps it is that philosophers are known as theory-first kinds of guys, and that theory-first has long been the mantra of philosophy. Plato's philosophy of Ideas is taken to be the greatness of his philosophy. Medieval proofs of God's existence are calling cards. Descartes is a mind-centric philosopher and his dualism is a failure. No one cares about Kant's empirical analyses, except where they help us understand his theory better. In other words, it is

the theoretical that is privileged in what we understand philosophy to be. Concern about visible things is there, but it gets buried under a mountain of theory.

This is a stronger version of the narrative, but does it give the kind of explanation we want? That is, does it explain the continued presence of philosophy's white, male visible identity? Not really. It does not really answer our question, and it cannot. It cannot answer our question because we need a reason that says what it is about philosophy itself that leads philosophy not to take visible identity as a problem. Merely privileging theory is not enough to explain the absence of visible identity. By taking up the inquiry as we did, we have made a political agenda rather than doing the requisite philosophical justificatory work.

What does it take to make a better argument? To go about answering our question, we want to be able to say, for reasons internal to philosophy, why philosophy fails to address visible identity. We won't get this project done today, but I am glad to offer a possible starting point. The starting point I offer is Descartes' determination that 100% certainty is the bedrock of philosophizing well. We could start from other places, but there are four good reasons to start from Descartes. 1. Descartes is taken as the father of modern philosophy. 2. Descartes really gives us resources for explaining the absence of visible identity in his philosophy. 3. We could track in a direct way how Descartes' model creates difficulty for subsequent philosophers if they want to discuss visible identity. 4. It is always fun to beat up on Descartes. Here we go: a rough sketch of Descartes' blameworthiness.

Descartes famously sets out an epistemology based in absolute certainty: no belief counts as true unless it is 100% true or completely indubitable. This choice has a peculiar effect: it downgrades ordinary life as an appropriate venue for philosophical study, and Descartes actually makes that claim explicitly. Ordinary life is a realm of partial, dubitable knowledge. Visible

identity of course is valuable in ordinary life: it helps us know who each other are well enough to live in the world. It is also not the kind of thing that admits of 100% certainty: some of you, for example, are not actually students. Thus Descartes dismisses visible identity, and topics like it, social topics in general, from philosophical study: they do not meet the standard of certainty that Descartes selects. In fact, they show up later as knowable only on a *foundation of absolute truths* and largely through empirical methods, not philosophical ones.

We could argue that Descartes introduces a rift between philosophy and ordinary life, a rift that has persisted through countless permutations. We could argue further that this rift is still present. This argument needs much more support. Regardless, we have opened up the idea that philosophy has long been situated such that it is unable to take questions about visible identity seriously. We have a potentially viable mode of inquiry into how the content of philosophy has been shaped for philosophical reasons to exclude visible identity as a realm of study.

### **How do we change philosophy's visible identity?**

If it is the case that philosophy is constructed to disregard visible identity, how do we change it? Although at first he seems like only a critic of philosophy's exclusiveness, Frantz Fanon's work gives us one approach. Let's begin with his description of the problem.

[O]ntology is unrealizable in a colonized and civilized society.... There is, in the *Weltanschauung* of a colonized people, an impurity, a defect that forbids any ontological explanation... When one has admitted once and for all that ontology leaves existence aside, one sees why it does not allow for understanding the being of the Black. It is not a question of the Black being black anymore, but of his being black opposite the White (LEB 184).

Ontology is the kind of philosophy that has to do with what kinds of things there are in the world; it is a theoretical endeavor. When we recognize that blacks and whites experience being

in some dissimilar ways, we are required to consider the relevance of visible identity to philosophy, yet philosophers have neglected this resource and assumed that visible identity is irrelevant and focused on the theoretical. As Fanon puts it, philosophy fails to appreciate actual existence. Thus far we see an idea similar to that which we have already pursued, and we might conclude from what he has said that Fanon rejects philosophy. The funny thing is what happens next.

I know that if I want to smoke, I will have to reach out my right arm and take hold of the pack lying at the other end of the table. Since the matches are in the left drawer, however, I shall have to lean back slightly. And I perform all these movements not out of habit, but out of an implicit knowledge. A slow construction of myself as a body in the midst of a spatial and temporal world, such seems to me to be the schema. It is not imposed on me; rather, it is a definitive structuring of the self and the world (LEB 185).

In this example, the world makes the body (Fanon must lean back to grasp the matches) at the same time that the body makes the world (the matches are in that drawer so the body may grasp them). Although this example is brief, we may say that the schema, for Fanon, is both the schema (1) that the self projects into the world in order to make that world's space intelligible to the body, and (2) that the world projects onto the body to condition the body's movement.

“Schema” is a traditional metaphysical concept. Just when we thought he was rejecting philosophy, Fanon has launched into a detailed discussion of one of its hallowed concepts. He is not rejecting it, but making use of it to put forward his own analysis of the co-constitution of self and world. These are theoretical philosophical projects. We must wonder: given the attack on ontology above, how can Fanon commit himself to such a project? The answer comes in the next paragraph:



Below the corporeal schema, I created a historico-racial one... I believed I would have to construct a physiological self to balance space, to localize sensations... (LEB 185).

Fanon brings a racial schema to bear on the corporeal schema. How we look—race in particular—is a significant condition on how we experience our freedom, and especially the options we have for defining ourselves and the meaningfulness of our worlds. With this idea in mind, Fanon goes on to produce a detailed rendering of how thinking in terms of race can supplement, but also alter and improve traditional philosophical concepts. For example, if some races experience limits on their freedom that others do not, that experience could provide important information about what the limits of freedom are and how we can go about investigating them. If Fanon is right, we may need to radically restructure how we think about limits on self-constitution once we take race into account.

By using race as his approach, Fanon begins the task of integrating visible identity questions into the traditional discourse of philosophy. Fanon's position is not that we should give up philosophy, or that it is inescapably wedded to theorizing that excludes visible identity. The position seems to be (although this is far less nuanced than what Fanon actually thinks) that philosophy itself has the power to correct its shortcomings in diversity. We should take the idea to be that ontology is incomplete, but we can bolster it. We can do so by taking visible identity into account.

When we bring the two ideas together that I have discussed tonight, the following approach appears. On the one hand, we can mine the texts of philosophy for concrete philosophical reasons why visible identity is deemphasized, disregarded, or denied value as a

philosophical topic. On the other hand, we can find places where philosophy can be opened up not only to accommodate, but to be significantly re-imagined in light of visible identity.

It is my belief that if we take up this approach, we will begin to change the visible identity of philosophy. Philosophy needs to present itself so people can see that it speaks to them. Just by talking about visible identity philosophy will attract diverse thinkers, especially folks who end up in other disciplines because it seems like philosophy just is not concerned about them.

I have asked my students if they felt alienated when a reading list for a course has only white male authors. They have told me that they do not feel alienated, but the presence of nonwhite and nonmale thinkers makes them feel invited. This is a positive idea. As the approach I have outlined suggests, philosophy's problem with visible identity is not alienation but of lack of invitation. This event, the Food & Talk, is our Philosophy Department's invitation to the UF community to feel welcome to engage us and our discipline. As we and others in our field work to improve philosophy's diversity and move away from its traditional visible identity, we have one idea we all want to express. Please, feel invited. Everyone is welcome.

## **Resources**

American Philosophical Association, "Resources on Diversity and Inclusiveness."  
[http://www.apaonline.org/?page=diversity\\_resources](http://www.apaonline.org/?page=diversity_resources)

Descartes, R. (1985-6), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 2 vols., trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Fanon, F. (2001), "The Lived Experience of the Black," trans. Valentine Moulard, in *Race*, ed. Robert Bernasconi. Malden, MA: Blackwell.