

Who Does Philosophy? And Why *Them*?

Questions of Diversity in the Discipline

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Food & Talk event

Our topic tonight is not one typically broached in philosophy classes. It may in fact be one that is not properly classified as a philosophical topic in the first place. Nonetheless, it's a topic that philosophers need to address.

The topic is diversity within the discipline—or rather the *lack* of diversity in the discipline. Dr. Westmoreland is right that the image of the philosopher not only *has* been but still *is* that of an older white male. But it is not just the image we need to worry about; there is also the statistical fact that the population of philosophers, both faculty and students, is overwhelmingly white and male. This is the case even though in many other academic disciplines the population has changed quite a bit in ways that reflect the demographics of society at large.

I want to address three questions about this persistent homogeneity of philosophy in the academy. Call them the *problem* question, the *explanatory* question, and the *strategy* question.

1. The problem question

The problem question is just this: what exactly is the problem? What is it about the lack of diversity that should worry us? Why does it matter that philosophers in the academic are largely white and male?

There is, I think, a straightforward answer. It is worth spelling out, though, both so that we have a good grip on its seriousness and so that other possible answers that are (I think) less persuasive don't lead us to neglect the issue.

In my view, the main reason we should be worried is as follows. The persistent lack of diversity in the discipline is evidence supporting an unhappy hypothesis, namely, that there is *something* about the institution of philosophy as it now stands that has the effect of discouraging or excluding certain groups of people from becoming engaged in philosophy—something that stands as a barrier to becoming interested enough to take classes, developing the confidence needed to pursue it seriously, or even taking it up as an academic career. Those people ought not to be excluded or discouraged, and so long as it is made harder for them to develop an interest and perhaps a career in philosophy, they are being done an injustice.

Of course, philosophy is notoriously difficult and there are many, many people who will be discouraged by it. But that doesn't explain why some groups—white men—are less discouraged than other groups. The evidence strongly suggests that something is making it especially and inappropriately difficult for women and racial or ethnic minorities to become interested in philosophy and/or confident enough in their abilities to pursue it.

The problem, we might say, is not that there is something intrinsically unhappy about the preponderance of one kind of group in the discipline. Rather, the problem is something to which this statistical fact points. It is, I believe, of considerable benefit to *anyone* to study philosophy, at any level; as a result, if certain groups have a much harder time taking advantage of the opportunity to study philosophy, that is simply *unfair*—akin to making it harder for certain groups to take advantage of bank loans, to vote, to get a job, or the like.

Now, I think this is reason enough to be alarmed by the lack of diversity in philosophy; it's reason enough to make serious efforts to change things. But I want to mention another sort of claim that is sometimes heard, a different claim about the importance of diversity. This other claim is that we need to strive for diversity (of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or whatnot) because such diversity provides a multiplicity of perspectives on the subject at issue, where this multiplicity is supposed to help improve the quality of research. On more than one occasion when the topic of diversity in philosophy has come up, I've seen a philosopher react with impatience, even annoyance. This negative reaction, I am confident, was due to their thinking of this other line of thought and finding it not at all persuasive.

I am somewhat sympathetic with that reaction. The idea that such diversity will improve our attempts to do such things as untangle the concept of free will, respond to skepticism about the external world, determine the moral status of capitalism, and so on—I confess that this seems to me rather dubious. I may be wrong, of course. And I expect that such diversity does at least sometimes help with philosophical investigation into some topics, since differing backgrounds and experiences may help bring to light problems and strategies that are not as visible to others.

But I mention this motivation more to set it aside. Even if you think there's nothing plausible about the idea that diversity aids philosophical investigation, the other point about justice simply cannot be ignored. If we are doing something that discourages certain groups from taking advantage of the discipline of philosophy, that is something that should change. And from the looks of it, we *are* doing something that has this effect.

This is bad enough, but there's a further, unhappy twist. Among the benefits of a philosophical education is that it gives you the tools to stand up for yourself, to discern when you're being bamboozled, to fight back with reasoned argument, and to retain your ability to think for yourself even when others are dismissive of your views and capabilities. Those who have been treated as second-class citizens in our society arguably most deserve the benefits of such tools, but they are also the ones who are somehow being discouraged from the philosophical education that provides them.

2. The explanatory question

Let us turn to the explanatory question. *Why* is it that the population of philosophers in academia has remained so lopsidedly white and male? There are presumably several factors at work, including factors that have nothing to do with philosophy in particular; but for those of us in the profession, getting a grip on the factors that *are* peculiar to philosophy is of special interest, since that is where we are likely able to make a difference.

Those other, more general factors cannot be denied. I know that some folks are fond of saying that sexism and racism are no longer issues in our society, but that is just demonstrably false. Many of you may be familiar with the multiple studies that have been done using responses to resumé. Craft a resumé and do two versions identical but for the names; make one male and the other female, and see the different results one gets back. Or pick one name that sounds white and another that sounds black or Hispanic. The results are what you can predict, and they're quite robust.

But it seems unlikely that such general discriminatory attitudes do all the explaining here; after all, in other areas of the academy, the demographics have changed over time. Not all of them; some are as lopsided as philosophy, but many of them -- indeed, nearly everything else in the humanities -- have changed quite a bit. So what is going on in philosophy?

Dr. Westmoreland points to the visible identity of philosophers and suggests that philosophers tend not to concern themselves with certain topics—those that concern matters in ordinary life. I agree with him to an extent. Recall my initial remarks tonight: I said that our topic might not be properly classified as a philosophical topic in the first place. It is true that one important strain in philosophy since the early 20th

century is an anxiety over the proper domain for philosophical investigation. Should a philosopher really venture to try to say something about what is, one may think, a sociological question?

How might this fussiness over what philosophers should work on play a role in explaining the homogeneity of the population of philosophers? Perhaps in the following way. If we are in the habit of setting certain things aside as not of interest, we may become especially unobservant with respect to those things; and those might include social phenomena that are relevant to our present question. If this is right, then just by bringing up the topic in a venue such as this should help us become more observant and thereby more likely to locate the problematic factors.

But of course this just tells us, so far, to look at the issue and not to ignore it. It doesn't yet give us any hypothesis about why philosophy has lagged behind other areas of the academy in becoming more diverse.

Now, I do want to venture such an explanatory hypothesis. I do this being fully aware of how speculative this is. Nonetheless, I think it sufficiently plausible as to be worth sharing in this forum. Further, if the hypothesis is right, sharing it might help counteract the effect. Without further ado, then, let me introduce the hypothesis.

The main idea is that philosophy, as a discipline, suffers from a kind of insecurity that leads its practitioners to *armor* themselves in ways that exploit the pre-existing status symbols in society at large. Those status symbols come laden with associations that discriminate in favor of white men. The sort of insecurity at issue in philosophy does not afflict many other academic disciplines, and this difference helps explain why there is such a lag in diversity in philosophy as compared to others.

So what is this insecurity of which I speak? It's related to the point touched on earlier about anxiety over the proper realm of philosophical investigation. As you may know, the term "philosophy" used to have a very wide range of application, so that all investigations were thought of as philosophy; this use survives in the fact that a "Ph.D." means "Doctor of Philosophy," regardless of the field. But the advances in science created a sort of crisis in philosophy in the early 20th century, as it was not clear what philosophy was supposed to do that science could not do. The idea that philosophy focused solely on conceptual analysis or a priori investigation took hold and remains influential, though today within philosophy the idea that philosophy is continuous in some way with the sciences has gained a great deal of adherents. Still, the philosophy *of* philosophy remains highly contested.

As a result, those engaged in philosophy are surely aware of the ways in which their own work has a controversial status and can feel maligned or in danger of being treated as inferior. Now, I don't want, by saying this, to give the impression that I think that there's any good case to be made that the discipline is indeed inferior in some way. To the contrary, I think there are many plausible things to be said about what it does, why it is valuable, and how its accomplishments make a positive difference to other fields. But my point is a sociological or psychological one. Given the history of controversy over the identity of philosophy, it is predictable that philosophers, from early undergraduates to senior faculty, will be inclined to be defensive about their discipline.

The insecurity I have in mind here includes, but is not limited to, that which is driven by worries about practicality. The undergraduate who undertakes a study of philosophy is bound to be harassed with the question "What are you going to do with that?" This can lead to defensiveness, of course. But many other academic areas get the same kind of harassment; the charge of impracticality is hardly unique to philosophy. The insecurity I have in mind runs deeper, so that even if we were not in a culture in which education was valued primarily as a means of making money, there would still be this anxiety attending the pursuit of philosophy.

This insecurity and resulting defensiveness, I suggest, is responsible for those behaviors that end up pushing away those who don't already enjoy the privileged status of the white male.

What behaviors do I have in mind? I don't think there is much conscious racism or sexism at issue here. A focus on consciously held beliefs of an odious kind is a red herring. The hypothesis, rather, is that there are ways of talking and behaving that trigger pre-existing associations that do harm. The associations are those that link sex or race with certain qualities deemed desirable or undesirable; they affect our reactions to things without our realizing it, and in this way certain groups are made to feel excluded and others are made to feel at home.

My suggestion, more specifically, is that those who identify with philosophy in some way, in order to deal with the insecurity attending that identification, will characterize what they do in terms that specifically invoke features that indicate, specifically, masculinity, and that image of masculinity that is highly valued in our culture, which is an image of a white male. Such people may say, for example, that philosophy is tough business; it's serious business; it's not for wimps or those who can't stand the rough-and-tumble of rigorous debate. You have to develop a tough skin. There's no place for warm fuzzies or just sharing opinion; there's no place for fluff or self-indulgence. You need to be rigorous and hard-headed. And so on—you get the idea.

Let me now bring to bear two data points, both concerning undergraduate studies in philosophy, and both coming from what I learned at a conference held this last spring dedicated entirely to the topic of diversity in philosophy.

First, a statistical point. Included in a number of presentations were statistics about the participation of women and minorities at various levels—taking just an undergraduate course or two, getting a BA degree, going on to advanced study, and so on. One of the most striking bits of data came from some studies done at the University of Georgia, where it was found that in lower-level philosophy courses (such as Introduction to Philosophy), the numbers of women and minorities tended to be proportional to their prevalence in the undergraduate population at large. However, among classes likely to be taken as a second course in philosophy, the demographics shift quite dramatically, so that white male students come to dominate. Plainly, whatever it is that makes some groups feel less welcome in philosophy happens right there at the earliest stages, at the first encounter with philosophy in the classroom.

The second observation stems from the anecdotes I heard at the conference, those concerning the experience of undergraduate philosophy majors who are not both white and male. The impression I got was that, while at all levels of academia women and minorities in philosophy face inappropriate barriers, it is actually most striking at the undergraduate level. This fact fits, of course, with the statistics regarding lower-level vs. more advanced courses for undergraduates. And in fact, it fits very well my hypothesis about insecurity.

How so? Well, think about the position of the undergraduate who decides to study philosophy. You know that he is going to face pressures not to do so. As noted, parents, peers, and others will likely tell him not to be so impractical, and I will leave for your imagination the kind of stupid jokes and mockery such students may get from various non-philosophers. The undergraduate philosophy student is, then, *especially* vulnerable to the insecurity that I was talking about. And as a result, he will be especially inclined to buttress his sense of self-worth by emphasizing the high status of philosophy and thereby cause the effects I have been discussing.

What's even worse, then, is for the student who is not a white male who not only will likely get grief from outside parties but also *from the philosophy students themselves*. If this is indeed the dynamic, or a large part of it, it is no wonder that women and minorities will be less inclined to stick with philosophy.

Before I turn to the final question—the strategy question—let me pause to consider an objection to my hypothesis. The objection is just this: Look, philosophy is not unique in having insecurity issues. Certainly students who study English, for example, will get the same kind of grief for their choice, and English professors certainly can't claim the kind of high status that scientists, engineers, and businessmen enjoy. Yet those fields don't suffer from the kind of homogeneity we see in philosophy—far from it. What makes the difference?

As I said earlier, the insecurity I have in mind is not just the point about "practicality" but something deeper about the institution itself. Here's a way to see how the insecurity afflicts philosophy but not, say, English or history. Unlike those and many other areas of the academy, philosophy has long seen itself as in the same business as high-status areas because of its subject matter. Historically, as I noted, it was linked with both the natural and the social sciences, and even today it claims to do things like investigate *the nature of reality*—a topic that may seem to belong to physics or other natural sciences. That sort of competition does not, I think, show up in English, history, or other humanities. I agree, though, that a full defense of this hypothesis needs more careful examination of these other fields to see if they in fact lack the kind of defensiveness that I posit afflicts philosophy.

3. The strategy question

So let's turn to the strategy question. As you can guess, this is the question: What can we do to change the situation? What might we do to help bring about a more thoroughgoing participation by all groups in the discipline of philosophy?

Suppose the insecurity hypothesis is right and that defensiveness plays a significant role, at least, in discouraging women and people of color from studying philosophy. We can, of course, work to change the status of philosophy so that those who pursue it don't feel any need to defend it in the way described. This is a long term project, however, and it is hardly likely that disputes about the role and nature of philosophy are going away any time in the foreseeable future.

It will help, surely, to be aware of the ways in which we might unwittingly reinforce the idea that philosophy is a field too forbidding for those who don't already enjoy the privileged status of a white male. But being aware of a problem is far from having a solution. And here, the problem that remains is that those of us who identify with philosophy will, I expect, continue to feel the need to fend off detractors and want to reach for images of toughness, combat, and the like to signal high status. What is needed, apparently, are other ways of defending ourselves, ways that don't trigger unwanted and damaging associations.

What are those? Perhaps the suggestion I am most optimistic about is just this. One can defend the value of philosophy to others by *showing*, not *telling*. Instead of taking opportunities to characterize its virtues, *demonstrate* them by exhibiting the virtues of clear thinking, careful argument, and charitable listening. Show, don't tell; if someone asks you about the point of doing philosophy, bring up an actual philosophical topic that they are likely to care about (everyone cares about some philosophical issue or other) and discuss it with them. Do a bit of Socratic midwifery. Don't take the occasion to make the other person look bad. Emphasize that the skills on display are for everyone to take advantage of, and that all of us have to work on improving them over time.

This, anyway, is a very tentative suggested strategy. In brief, I am suggesting that there are ways of exhibiting the virtues of philosophy to others that are less likely to make certain groups feel excluded, and I ask that all of us—undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty—aim to do that. Philosophy is too important, and its benefits too valuable, for us to be complacent about the need to ensure all students are given adequate opportunities to take advantage of it.