

NYTimes, September 2013 “Women in Philosophy” series on Opinionator

SEPTEMBER 2, 2013, 9:30 PM

Women in Philosophy? Do the Math

By [SALLY HASLANGER](#)

Since the resignation of the well known philosopher Colin McGinn from his tenured post at the University of Miami, following sexual harassment allegations made against him by a graduate student, the longstanding debate about the obstacles faced by women in academic philosophy has been renewed. The Stone recently asked several women philosophers about their views on the status of women in philosophy, both inside and outside academia. Five of them will be published on consecutive days this week. This is the first.

Many of us have had the experience of sitting on an airplane and being asked by the person in the next seat, “What do you do?”

It is a moment of uncertainty: what to say? There are risks if you reply, “I’m a philosopher,” for you may then have the neighbor expounding “their philosophy” at length, or recounting how awful their experience was when taking Philosophy 101. (“We read some crazy article about being kidnapped and hooked up to a famous violinist to keep him alive!”) One time, a male friend of mine got the enthusiastic response, “Oh, you’re a philosopher? Tell me some of your sayings!” However, when I’ve tried the “I’m a philosopher” reply, it has prompted laughter. Once when I queried why the laughter, the response was, “I think of philosophers as old men with beards, and you’re definitely not that! You’re too young and attractive to be a philosopher.” I’m sure he intended this as a compliment. But I stopped giving the answer “I’m a philosopher.”

Although most philosophers these days are not old men with beards, most professional philosophers are men; in fact, white men. It is a surprise to almost everyone that the percentage of women earning philosophy doctorates is less than in most of the physical sciences ([see chart](#)). As recently as 2010, philosophy had a lower percentage of women doctorates than math, chemistry and economics. Note, however, that of these fields, philosophy has made the most progress on this count in the past five years.

The percentage of women philosophers in the faculty ranks is much more difficult to determine. Although for decades the American Philosophical Association’s Committee on the Status of Women lobbied the association to collect demographic data, it failed to do so. We have mostly relied on the efforts of individuals to do head counts. The best data we have suggests that in 2011, the tenured/tenure-track faculty in the 51 graduate programs ranked by the Leiter Report — the most widely used status ranking of anglophone philosophy departments — included [only 21.9 percent women](#).

This is potentially quite misleading, however, for the Digest of Education Statistics reports that in 2003 (the most recent data compiled for philosophy), the percentage of women in full-time instructional post-secondary positions was a mere [16.6 percent of the total 13,000 philosophers](#),

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a year when 27.1 percent of the doctorates went to women. Soon we will know more, however, for the A.P.A. has thankfully started to collect demographic data.

The numbers of philosophers of color, especially women of color, is even more appalling. The 2003 number quoted above of 16.6 percent full-time women philosophy instructors includes zero women of color. Apparently there was insufficient data for any racial group of women other than white women to report. The A.P.A. Committee on the Status of Black Philosophers and the Society of Young Black Philosophers reports that currently in the United States there are 156 blacks in philosophy, including doctoral students and philosophy Ph.D.’s in academic positions; this includes a total of 55 black women, 31 of whom hold tenured or tenure-track positions. Assuming that there are still 13,000 full-time philosophy instructors in the United States, the representation of scholars of color is plausibly worse than in any other field in the academy, including not only physics, but also engineering. Inexcusable.

With these numbers, you don’t need sexual harassment or racial harassment to prevent women and minorities from succeeding, for alienation, loneliness, implicit bias, stereotype threat, microaggression, and outright discrimination will do the job. But in a world of such small numbers, harassment and bullying is easy.

“Bad actors” are a problem, but the deeper problem is the context that gives “bad actors” power. Change needs to happen on multiple fronts for us to make progress. Philosophy lacks the infrastructure that other disciplines have to bring about systematic change. We don’t have the funding or the clout of anything like the National Science Foundation.

We do have a small community of feminist and antiracist activists and some important recent changes in the governance of the A.P.A. — like the appointment a new executive director, Amy Ferrer, who not only has a strong background in non-profit administration, but also a degree in women’s studies. The McGinn case is a tipping-point, not because it has taken down someone with great power and influence, but because his case and the response to it demonstrates that the persistent activism of the past 20 years is becoming institutionalized. We are the winning side now. We will not relent; so it is only a matter of time.

*[A more thorough collection of data on women in philosophy](#) is available from *The American Philosophical Association’s Committee on the Status of Women*.*

Next post: “[What’s Wrong With Philosophy?](#)” by Linda Martin Alcoff.

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papers, “Resisting the Real: Social Construction and Social Critique” was published by Oxford University Press in 2012.

SEPTEMBER 3, 2013, 10:15 PM

What’s Wrong With Philosophy?

By [LINDA MARTÍN ALCOFF](#)

This is the second of five posts this week on [women in philosophy](#).

What is wrong with philosophy?

This is the question I was posed by journalists last year while I served as president of the American Philosophical Association, Eastern Division. Why is philosophy so far behind every other humanities department in the diversity of its faculty? Why are its [percentages of women and people of color](#) (an intersecting set) so out of tune with the country, even with higher education? What is wrong with philosophy?

And now our field has another newsworthy event: the claims of sexual harassment against the influential philosopher Colin McGinn and his subsequent resignation, a story that made [the front page of The New York Times](#). Here is a leading philosopher of language unable to discern how sexual banter becomes sexual pressure when it is repetitively parlayed from a powerful professor to his young female assistant. It might lead one to wonder, what is wrong with the field of philosophy of language?

McGinn defended himself by deflecting blame. The student, he argued, simply did not understand enough philosophy of language to get the harmlessness of his jokes. He did not intend harm, nor did his statements logically entail harm; therefore, her sense of harm is on her.

Alas, McGinn’s self-defense echoes a common narrative in the discipline concerning its demographic challenges. As The Times article reports, and the philosophy blogosphere will confirm, the paucity in philosophy of women and people of color is often blamed on us. Some suggest it is philosophy’s “rough and tumble” style of debate that has turned us women and nonwhite males away. Logical implication: we may just not be cut out for such a demanding field.

Once in graduate school, I ventured to raise a series of skeptical questions to one of the most world-renowned philosophers, Roderick Chisholm, in his seminar on the theory of knowledge. I leaned toward American pragmatism and Wittgenstein; he was a famous foundationalist. He wiped the floor with me, turning my questions to mush and getting a good laugh from the class. This did not surprise me, but what did was that, the next day, Chisholm approached me in the student lounge and asked me gently if I was O.K. I answered, “Yes, of course,” which was the truth.

I had observed Chisholm’s pedagogical style for two years, and I knew his capacity to turn a student’s dissenting opinion into a jello mold of quivering meaninglessness, to the class’s mirth. I admired his abilities. But I still wanted to see how he would respond to my specific questions. Despite his jokes, one could garner from his response to my questions a substantive philosophical rejoinder. It was a perfectly legitimate philosophical exchange, livened up a bit to keep his students awake.

Chisholm was typical of the best philosophers of his day and ours in his combination of philosophical acumen and rhetorical skill. Yet he was atypical at that time in his sensitivity to the practical contexts of the argumentative arena. He had enough respect for me to treat me like all other disputants, but also to want me to stay in the game. As one of two women in the class, he was aware I might be experiencing an alienation-induced anxiety about my public performance.

The issue is not debate, simpliciter, but how it is done. Too many philosophers accept the idea that truth is best achieved by a marketplace of ideas conducted in the fashion of ultimate fighting. But aggressive styles that seek easy victories by harping on arcane counterexamples do not maximize truth. Nor does making use of the social advantages one might have by virtue of one’s gender, ethnicity or seniority. Nor does stubbornly refusing to acknowledge the real world contexts, rife with implicit bias and power distortions, in which even philosophical debates always occur.

Sometimes, interestingly, the aim of truth is enhanced less by adversarial argument than by a receptivity that holds back on disagreement long enough to try out the new ideas on offer, push them further, see where they might go. Sometimes pedagogy works best not by challenging but by getting on board a student’s own agenda. Sometimes understanding is best reached when we expend our skeptical faculties, as Montaigne did, on our own beliefs, our own opinions. If debate is meant to be a means to truth — an idea we philosophers like to believe — the best forms turn out to be a variegated rather than uniform set.

The demographic challenges of philosophy cannot be blamed on the deficiencies of the minority. Unlike Professor Chisholm, McGinn did not check in with his student but continued to lace his e-mails with sexual innuendo, if not propositions. Women who have had this experience in the discipline (me and nearly everyone I know) can be discomfited by the thought that their professor’s intellectual praise is strategically motivated, designed with an intent other than the truth. It can throw their confidence, and certainly disable debate. Which may, of course, be quite intentional.

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Eastern Division. She is the author of “Visible Identities: Race, Gender and the Self” and other books. More of her work can be found at [her Web site](#).

SEPTEMBER 4, 2013, 9:00 PM

The Disappearing Women

By [RAE LANGTON](#)

This is the third of five posts this week on [women in philosophy](#).

“How many philosophers does it take to change a light bulb?”

“It depends what you mean by ‘change’...”

That joke pokes gentle fun at a popular caricature: the chin-stroking grey-beard, with his fetish for word-meanings, his practical irrelevance and his philosophy that “leaves everything as it is,” as Wittgenstein said. The caricature is misleading, for philosophy also prides itself on its capacity to ask hard questions and challenge prejudice. Socrates was executed for stirring up trouble. Descartes began his “Meditations” with a rousing call to “demolish completely” a long-standing edifice of falsehoods — to uproot our “habit of holding on to old opinions,” and look at the world with fresh, unbiased eyes.

That radical power has inspired many women in philosophy, and much political work. The English philosopher Mary Astell wrote irreverently, in 1700, that an opinion’s age is no guide to its truth, that “a rational mind” is not made for servitude, and that a woman’s obligation to a man “is only a Business by the Bye”— “just as it may be any Man’s Business and Duty to keep Hogs.” From Descartes’s idea that we are essentially thinking beings she deduced a conclusion too daring for her peers: colleges for women. Husband-keeping is like hog-keeping: a contingent duty, not what a woman is made for.

Many women have, like Astell, found in philosophy a source of joyful challenge and liberation, fascinating in its own terms, with illuminating consequences for life and the social world. Given philosophy’s ambitions, we might fondly expect a profession especially free from bias and welcoming to those targeted by prejudice. That hope is somewhat hard to square with its dearth of women.

There are many possible explanations. Bias is harder to notice than Descartes expected, being unconscious, near-universal and more readily revealed in the psychologist’s lab than by the “natural light of reason.”

There is the effort of juggling work and family life (but why philosophy, more than other disciplines?). There are startling reports of sexual harassment, at “[What it’s Like to be a Woman in Philosophy](#)” (Worse than other fields? —who knows, but it should be better!). Some have looked to gender norms for an explanation, supposing that if “men are from Mars,” they thrive

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better in our martial debating culture (but why philosophy, more than economics?). Some have, more plausibly, invoked a “perfect storm” of diverse factors (see Louise Antony, “Different Voices or Perfect Storm: Why Are There So Few Women in Philosophy?”).

That caricature of Philosophy must be partly to blame: the “man of reason” pictured as a serious, high-minded Dumbledore. For some nice correctives, see the site [Looks Philosophical](#)). When a field is group-stereotyped, outsiders often feel less welcome. They often perform less well when something triggers group-awareness. Stereotype threat can make anyone, from white athletes to black students, underperform, when appropriately primed. Philosophy itself may be a source of priming influence, with its mostly male line-up for reading lists, conferences and teachers (see Jennifer Saul on [the psychological biases affecting philosophy](#)).

Philosophy is often introduced through its history, beginning with Socrates, who banished the weeping women, as prelude to the real business of philosophizing. Other banishments followed, so it can be tempting to see an unbroken all-male succession, as course lists (including my own) still testify. That part too is misleading. Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, in her notable correspondence with Descartes, offered the most enduring objection to Descartes’ dualism: How can immaterial mind and material body interact? She is puzzlingly absent from standard editions that include his contemporary critics. Maria von Herbert provoked a deep question for Kant: is moral perfection compatible with utter apathy? She is puzzlingly absent from the latest Kant biography and her letters survive elsewhere for their gossip value (sex! suicide!). With omissions like these we let down philosophers of past, present and future. We feed the stereotype, and the biases Descartes despised.

One more joke then: “How many feminists does it take to change a light bulb?”

“It’s not the light bulb that needs changing.”

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SEPTEMBER 5, 2013, 9:00 PM

Academia’s Fog of Male Anxiety

By [LOUISE ANTONY](#)

This is the fourth of five posts this week on [women in philosophy](#).

I don’t want to talk about Colin McGinn. I want to talk about Steven Pinker — or rather, about something Steven Pinker said, in [a letter he wrote](#) in June to Professor Edward Erwin at the University of Miami, defending McGinn. Referring to the university’s threatened disciplinary action against McGinn in response to complaints from a female student, [Pinker wrote](#) that “such

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an action would put a chill on communication between faculty and graduate students and on the openness and informality on which scholarship depends.”

What I want to say about this is: Really? For a university to treat lewd conversation as a serious offense threatens scholarship as we know it? Aren't we being just a tad apocalyptic?

To be fair to Pinker, a well-known Harvard psychologist and author, his main worry at the time was about the proportionality of the university's response to the alleged offense — he was appalled that behavior “apparently no more serious than exchanging sexual banter with a graduate student” had been met with the academic equivalent of the nuclear option. Later, as more of the facts emerged, Pinker admitted that the alleged wrongdoing might have been more serious than he had originally thought. (Pinker apparently did not know all of the facts when he wrote this letter; [he now acknowledges that McGinn “behaved badly,”](#) but still maintains that “the outcome was too severe.”) But the fact that Pinker had found it plausible that a university would have forced out “a brilliant and distinguished scholar” just for joking around betrays some high paranoia.

Pinker's reflexive and overheated reaction to the events in Florida is simply one precipitate of the fog of male anxiety that floats through the halls of academia. I'm always hearing from stressed-out men, worrying aloud what “all this fuss” about sexual harassment means for them. I've heard it at training sessions on university sexual harassment policy: “Does this mean I can't even tell a woman that she looks nice?” I've heard it in coffee lounges: “Make sure you keep your door open when you're talking to a woman student — you never know what she might say later.” And I've had it confided to me, with a sigh of regret, at conference happy hours: “I'm afraid now to form any relationships with female students — they might take it the wrong way.”

In fact, there are very, very few cases in which academic men have even been brought up on formal charges, much less fired, for sexual harassment. (Otherwise, the Florida case would have not been worthy of such media attention.) And I would venture that almost any woman in the profession can give you four or five examples of egregious misbehavior by male professors that has gone completely unsanctioned.

So what's the worry? The real worry, I think, for men is that they will have to change their ways. They will have to monitor what they say to female students and colleagues. They will have to think twice before chatting up that attractive graduate student they see at a conference. They'll have to stop relying on smutty double entendres to get laughs in their seminars.

And all this would all be bad because.....? Here's the good news, fellas: none of this behavior on its own is going to get you fired; it probably won't even get you a note on your permanent record. But you're right — the P.C. police are out there, and if you step out of line, they will impose one of the following penalties: dirty looks; explicit criticism; sensitivity training. You may be subjected to blogging.

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What can you do to be safe? Well, you might try educating yourself about the problems of sexual harassment and hostile environments, and particularly about the toxic effects of these on your female colleagues and students. You might try having a frank discussion with one of your colleagues who seems to “get it” about whether you are doing anything you’re not aware of that is contributing to a problem in your department. You might try adopting one or more of the behavioral strategies found to be effective in dulling the effects of implicit bias (for example: make it a conscious policy to maintain eye contact whenever you are having a conversation with a woman. Oh! and hey, women — this applies to you, too!) You can find out what people are doing in your discipline to address existing problems, and join the effort. (Philosophers can start [here](#) or [here](#).)

Whatever you do, though, don’t tell me that the cost of your heightened vigilance is going to be the loss of “open and informal” pedagogical relationships. I don’t buy it. I just know too many men who have formed close and mutually rewarding intellectual relationships with women without ever once mentioning, um ... manicures.

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SEPTEMBER 6, 2013, 9:30 PM

The Double Bind

By [PEG O’CONNOR](#)

This is last of five posts this week on [women in philosophy](#).

My heart simultaneously soars and sinks when a female undergraduate tells me that she is considering pursuing a Ph.D. in philosophy. First, I think, “You will be a great philosopher and make some important contributions to philosophy and someday I will get to be your colleague. Go for it!” My thoughts careening on a parallel track are, “Graduate school in philosophy can be treacherous and lecherous. And then if you make it through, the job market is its own special nightmare. Run away!” In that moment I feel trapped in the classic double bind of damned if I do and damned if I don’t, which many feminists would identify as the hallmark of structural sexism. I resent that trap. Bitterly.

But when I am honest with myself, I realize that I inhabit that double bind not just in those conversations but rather during most of the time I devote to my female philosophy students. Have I been tougher on them than other students because I know they will need to be tougher in graduate school? Have I encouraged them to pursue certain areas in philosophy over others because they are safer in the sense of being less threatening and more mainstream? Do I not

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push them hard enough to shoot for the most excellent schools because I can look at admission data, graduation rates, placement records, and recall anecdotes from colleagues and judge whether a program is or is not “female friendly?”

And late at night, do I find myself thinking that I am preparing my students to accept their own double bind involving what some might call the best case scenario. What if they have multiple acceptances and have to choose between a more highly ranked but less friendly program and one that is more open and friendly but perhaps not as highly regarded?

There are several things to note about double binds. The first is that double binds constrict options for certain individuals and function as barriers. They keep people out, keep them confined to their “proper place,” and keep them acting in ways that are “acceptable” yet still troubling. The most important thing about a double bind is that the people caught in it are not the ones who can fix it.

Women can only do so much. We can teach and mentor well, open doors when we have some institutional power, advocate for change in admission and harassment policies, for example. But nothing will really change unless and until more of our male colleagues begin to use their male privilege in very different ways. The burden clearly rests with them, and I hope that they assume the responsibility.

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