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On the Status of Women in Philosophy

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COMMENT

Hey! Can't you smile!

Women and status in philosophy

Babette Babich

What is the status of women in philosophy today? Before asking this question it is important to recall that when one speaks of status one speaks of prestige or value. Questions of status have nothing, by nature, to do with 'truth', objective or otherwise; at stake are matters of power and respect.

Who is the top philosopher today? How about the top three? To stay with living names, we might think of Charles Taylor or Alasdair MacIntyre or Stanley Cavell, or, to name a few continental philosophers, Jürgen Habermas or even, for the younger and edgier among us, maybe Jacques Rancière (maybe) or Alain Badiou (more likely); some might think of nominating Slavoj Žižek or Gianni Vattimo (or maybe not). Wondering about additional anglophone names, we may well be short of great thinkers these days, but surely Simon Blackburn or Hilary Putnam would count.

Folks with or without analytic tastes may have different lists, but I submit that candidates for such an accolade are typically men, with women added, as women tend to be, only for reasons of equity, *if* one thinks of it, or is asked to do so: *as an afterthought*.

For my own part, and not just because of my continental formation, I do not believe that the explanation for this is that men are inherently, essentially philosophical (empirically I know this is not so). Rather, men are in possession of power/status to start with. Thus I find myself in agreement with Louise Morley's observation that 'credentials and academic capital in women's possession mysteriously lose their value.'¹

Years ago now, Deborah Tannen got a lot of attention for her linguistic studies of gender differences.² Expanding on the work of Patricia Bradley Hayes and others, Tannen argued that such differences had to do with what social scientists called *value expectancy*. Put a male and a female lecturer having the same substantive things to say (with the same text) in front of an audience and it turns out that audiences interviewed regarding the competence, the fluidity, the clarity, the

importance and overall the *brilliance* of the speaker (analytical philosophers will sum all of this up as 'quality') turn out to prefer the guys. Hands down.

Value expectancy corresponds to the 'schemas' that Sally Haslanger identifies favouring male above female, white over black, philosophers. Indeed, Haslanger's most disquieting but ultimately plausible suggestion, given the bias observed in the profession overall, asks that one consider the possibility 'that there may well be an 'evaluation bias even in the peer-review process.'³ So ask your own students. Worse yet, remember your own experiences, your own expectations, when you learned that your instructor in a particular university course would be male or female (never mind academic rank, race, age, and so on – though of course all these things too make a difference for men as for women). Hearing reports of disparate gender representation, academic philosophical associations, like philosophy departments seeking to make a gender hire, offer the strikingly simplistic remedy that women should come forward, as if this were the problem (and indeed when job searches fail to identify women, academic philosophers morph into Jacques Lacan and uniformly lament: there are no women!), as if there were no issues of political dominance, as if the status dilemma were no dilemma at all, as if the persistence of these professional issues were merely a matter of oversight.⁴

The status of women in philosophy is and remains nugatory or weak, and most of the time, in the most important and everyday ways that matter, the question of the status of women is low or trivialized in the profession. And one of the best ways to trivialize any problem is to deny that there is a problem. Just think of the debate on continental and analytic philosophy. Isn't it *really* all about doing 'good 'work? Ditto for women philosophers. For, as I can tell you from my own experience, all-boy or old-boy socialization continues apace, usually covered over with a joke or a sneer. Men use such jokes to perpetuate the old sexist

standards and ideals, laughter works wonders at allowing one to have one's insult and get away with it too, and women learn to tolerate or smile at the same. For, as in other instances, it turns out that it is the 'quite systematic talk used by men, to and about women, to violate women's credibility and professionalism'⁵ that undermines both the position of women and their efficacy in academia. What is to be done? Revolutions? Marching in the streets? Writing book after book? This has been done.

I thus argue for a different tack (and because I realize that this is a subtle point, let me emphasize that I am being ironic in the spirit of Jonathan Swift's 'Modest Proposal' – which was, you will remember, neither modest nor indeed a proposal, properly speaking). I argue, in case you have not noticed, for *respect* and a certain social freedom. Not in the way 'respect' is ordinarily claimed by women (will you respect me in the morning?) but the kind of regard that accrues to power. And although power can – and your political and social and cultural theorist and even social worker friends will tell you *must* – be claimed, such claims only work as claims if they succeed. Otherwise not.

I argue, then, for the perfectly professorial *right* for women in the academy who happen to be professors to be, as professors often are, preoccupied; the right, if one so chooses, *not* to smile at the men but to think and even to have (*pace* both Tannen and Haslanger) the same 'poor' social skills men have and *not be penalized* just as men *are not penalized* but often rewarded and lionized for the same.

Ladies not smiling. My word! Whatever will they propose next? And I cannot but imagine that I have lost the support of my readers just about now.

From the continental side, I agree with much of what Haslanger and Tannen take as their respective points of departure, and I agree with many of their conclusions (despite the fact that the 'continental side' is conspicuously absent in their worlds of philosophy). But I refuse Haslanger's idea that the solution could be 'to find ways to discourage antisocial behaviour'⁶ in men, and not only because this sounds like the very sort of onerous obligation often 'conveniently' imposed on women. Women have a wretched track record, one-on-one, when it comes to *changing* anti-social or non-supportive behaviour in an intimate relationship where both parties supposedly have a mutual investment in the relationship. If women are less than good at changing their personal partners, why suppose they will fare any better with their academic colleagues? Unfortunately women are very good at learning not to mind; this is the paramount social skill, is it not?

Of course I am all for politeness and social skills. But being distracted is often the cost of being 'lost', as we say, 'in thought'. So, rather than socializing men to be more sociable, my radically immodest (or unearnest) proposal is that women too claim the right to be absent-minded, and my still more radical suggestion is that we celebrate and admire rather than make excuses for such women. Perhaps men's putatively 'poor' skills advance rather than hinder rank and status? Or it may be that the having of rank and status entails that one need not bother with such 'skills'? Some social actors are more equal than others: some can be rude and dishevelled (and get away with it on both counts), some not. Nor is this limited to academics, or limited within the academy to philosophy departments. Some with poor social skills suffer from socialization deficits while others are rewarded.

Sartor resartus

Simon Critchley, a T-shirt-and-jeans guy from way back, takes insouciance so far that both undergraduates and journalists can get carried away by his 'style' (for he does take a care for his shoes, albeit at levels of discrimination below the impeccable Alexander Nehamas, who wears, no matter his other excellences, simply wonderful shoes). Why does it seem to be pushing things a bit to talk about Simon Critchley's clothes or Alexander Nehamas's shoes, not to mention the distracted fallout of, say, Saul Kripke's couture? For Kripke's messiness is part of his reputation and constitutes, aesthetically, if paradoxically for some, no small part of his reputation for *genius*. Let's take it to the street. Pass a man wearing a casual shirt and a casual pair of pants and you will not even notice his attire. What do clothes have to do with it? Put a jacket and tie on the guy and he's dressed for the finest restaurant, and these days he can even lose the tie. Contrast this with women on a Friday evening in London or New York (indeed any evening might do).

Do a little ad hoc phenomenology, using your observations and your own variations, and hence with and on yourself and your judgement, as you wander down the street on such evenings (assuming you are not part of the phenomenon yourself, as you might well be). Look for the well-dressed young woman out for the night, ideally with a date for the evening. She may be wearing a little black dress or equivalent, high heels, stockings, have newly polished nails, newly coiffed hair – and then there is that make-up thing. If her companion is her own age, almost invariably he will be dressed as he was the whole day (though the more fashion-conscious young fellow may have switched the day's T-shirt for

a T-shirt for the evening). If he is an older man, he may be wearing the aforementioned jacket or a suit or he may have the Euro, I-am-still-young look. But, and *especially* if he is an older man (alas, an almost quantifiable phenomenon): his attractiveness and height will nearly always be inversely proportional to hers. What is important is that however casually or formally he is dressed, he will get to have his feet – every last inch of them – on the ground.

Men are not objectified on the street (save by other men), despite the commercial success of metrosexual products (which I am all for; you will have noted my enthusiasm for men's haberdashery and in general *anything* to do with male beauty). Men are so unused to being looked at appraisingly (this is not the same as an invitation) that such an appraising look (*nota bene*: without smiling) can bring a man to stumbling. Could it be me she's looking at? And then it gets dangerous: How dare she? (A word to women practising such a street phenomenology: do be careful. The point about power is all too real.)

The stuff about T-shirts and black dresses is a metaphor here. The same double standard holds for academics. The assumption is that 'a successful philosopher should look and act like a (traditional, white) man',⁷ but the kicker, for women, is that if one does look like a traditional, white, male philosopher one will look (if one happens to be a woman) more rather than less unkempt and one will be judged accordingly (as being 'unattractive'): quite apart from whether the traditional 'academic' look is a T-shirt look, or a rumpled shirt-sleeve look, or a jacket-to-go-to-the-APA-in look. Men in society and in the academy not only *do not* have to dress to please a woman's appraising eye but when they do dress up it is solely for the sensibilities of other men. ●ne can argue that women do this too, but anyone who argues in this way argues tendentiously just because, as Beauvoir rightly notes, women sit in competitive judgement on other women's attractiveness to men and this is not the same as men dressing to impress men.

With respect to desiring, and hence of desirability, the Austrian novelist Elfriede Jelinek observes that 'as long as men are able to increase their sexual value through work, fame, or wealth, while women are only powerful through their body, beauty and youth, nothing will change.' Incredulous, her interviewer protested that surely this claim could not be said to hold for famous women – like the Nobel Prize-winning Jelinek herself – but Jelinek insisted that a 'woman who becomes famous through her work reduces her erotic value. A woman is permitted to chat or to babble but speaking in public is still the greatest transgression.'⁸

So it goes for Jelinek, who mused that 'at best, people are afraid of her'. Thus Hilary Clinton spent a failed presidential campaign learning to deal with inherently sexist mockery and still struggles to this day for respect. In politics, as everywhere, a woman has to show her femininity in just the right way, just to be sure of esteem. But that can be tied to all kinds of conditions, and what is more sobering – this would be pant-suit or iron-lady politics – can be refused at any level.

What are the prospects for women in the safe and, one fondly imagines, reasonable field of philosophy? The immodesty of my proposal on the status of women in philosophy, as academics, as colleagues, as professors, proposes that we do not insist upon social solicitude from academic women, just where we do not and cannot presume it from academic men. Thus I suggest we let thinkers, male and female, be thinkers. Falling into wells (like Thales), standing stock still in the midst of battle (Socrates as reported by Alcibiades), failing to wear socks on principle (Einstein) but also given to poorly socialized gestures (Wittgenstein's poker) and sentiments (Adorno), let them all, women as well as men, be social 'misfits'. If we can not only tolerate but sometimes admire such things in men, we might well tolerate and (sometimes) admire the same in women.

It's a small thing if we can count both women and men. Failing that, it's about power, about who gets to get away with stuff and who gets to be considerate. (Hey! Can't you smile!)

Notes

1. Louise Morley, *Quality and Power in Higher Education*, Society for Research into Higher Education, McGraw Hill, 2003, p. 153.
2. Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand*, Ballantine Books, New York, 1990. In what follows I concur with Senta Troemel-Ploetz's assessment of Tannen's innocence of the 'status dilemma'. S. Troemel-Ploetz, 'Selling the Apolitical', *Discourse Society*, vol. 2, no. 4, 1991, p. 490.
3. Sally Haslanger, 'Changing the Ideology and Culture of Philosophy: Not by Reason (Alone)', *Hypatia*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2008, pp. 213–14.
4. Kristen Monroea, Saba Ozyurta, Ted Wrigley and Amy Alexandra, 'Gender Equality in Academia: Bad News from the Trenches, and Some Possible Solutions', *Perspectives on Politics* 6, 2008, pp. 215–33; as well as, more broadly, Virginia Valian, *Why So Slow? The Advancement of Women*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1999.
5. Troemel-Ploetz, 'Selling the Apolitical', p. 499.
6. Haslanger, 'Changing the Ideology and Culture of Philosophy', p. 218.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 210.
8. Deborah Solomon with Elfriede Jelinek, 'A Gloom of Her Own', *New York Times*, 21 November 2004.