

This talk was given to the Kant's Cave philosophy meeting in September 2020 and generated a great discussion. These notes barely scratch the surface!

Thinking Outside the Box: Why philosophical diversity matters

In saying that philosophical diversity matters I mean diversity in the philosophical views we are exposed to, the views that we engage with in our own thinking. This is different from the claim that philosophy needs to include philosophers and academics who are female, philosophers of colour, working class or coming from different cultural traditions, although I think that aiming for philosophical diversity *entails* the inclusion of female philosophers, philosophers of colour, philosophers of Eastern, African, Islamic traditions, or philosophers engaged in exploring gender in their work.

In short, in order to *think in philosophically diverse* ways we need to read and be taught philosophy by philosophers and academics whose perspective and work is itself breaking with traditional approaches to philosophy. I am thinking here of traditional approaches as those of Western, European thinkers, with a narrative that reaches from Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle to Descartes, through Spinoza, Leibniz and Hume, leading to Kant, with the explosion onto the scene of Analytical philosophy through Russell and Wittgenstein. As you will notice, that list is made up entirely of white male philosophers.

My aim, then, is to work outside the canon, to include a world of thinkers in my thinking who think and work outside what is standardly thought of as the philosophical canon. I hope to show you here why I think this is important.

SOME HISTORY ON DIVERSITY IN PHILOSOPHY

I think the movement to motivate this opening up of our philosophical boxes began with the recognition that philosophy seems to be a white, male dominated discipline, with few women or people of colour being given the voice in our academic studies they ought to have. Some have argued that there are good reasons why philosophy is white and male, (though I will focus on the male / female distinction to keep things simple). Below are some claims made for why this is so:

1. Philosophy requires genius and women don't seem, generally, to have the quality of genius.
2. Philosophy is too nit-pickey, too focused on trivial debates, whereas women tend to see the bigger picture and are less interested in the 'gladiator style' battles encouraged in academic philosophy.

3. Women were historically denied formal education and so cannot be included in the foundations of philosophy.

My view is that none of these actually survives scrutiny, though I don't know how people feel about these responses. If in discussion anyone wishes to raise of these points, please do, but I won't be going into them here.

Those who see the lack of representation of women as a problem that can be overcome (and I certainly share this view) tend to see the issue as one of fairness, or lack of it. The motivation for bringing in more texts by women and more female academics is that the lack of recognised female philosophers and students ought to be rectified for a fairer and more representative discipline to emerge, one that can represent and be enjoyed by more than one small section of the population.

I initially did think that the important point here was one of fairness, that we should increase the number of female philosophers in academia, and include the work of female philosophers in reading lists for these reasons. The hope here is that students, both male and female, will produce their own research on the work of the newly included philosophers and correct, finally, the perception of philosophy as fundamentally a discipline better suited to male thinkers, with women playing subsidiary roles in footnotes or as professors devoted to teaching the work of male philosophers to a largely male student body. The deep unfairness of this seems sufficient as a reason for changing this state of affairs.

PART II

Diverse thinking

However, what I learned when I started including women in my courses was that there is a range of ideas in these works that are new, challenging, brilliant and exciting both to me in my research and to students who had not been introduced to their work before. What we also discovered in these classes is that philosophy stopped appearing as abstracted entirely from the lives of the philosophers themselves, and this turn excited students and me too. Including women put the thinkers themselves in the frame, placed them in social contexts, making their work more accessible as the thoughts and analyses that real people have in responding to their intellectual and specific cultures.

Where it becomes difficult to do this work is in the following ways:

Researching philosophers who have not been summarised, and given a role in the official dialogue we learn exists between, say Locke and Berkeley on secondary qualities, or Hobbes and Rousseau on human nature and the social contract, means that a huge amount of work needs to go into preparing courses with historical female figures, as well as researching the contemporary female philosophers who don't show up in the thought experiments of say a John Searle or Thomas Nagel. There are certain voices we are used to hearing, certain kinds of arguments that are familiar, and knowing the key "players" in the central debates is part of our understanding of philosophy. So we tend to teach what we have learned and what students expect to hear. Equally, students who know something of Plato Socrates and Aristotle, of Descartes and Kant, can end up feeling that they are not being given the "real" stuff when these philosophers don't form the core of a course. If they come out of the course knowing what Princess Elisabeth thought about dualism, or Gabrielle Suchon thought about autonomy, or Simone de Beauvoir's nuanced existentialism, there can be a sense that they are focusing on the minor figures, or getting a kind of slanted and unimportant view, perhaps even 'second rate' thinking, since why wouldn't these philosophers be part of the canon if they are so good? So students need to be convinced through the quality of ideas that they are worth paying attention to.

Conferences and publications focusing on their work help enormously. And philosophers in academia who go to the trouble of reading new texts and presenting these to their students are doing a major service to philosophy by giving these philosophers the stamp of approval as well as, of course, access to the work, and the opportunity to discuss it.

Concluding this point, while it is clear that opening the box of philosophical ideas is difficult, difficult for academics and difficult for students, it is, nonetheless, important. Bringing in female philosophers is not just about fairness: it isn't just a way of encouraging female students to think of philosophy as something they can do, although these are important issues.

Researching and working with the ideas of female philosophers has opened up the nature of philosophy, made it more interesting; in doing so it covers a wider range of philosophical thinking for us to draw on, it improves the canon.

I also want to say that what I discovered is that I didn't want to stop there. Once I felt the impact of different ways of thinking, of conceiving of the questions found in accounts of freedom, of ethics, of metaphysics or of methodology in philosophy, I realised that there were many other perspectives possible, which I hadn't explored, such as ways in which Buddhist philosophy can be brought into courses on personal identity, or how the work of

Judith Butler can illuminate the relationship between identity and ethics. There is really no reason to limit the range of ideas that can contribute to our philosophical understanding of human experience.

The idea that all philosophical voices are relevant to philosophy just seems right if we think of philosophy as a living activity, one that challenges us, and playing it safe in philosophy really seems to me to undermine its fundamental character as capable of opening us up to thought, rather than containing it in recognizable, well-rehearsed ideas.

The idea that philosophy is itself about opening up thought means that philosophy itself can never be viewed as safe.

Philosophy can't be safe because being safe means you can think without effort, that you can become convinced that you "know things", that your understanding is correct, all the hallmarks of becoming complacent. The philosopher Hannah Arendt views thinking as an activity that is at the heart of being human, but "thinking" needs to be "thinking without bannisters", with no bold print sign posts along the way to help us with our thoughts: we need to exercise our capacities to think anew, to discover ideas that challenge our own and to be alert to any dogmatism or conventionalism in our thinking.

So to sum up: Philosophical diversity is really just philosophy: because philosophy, in its true sense, is engaging with the fullest range of ideas possible, reaching for the challenges, opening up our own set of assumptions. A lack of diversity in philosophy really just turns philosophy into a canon-based, degree-based project, rather than the deep and challenging exercise of our capacities as thinkers it is (and has been since Socrates) meant to be.

FURTHER THOUGHTS ON 'INTUITIONS'

Tamar Szabo Gendler and Stephen Stich (<http://www.philostv.com/tamar-gendler-and-stephen-stich/>) discussed this question online, with Gendler saying that she had been discouraged by her professors from considering a career as a philosopher because she did not have the right 'intuitions'.

((There is also a discussion between them which is very interesting on the question of women's reception in contemporary philosophy.))