



What it's like being a woman in philosophy¹ - an address to the Deakin Philosophical Society

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Imagine a young girl growing up, playing football. She loves the game, she's a great player, loves the team and in every way she is one of 'the boys'. They value her because she runs, tackles and is a mean mid-fielder. Imagine a world where she does not have to leave by default, once she turns 14. Imagine she continues to play with her team. Five years later, she still loves the game. She runs, tackles and is a mean mid-fielder. And she is all those things because she trains harder than any of her fellow players. Her biological handicap, the lack of testosterone, is compensated by relentless weights and cardio-fitness sessions. She has shaped her body to engage in the game.

Yet, this story does not work. In the real world, her place in the football team depends not on her own innate or natural gifts and talents, but on her willingness to conform to an identity. In the real world, to be a footballer is not simply to be athletic, to be a footballer is to be a god of virility. As soon as this young woman ceases to appear as 'virile' and, god forbid becomes 'fertile', she is no longer one of the boys. She becomes the Other who does not belong on the football team. If she wants to play with the footballers, well, it will be a different kind of playing altogether. Skills and passion have nothing to do with the rules of this game, which are so closely linked to the self-affirmation of male identity. Play the game like a man, or get off the field.

Can the young woman singlehandedly change the culture of the game? No. If she wants to play, she plays a man's game and she'll have to repress her 'fertility' and imitate their 'virility'. Only a group of women can band together and tell the football players: you're messing this game up with your bullshit behaviour that has nothing to do with the game itself. Those women who band together and want to play will push the rules of the game (if that's what it takes), in order to make it a game for *all* of footballer lovers, not just the young men.

Football and philosophy may appear miles apart. Yet my use of the word 'virility' and its connection to a game embedded in male culture is intentional. Analytic philosophy, the practice of philosophy

¹ For countless of first-hand accounts on what it is like to be a woman in philosophy go to <http://beingawomaninphilosophy.wordpress.com/>

favoured in the English speaking world, is based on the adversarial method where the philosopher with the best strategy is able to devastate their opponent's argument and thereby becomes 'top dog'. Philosophical discussions are not so much aimed at learning or understanding through dialogue, as much as opportunities to demonstrate one's own wit and intellect. This adversarial method establishes the authority of the single reasoner. He or she is top dog until a challenger overthrows him or her. Without a doubt, the player who benefits by this form of philosophy is the one with the natural skill and ability enhanced by testosterone: a desire for conflict and competition. The woman who enters this game will have to suppress her own preferred way of philosophizing and work damn hard to jump into the fray of this man's game. And of course, should the woman by some chance become 'top dog', the most natural and acceptable strategy of attack for the opponent is her weakest defence: her 'fertility', or her hidden identity as a woman.

What if the female philosopher were to think as a woman? What if she ceased to believe that being a philosopher is equivalent to being 'autonomous' and 'rational'? What if she recognised the big sell for what it is, a game played by men who desire power and control? Feminist philosophers (and not those exclusively) have effectively banded together and said - you're messing up philosophy with your bullshit tactics and invented rules of the game. Make it a game for all humanity, for all lovers of wisdom, not just the white Anglo Saxon males.

What is it to be a 'thinking woman'? Let's start with what is it to be a 'thinking man'. The best and most noble image of the thinking man is the polymath, the genius, the 'renaissance man'. When I started philosophy, I had dreams of becoming a renaissance man. It took a number of years before reality dawned on me: I would only ever be a 'renaissance woman'. And the image of the Renaissance woman is not Leonardo Da Vinci but something closer to Botticelli's Venus. While contemporary feminists work hard to reappropriate the Renaissance woman, the *real* Renaissance woman was a child-bearer, a keeper of the home and a good wife in a culture where the family unit was the bedrock of society and political stability. The few powerful women in the public sphere (notably Catherine de Medici) were far outnumbered by the other 'public women', the 'painted poetry' or male artists' images of sexual perfection.

The woman who looks for role models in the philosophy tradition will find few. The woman who looks for answers to her questions will find those questions answered each and every single time by a man. The woman who wants to be a philosopher finds herself either playing a man's game and at odds with her own identity, or finds herself fighting to be true to her own identity and is thereby at odds with the rules of the game as they are currently constituted.

When I began philosophy, eight years ago, I had all sorts of reasons for doing and loving philosophy and barely noticed my gender. I was completely taken and excited by the breadth and depth of the entire discipline. Undergraduate classes were challenging and stimulating, and I enjoyed stimulating discussions with fellow students, who were both male and female in class (undergraduate classes have a good gender balance) and more informally in the bistro.

Earlier this year, I attended a postgrad seminar on Kierkegaard at Latrobe University, presented by Dr Jeff Hanson, based at ACU and now one of my research supervisors. Of the 12 attendees, I was the only woman. In 2009 I presented at the national Bonhoeffer conference in Australia. I was the only female presenter who spoke on Bonhoeffer. The only other female presenter was a high school

principal, speaking on education. She had read little of Bonhoeffer and apologized for being a 'practical', not a 'scholarly' person.

In my conversations and professional training as a philosopher, I am quite literally, surrounded by men. In addition, I'm writing my thesis on the ideas of a man involved in an assassination plot to overthrow a political figure, the 'mother' of all political leaders – Hitler himself. In my research, I've had to wade through mountains of war glorifying literature. Like football culture, war culture is the glorification of male virility. The great war makers and theorists (Bismarck, Napoleon, or von Clausewitz) are great because, like great footballers, they left their mark on the game of war. Like great footballers, they affirm masculine virility. In addition to this, to write a thesis on a German is to do philosophy in a tradition of male philosophers. Frustrated with the lack of female German philosophers, I recently discovered that contemporary German feminist philosophers are simply not read in the Anglophone world (unlike their French counterparts, who are widely translated and available).²

Sally Haslanger, based in the Department of Linguistics and Philosophy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, describes philosophy departments as hyper-masculine places that are competitive, combative, oriented towards individual accomplishment, individual intelligence and hostile to femininity. Women are alienated by the atmosphere where ordinary social norms are not recognized. As a result, 'it is difficult for women to feel "at home" in a hyper-masculine environment since it requires sublimating potentially important aspects of identity'.³

Let me be crystal clear about what it is like to be a woman in philosophy. It is to be aware of yourself as a woman all the time, much as a woman is aware of herself as a woman amongst footballers or army recruits. It is to feel vulnerable, to be slightly on guard *all* the time and that feeling of guarding your vulnerability transfers to what you read, to what you think, to who you talk to and, ultimately, to what you write. Vulnerability is an interesting word here because the 'top dog' style of thinking is about consolidating power in order to make one invulnerable from attack.

How does a woman speak to her research topic in an environment that promotes and prides itself on the adversarial technique? Is there a way of doing philosophy that does not depend on the adversarial technique promoted in the Anglophone philosophy world?

The dilemma faced by a woman philosopher can be summed up in the concept of feminism *and* philosophy, and feminism *in* philosophy. The first fights for independence, for an extreme intellectual separatism. This is wholesale critique of philosophy. It is the waiting for an as yet unheard feminine philosophical voice advocated by feminist theories such as Irigaray. The second is an internal conception, which overlaps with and is historically dependent on the former. The aim is integration into mainstream debates, seeking dialogue with unconvinced colleagues that at least some of the concerns of feminist philosophers might properly be the concern of any philosopher.

² This unavailability is not arbitrary but has important implications for all women philosophers - "The politics of translation is a critical issue for the status of women in philosophy. Translation practices are one of the most significant means of establishing women philosophers as recognized and important thinkers. Not to translate is to designate the interest of the writer in question local and temporary" Deutscher cited in Postl, G 2005, 'Introduction: Contemporary Feminist Philosophy in German', *Hypatia*, vol. 20, no. 2, pp. viii-xvi.

³ <http://www.mit.edu/~shaslang/papers/HaslangerCICP.pdf>

I would argue for the second. If philosophy aspires to self-criticism, self-evaluation, feminism in philosophy contributes to that ideal and to that task. Integration is now an active critical ambition, not a desire for mere acceptance. It is to transform thinking on both sides. An internal critique argues for an improved conception of rationality which brings in a new range of questions to which philosophy may be fruitfully applied.

How might the woman philosopher improve the discipline in which she seeks to make her home? One example is through the transformation of weak objectivity into strong objectivity. I'm drawing her on the work of Harriet Harris (2001) and Pamela Sue Anderson (1998).

Weak objectivity allows privileged individuals to claim knowledge of the world while excluding the world of the non-privileged. Strong objectivity recognises that facts are shaped by the knowers and their processes of coming to knowledge. It tries to gain insight from multiple standpoints, including standpoints from the margins. When we become aware of the limits of our own thinking, and are prompted by the experiences of others to reflect critically on our outlook, then we move into fuller knowledge. This moving into fuller knowledge is not the quest of a solitary individual. To practice standpoint is to be in solidarity with another, to stand alongside. The ability to show empathy, care and concern is not just a moral virtue, but an intellectual virtue. Here is a return to the more ancient union of truth and justice.

In my reflections on what it is like to be a woman in philosophy, I have chosen to write on my experience, an experience corroborated by many other women in philosophy in the English-speaking world (see footnote 1). I have also provided a brief description of an alternative way of doing philosophy through Pamela Anderson's standpoint theory, which I have found convincing and encouraging, though I will happily learn from and engage with other forms of critique that question the current dominant model of philosophizing.

But for those of you are unmoved by either experience or argument: here are the cold hard facts.

Of the 21.3 professors in philosophy employed in Australia in 2005, one was a woman.⁴ Overall, the proportion of women in philosophy above level B, in senior positions, is significantly lower than the rates across the university sector. Since 1981, the percentage of women philosophers employed in continuing positions in philosophy programs has improved overall from 8% to 23% in 2005, though still lagging behind the 38% mark across the university sector. The bulk of women's employment in philosophy is fixed-term contracts, casual teaching and research positions. The long-term impact of short-term employment is a heavy teaching and research assistant load, without the secure employment necessary to conduct original research or produce quality publications, thus establishing a distinct disadvantage for these female philosophers in a competitive environment.

The Deakin Philosophical Society rightly prides itself on being a society aimed at students. Perhaps the employment statistics are irrelevant or uninteresting. I hope the following interests *all* DPS members. Female students make up 55% of Bachelor courses. In philosophy streams, female enrolment for first year philosophy units is 57% (2001-2006), the percentage gradually declining to

⁴ All figures and data taken from the Improving the Participation of Women in the Philosophy Profession (IPWPP) report, commissioned in 2007 with the support of the University of Wollongong and the Australasian Association of Philosophy. Report tabled at the AAP AGM, 2008. Can be found online at <http://www.aap.org.au/women/reports/index.html>

39% at doctoral research level. At doctorate research level, the participation rate is slightly higher than the wider PhD population (35% - 2005/2006).

So here is my question – If 57% of students in first year philosophy units are women, where are the women in the DUSA affiliated Deakin Philosophical Society? Could it be that young women find themselves ‘strangers’ in a club which chooses to discuss as light-hearted entertainment a Vanity Fair article called – ‘why women aren’t funny’?