

Women in philosophy in Britain

The good news and the bad

The Society for Women in Philosophy has now been in existence in Britain for over a decade. During this time a great deal has been achieved in terms both of the increased publication of feminist philosophy and the encouragement and support of philosophical work of all kinds by women within the academy. SWIP has held conferences and workshops (small- and large-scale) every year in different regions of Britain and also produced the *Women's Philosophy Review* (previously the *SWIP Newsletter*) twice a year, which is an invaluable source of information about recent publications and events. Two of the key features of SWIP are that its membership is drawn from philosophers at all stages of their career and many do philosophical work in the context of other disciplines (politics, education, theology, literary studies, etc.) or outside the academy altogether. The *Review* has no editorial line and welcomes contributions from women working in any philosophical tradition. The main purposes of SWIP are to provide all women working in philosophy with a forum for the discussion of their work, and to assist the networking process between women philosophers with shared interests. Through these means SWIP offers help to women struggling to find a place in a male-dominated profession.

In order to ascertain the current situation of women working in philosophy in Britain, SWIP carried out a survey of its members in 1995/6. The preliminary findings suggest that, in spite of the growing body of work by women philosophers (including, but not exclusively, feminist philosophy), an increase in women postgraduates and in the number of publications and other activities in which SWIP members have been involved over the past ten years, the position of women in philosophy, from graduate students to academics, remains marginal and embattled. The survey enquired about attitudes to feminist philosophy encountered by respondents, as well as their employment situation and

career development. As with all surveys based on a relatively small and self-selected sample (75 – half of SWIP members), it would be wise to treat the results with caution; nevertheless there is sufficient pattern in the responses to give cause for concern about the following:

1. The kinds of philosophy in which women are more likely to specialize (feminist philosophy, but also 'applied', ethical and political, Continental) tend to be looked down on within some philosophy departments as not 'real' philosophy.
2. If you are a woman it is easier to have a career and pursue research interests in philosophy *outside of* philosophy departments, particularly if you are interested in feminist philosophy.
3. Philosophy departments are male-dominated, and so are appointments and promotion interview panels. It is easier for women to be successful where there are women already in post and involved in interview and selection processes.

The picture is a dispiriting one. It is worth noting, however, that ten years ago the resistance of the philosophical academy to both women and feminist philosophy would probably not even have been noticed, since there were fewer women on the scene and very few researching into feminist philosophy at all. Nevertheless, it is important to ask what the reasons are for the philosophical establishment still being, apparently, so closed to women. This is a very difficult question to answer, partly because it is impossible to gauge the extent to which philosophy departments reflect patterns common to a whole range of disciplines. It is also important not to discount the ways in which women are still more likely than men to have to take career breaks or to do part-time rather than full-time work. However, there do seem to be things that are peculiar to philosophy departments: while part of the explanation lies with outright misogyny, it would seem that a

great deal has to do with the narrowness with which many departments continue to define their discipline. Until there is a more general openness as to what counts as philosophy in the British philosophical

establishment, women will continue to be at more of a disadvantage than male colleagues, in a situation in which gaining a Ph.D and then a permanent job is difficult for anyone, male or female.

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Feminist philosophy in Israel

Feminist philosophy in Israel hardly exists, and those few scholars who do embrace feminist considerations find themselves fighting for the philosophical legitimacy and seriousness of their theoretical and practical choices. Why is this? Clearly it is never easy to introduce new approaches into an old discipline. However, I want to suggest that one particular reason for this attitude towards feminist philosophy is connected to the position of intellectuals in Israeli politics.

Israeli society lives with a constant feeling of risk, with a fear for its own survival. Every event or political decision is seen in relation to this fear – the fear of making a fatal mistake. The recent elections in Israel polarized the issue of the peace process into two camps: either it is seen as the only way to a safer life or it is seen as suicide. In this kind of political atmosphere the role of the intellectual is a very difficult one. On the one hand, a cultural arena that does not participate in any way in political discussion loses an important rationale for its existence and seems insignificant. On the other hand, political participation is all or nothing, when taking one side means losing general legitimation and acceptance. The rules of this manic political discourse apply to each individual immediately.

For philosophers, identification with one particular set of political players in this volatile arena would mean the loss of what they perceive to be the uniqueness of their theoretical tool: general applicability. The result is that much philosophical practice in Israel relies on a gap between theoretical interests and 'private', non-professional, political activity. It is this gap that protects the autonomy of philosophy within discourse more generally. But feminism endangers this artificial separation of politics and philosophy. Feminist philosophy positions itself firmly in a political and cultural present, because being a feminist philosopher means taking into account some dimensions of

'reality' that are neither universal nor value-free. In Israel being a feminist philosopher also means thinking about those features of Israeli society that make it different from, say, Europe or America. The feminist philosopher in Israel has to participate in English-speaking philosophical discourses, but has also to remember and to remind others that there should be a part of philosophy that is 'made in Israel', that is grounded in the uniqueness of Israeli culture.

It is for this reason, I believe, that feminist philosophy has a hard time being accepted as 'real philosophy'. It puts into question the equation that makes philosophical practice in Israel possible: philosophy = the unlocalized. According to this equation, the political arguments and considerations that feminist philosophy insists upon seem like an unhealthy mixture of 'private' or particular political and cultural positions with the 'general' philosophical love of universal truth.

However, the picture is not so entirely black-and-white. There are some 'compensation structures' in the Israeli scene. Some aspects of liberal feminism can find legitimation as an extension of general philosophy. There is feminist work in law, for example, and groups of women in academia connected to women's organizations. In departments of philosophy, however, there is still precious little consideration of feminist philosophy.

Nevertheless, there is a new generation of students who read enough to know that this situation is absurd, and these women are trying to create a place for themselves in philosophy in Israel. They are creating new theoretical positions that will no longer be simply an application of a general philosophical theory, but the results of a philosophical problematization that has a place, a date, and a political effect.

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