



# Women and Deviance in Philosophy

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# Women and deviance in philosophy<sup>1</sup>

Helen Beebee

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## 1. Typicality, deviance and explanation

The central idea of this paper is that of deviance: the thought that standards of various sorts in philosophy are determined by what is ‘typical’ (the ‘typical’ philosopher being a man), and that, as far as those standards are concerned, women – ‘atypical’ philosophers – are therefore counted as deviant in some way.<sup>2</sup>

One problem with addressing the issue of the lack of female professional philosophers is that it is apt to engender the thought that it is women who are implicitly being told to change their ways, by becoming more like the typical (male) philosopher. This is an instance of a wider phenomenon that is nicely described by the psychologist Deborah Tannen:

Some women fear, with justification, that any observation of gender differences will be heard as implying that it is women who are different—different from the standard, which is whatever men are. The male is seen as normative, the female as departing from the norm. And it is only a short step — maybe an inevitable one — from ‘different’ to ‘worse’. Furthermore, if women’s and men’s styles are shown to be different, it is usually women who are told to change. (1990, 14)

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<sup>1</sup> Many thanks to Michelle Bastian, Wesley Buckwalter, Melinda Fagan, Katrina Hutchison, Fiona Jenkins, Phyllis Rooney and Jenny Saul, all of whom provided very helpful comments on earlier drafts of this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> Similar dynamics are doubtless at work with other minorities: the ‘typical’ philosopher, at least in the UK, is not only male but white and middle class. However I shall restrict my attention to gender in this chapter.

The thought that ‘the male is seen as normative’ in areas where the ‘typical’ person in a given area is deemed to be male is backed up in a study by Miller, Taylor and Buck (1991). Their hypothesis was that when explanations are offered for differences between the behaviour of typical and atypical members of a given class, those explanations tend to focus on the behaviour of the atypical members. A preliminary study ascertained that the ‘typical’ US voter tends to be thought of as male. Subjects were asked to imagine the characteristics of ‘the typical American voter’ and either to assign a name or to assign a gender to their imagined typical voter. 82% of subjects assigned a male name, and 72% described the typical voter as male – and these percentages did not differ significantly between male and female subjects (*ibid.*, 7).<sup>3</sup> In a further study, subjects were asked to explain differences in turnout between male and female voters in US elections.

The results of the study confirmed the hypothesis. Explanations provided by the subjects were coded as ‘female’ – that is, focussed on explaining why women were more/less likely to vote (e.g. ‘perhaps women vote less frequently because the electoral system is a less viable means for change for women in society’) or ‘male’ (e.g. ‘men are more concerned about and hence involved with the power structure and economy’). The mean number of female explanations per subject was 1.45, and the mean number of male explanations was 0.4. Moreover, subjects were also asked: ‘If the gender gap were to disappear, would it more likely be due to: (a) men’s turnout rate becoming like that of women’s, or (b) women’s turnout rate becoming like that of men’s?’. 85% of respondents gave the latter answer: a result reminiscent of Tannen’s claim that ‘it is usually women who are told to change’.

In a further study, subjects were asked to explain the discrepancy between the number of doctor visits per year between men and women elementary school teachers (where women are regarded as typical) or college professors (where men are regarded as typical). There were more male explanations when the group was identified as elementary school teachers, and fewer female explanations, than there were when the

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<sup>3</sup> I ran an unscientific version of this preliminary study in my first-year logic class. In a class of around 100 students, about 50% of whom were female, students were asked to imagine the typical student who is good at logic, and either to assign a gender to them or to give them a name. 93% of responses assigned a male name and 76% described the typical good-at-logic student as male.

group was identified as college professors. Again, then, it was the behaviour of the atypical members of the group that was generally deemed to require explanation.

What applications does this result have for the issue of the underrepresentation of women in philosophy? In the rest of this paper, I explore two very different areas in which women might be thought to be the ones who need to change. In §2, I discuss the combative style of informal discussion that is prevalent in philosophy. I argue that there is a clear distinction between style and content when it comes to philosophical discussions, and that an overly combative seminar style serves no philosophical purpose and may be alienating to (some) women. Failure to make this distinction naturally leads to the view that objecting to such a combative atmosphere amounts to holding that women just can't cut it in the philosophical battleground: an instance of the view that it is women who are deviant and therefore need to raise their game.

In §3, I discuss empirically discovered differences in philosophical intuitions between men and women in the context of Wesley Buckwalter and Stephen Stich's (m/s) hypothesis that these differences play a role in the dwindling proportion of women at successive levels of undergraduate study. I argue that philosophical and pedagogical recommendations for the teaching of areas of philosophy where intuitions play a major role, and where significant gender differences emerge, come together. On the philosophical side, there are no grounds for ignoring significant differences in intuitions across different sub-populations of speakers; and on the pedagogical side, dealing sensitively with such differences (as opposed to, say, telling students who have 'atypical' intuitions that they are wrong) may, if Buckwalter and Stich are right, play a role in stemming the flow of female undergraduates away from philosophy courses. Attempts to lessen the 'selection effect' that Buckwalter and Stich hypothesise would thus be philosophically as well as pedagogically legitimate.

## **2. The seminar as a philosophical battleground**

There are easier and harder issues to discuss when trying to make some progress on the question of why the proportion of women in philosophy drops off in the way that it does. Easier issues, in a sense to be explained, include those discussed by Jenny Saul in her contribution to this volume: implicit bias and stereotype threat. Very roughly, implicit bias involves regarding or treating people differently solely on the basis of their membership of a particular group (e.g. rating a CV with a male name attached higher than the same CV with a female name attached). Stereotype threat is

the negative effect such biases (whether real or imagined) have on the member of the group herself (e.g. girls who are told to colour in a picture of a doll rather than a landscape do worse on math tests because this reminds them that they are girls and they are aware that girls are stereotypically worse at math than boys).

These are ‘easy’ issues in the sense that (a) there is a considerable body of evidence that people in general – and so philosophers in particular – are subject to these phenomena; and, more importantly, (b) we can accept that implicit bias and stereotype threat exist, and suggest practical ways in which they might be mitigated or overcome, without even having to ask the hard question whether the relevant stereotype (‘women are generally worse at philosophy than men’, say) is true. The question whether a particular stereotype is true is a hard question for at least two reasons. First, stereotypes tend to be rather vaguely specified (what counts as being ‘better’ at philosophy?), and second, given the pervasiveness of stereotype threat it is unclear how the truth of the stereotype could be established in practice, since any evidence that we might take to confirm the stereotype may itself be a result of stereotype threat. To use a familiar example, I don’t know whether it’s true that whites tend to outperform blacks on IQ tests, but let’s suppose for the sake of the argument that it is. This does not constitute evidence that whites are, on average, more intelligent than blacks, partly because it is unclear (to say the least) that IQ tests measure *intelligence* in the ordinary sense of the word (and hence the sense in play in the relevant stereotype), as opposed to the very specific cognitive skills that IQ test directly measure; and also because an IQ test is a paradigmatic stereotype-threat situation for blacks, so one would expect a black person with the same level of ability as a white person to get a lower score.

The point here is that, as I say, the ‘easy’ issues are easy partly because we can accept the reality of, and consider ways of mitigating, implicit bias and stereotype threat without having to ask the hard question, whether the relevant stereotype is true. For even if the stereotype *were* true, that would not in any way justify, for example, judging a particular woman’s job application more harshly than a similarly qualified man’s, or failing to attempt to reduce stereotype threat. (Even if girls were generally worse at maths than boys, that would be no reason not to take steps to ensure that girls perform to the best of their ability.)

One question that might seem to fall in the ‘hard’ rather than the ‘easy’ category is whether the culture of philosophical discussion is one that tends to alienate

women. I shall start by discussing what I think should be an obvious distinction between the style and the content of philosophical discussion. I then turn to discussing a couple of responses that an earlier – very brief – airing of this issue by me received; this will connect with the discussion of §1 above, as we shall see. Finally, I return to the apparently ‘hard’ question just raised and argue that it is, in fact, an ‘easy’ question, in the sense described above. Once we grant that combative and aggressive behaviours are culturally deemed to be masculine behaviours – independently of whether this is really true – the alienating effects of such behaviours can be seen to be a trigger for stereotype threat. And stereotype threat, as I have said, is *easy*. We do not have to ask whether men, or male philosophers, are naturally or culturally encouraged to be more aggressive or combative than women or than female philosophers; that question does not need to be answered in order to argue that a combative seminar style can be alienating for women.

In 2009, *The Philosophers’ Magazine* ran a story about the low proportion of women in UK philosophy departments, to which I contributed a couple of sound-bites. Here is a passage from the article:

Helen Beebee, a University of Birmingham lecturer and director of the British Philosophical Association (BPA) ... says her impression is that there are roughly equal numbers of men and women graduating with good bachelor degrees in philosophy and that the numbers of women start to drop off at MA level and then again at PhD level. Beebee says this tapering off of women may be at least partly caused by a culture of aggressive argument that is particular to philosophy and which begins to become more prominent at postgraduate level. ‘I can remember being a PhD student and giving seminar papers and just being absolutely terrified that I was going to wind up intellectually beaten to a pulp by the audience,’ she says. ‘I can easily imagine someone thinking, “this is just ridiculous, why would I want to pursue a career where I open myself up to having my work publicly trashed on a regular basis?”’ (Lewis 2009)

These comments provoked a somewhat unfriendly response on a couple of philosophy blogs, to which I shall return shortly. Rather than remove my head from above the parapet, however, I would like to explain just what I had in mind, and why I think there is a legitimate concern here.

There is an extent to which philosophy is, in its nature, an adversarial discipline. By and large, philosophers cannot prove any theorems; nor can we appeal to empirical data to justify our claims. Our arguments typically rely on assumptions that are not beyond reproach, and the arguments themselves often fall short of deductive validity. When we present a paper at a conference or seminar, normally we present such an argument; and our audience is entitled to assume that as far as we are aware, the argument starts from plausible premises and, given those premises, is reasonably convincing.

What we tend to find, however – and of course this is a large part of the point of presenting one’s work to an audience – is that the argument was less convincing than we realised. It often turns out that our premises are more controversial than we thought, or that we have equivocated at a crucial point, or that there is a counter-example to our conclusion, or that the argument licenses only a weaker conclusion than the one we have drawn, or whatever. And of course we only find these useful things out if people draw our attention to them. Hence the claim that philosophy is, to some extent, adversarial in nature: it is a large, and entirely proper, part of the philosophical enterprise to point out to people where they have gone wrong.

I do not object to any of this. What I want to claim, however, is that seminar discussions frequently enshrine a confrontational attitude that is entirely separable from the philosophical content of those discussions. There is all the difference in the world between, on the one hand, raising an objection in a friendly and constructive manner and, on the other, raising it in a manner (by choice of words, body language and so on) that suggests that you think the objection is just *obvious*, and hence that the speaker must not be very clever, having failed to spot it for themselves. Similarly, I am certain that most readers will have come across at least one philosopher who – if not kept on a sufficiently short leash by the chair – will continue to harangue the speaker on a particular point long after it is obvious to everyone in the room that the questioner’s criticism is a good one and that the speaker is not going to be able to think up a convincing off-the-cuff rejoinder. No philosophical purpose is served by this kind of behaviour.

Or consider how rarely members of the audience make constructive suggestions: ‘perhaps you could say this in response to the previous question’, or ‘actually maybe your argument licenses an even stronger conclusion’, or whatever; or how rarely participants preface their question with a compliment about the paper

(‘I enjoyed that’, or ‘I thought what you said about X was interesting’). Of course, some philosophers take the view that such niceties are social conventions that have no place in the robust pursuit of the truth. (I myself used to take that view, and still find it unnatural to put the speaker at their ease before launching into my objection – so much so that I unfortunately very rarely remember to do it.) But in a seminar setting social conventions are always in play whether we like it or not: truth cannot be pursued but through the medium of conversation, and conversation is a social phenomenon. And of course social conventions are not set in stone: in principle, we could choose to make the atmosphere in our seminars more supportive, and to regard the pursuit of truth is a matter of collaboration between speaker and audience rather than conflict.

Indeed, a more collaborative atmosphere may positively aid the pursuit of truth. I would bet that many audience members in seminars that have a combative atmosphere have questions that they would like to ask, but they do not do so because they are not completely confident that they have fully understood the point at issue and are afraid of looking ‘dumb’ (as opposed to looking ‘smart’ – see Saul (XX)). This is especially likely to be the case for research students and temporary staff who may assume that their performance will be taken into account in letters of reference or judgments of suitability for future posts in the department. But – in the absence of any reason to think there is a close correlation between being confident that one has understood the point and actually having understood the point – an atmosphere that encourages rather than discourages people to participate might well turn up some excellent points that would otherwise remain unheard. And the worst that can happen is that the questioner hasn’t understood, and a couple of minutes are spent setting them straight. This may not aid the collective pursuit of truth, but it certainly benefits the questioner – something that ought to be seen as a good thing and not merely a waste of everyone else’s time.

The idea that the philosophy seminar is to be seen as a form of combat is not, thankfully, explicitly embraced very often, so far as I can tell. But it does exist. An example that I gave in the *TPM* article is of a (senior male) member of staff keeping a tally of ‘home wins’ and ‘away wins’ on the whiteboard in his office, and initiating discussion in the pub (not in the presence of the speaker, I’m happy to say) of which category the most recent seminar fell under. (I think they were virtually all home wins.) Another example, I think – and a more common one – is the idea that it is a

philosophical weakness not to be able to think of an immediate, off-the-cuff decisive response to an objection, and instead to commit to giving the objection further thought later. The ability to think fast on one's feet is doubtless an intellectual virtue of sorts, but I can see no reason to think that it is a specifically philosophical virtue. The pursuit of philosophical truth is not hindered in any way by its taking someone a few hours, rather than ten seconds, to think of a plausible rejoinder. Similarly, I have been surprised by the extent to which responses that manifestly and deliberately do not answer the question posed, but rather speak to a slightly different, easier one, are favourably regarded, as though they constitute admirable strategic manoeuvres in the face of enemy forces. Again, no philosophical virtue is being exhibited here; quite the reverse, in fact.

The adversarial nature of philosophical discussion has been discussed at some length by feminist philosophers. Trudy Govier, for example, distinguishes between 'minimal' and 'ancillary adversariality', which more or less maps on to the distinction made above between content and style – minimal adversariality being the kind of adversariality I earlier described as part and parcel of the philosophical enterprise, and ancillary adversariality being the kind of aggressive and combative behaviour that is entirely separable from the robust pursuit of truth that philosophical argument is supposed to be aimed at (Govier 1999, especially 244-6).

Phyllis Rooney (2010), while broadly sympathetic to Govier's distinction, argues that even Govier's description of minimal adversariality enshrines an 'argument-as-war' metaphor that misdescribes the dialectical situation by using terms such as 'opponent' and 'conflict', and hence that the minimal/ancillary distinction (and perhaps by extension my content/style distinction) is 'more porous than we might initially think' (2010, 222):

War-like metaphors (shooting down points, attacking positions and persons, going after fatal flaws, and so on), often enacted more explicitly and problematically with ancillary adversariality, have their less bellicose cousins—but cousins still—in the minimal adversariality informing basic understandings and descriptions of argument and argumentation. They do so to the extent that ... we barely recognize them as such, even when they are characterizing argument situations in epistemically erroneous and confusing ways. (*ibid.*)

Part of Rooney's point, then, is that the argument-as-war metaphor cuts a lot deeper than is normally recognised.<sup>4</sup> Just one (but by no means the only) aspect of this is that we tend to conceive of face-to-face arguments in philosophy as things to be won and lost: 'I *lose* the argument and you *win* ... But surely I am the one who has made the epistemic *gain*, however small. I have replaced a probably false belief with a probably true one, and you have made no such gain' (2010, 222). Again, the thought here is that the way in which we often conceive seminar-based philosophical discussion is actually in tension with our own self-image as seekers after the truth: the *epistemic* gain that should be our goal is supplanted by the aim of winning the battle. Right at the start of my first-year logic course, I tell the students that the sense of 'argument' at work in logic in particular, and in philosophy in general, is different to the more usual sense of 'argument', as in 'having an argument with' someone. They would doubtless find that claim hard to square with the way in which many professional philosophy seminar discussions are actually conducted.

My favourite example of a hostile style – though admittedly not in the context of a seminar – is a blog response that the passage quoted above elicited from a professional philosopher:

Helen Beebee, though I'm sure you're a wonderful director of the BPA, please think of handing over the reigns [*sic*] ... you don't know the first thing about (a) the fallacious use of anecdotal evidence, (b) the problems of shitty causal inferences that (c) reinforce naturalist assumptions dominant in the culture. And (d) please tell me that you don't think the problem is that women can't cut it. Because men like getting their work trashed?

Or better: maybe if we had more women in place at various universities, you know, getting hired, as Saul suggests, we could find someone to head the BPA (male or female or non-normed gender) who can 'easily imagine' ways to work for different modes of philosophizing, say, as head of

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<sup>4</sup> As may be obvious, I only discovered (a small corner of) the large feminist philosophy literature on this topic after this paper was substantially written; hence I am doing little more than drawing the reader's attention to it here, rather than discussing it in detail. See Rooney 2010 for many additional references.

something like the BPA ... Now instead of asking – from what you can ‘easily imagine’ – what a PhD student would be thinking, how about asking about a culture that needs to be changed so you can ‘easily imagine’ this?<sup>5</sup>

The wonderful irony of this response is of course that it exhibits (in admittedly a rather extreme form) precisely the kind of culture of aggressive argument to which I was alluding: the response to the claim that ‘this tapering off of women may be at least partly caused by a culture of aggressive argument that is particular to philosophy’ is to accuse me of being, in effect, woefully ignorant and professionally incompetent.

Another blog post commenting on the article, by Brian Leiter, runs as follows:

... some female philosophers in the UK [suggest] that the aggressive, argumentative style of philosophy drives women out. A female philosopher ... found this ... explanation (quite correctly) demeaning to women ...<sup>6</sup>

This passage, it seems to me, fails to make just the distinction between style and content that I have been urging. Philosophy does – in its nature – have an ‘argumentative’ style in the sense that philosophical claims are established by means of argument, and seminar questions are normally themselves arguments to the effect that the speaker has made a false or unwarranted or ambiguous claim. But this does not, of course, entail that philosophical discussion is inherently, or ought to be, ‘argumentative’ in the ordinary sense of the word: pursued in a manner that is belligerent, competitive, nit-picking, or whatever. Nor, obviously, is there anything inherently ‘aggressive’ about an ‘argumentative’ style in the first sense: there are nicer and less nice ways of telling someone that she has appealed to an implausible premise, or that her view is subject to a counter-example, or whatever. So to describe ‘the’ style of philosophy as an ‘aggressive, argumentative style’ is to fail to

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted from [philosophyinatimeoferror.wordpress.com/2009/09/07/women-in-philosophy/](http://philosophyinatimeoferror.wordpress.com/2009/09/07/women-in-philosophy/) (accessed 11 August 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Leiter Reports, [leiterreports.typepad.com/blog/2009/10/situation-for-women-in-philosophy-makes-the-ny-times.html](http://leiterreports.typepad.com/blog/2009/10/situation-for-women-in-philosophy-makes-the-ny-times.html) (accessed 11 August 2010). I should point out that Leiter later published a clarification of the position I was defending (along the lines described here) at my request.

distinguish the argumentative substance of philosophical discussion from the aggressive style in which that argumentative substance is often pursued.

These two responses to the *TPM* article relate to the discussion in §1 of some findings in psychology. Recall that the point there was that explanations for the differences between ‘typical’ and ‘atypical’ members of a group (US voters and college professors, for example) tend to focus on features of the atypical group, with the assumption – explicit in the case of the experiment concerning US voters – that it is the members of the atypical group whose behaviour is deviant. (Recall that 85% of subjects thought that a change in the gender gap in voting behaviour would be due to the women’s turnout rate becoming like that of the men.)

It seems to me that this kind of phenomenon might lie behind the blog responses described above, in the following sense. The authors took me to be suggesting that ‘women can’t cut it’ in philosophy – a claim that is ‘demeaning to women’. This interpretation seems to presuppose that an aggressive style is somehow inherent in the philosophical enterprise. I have already argued that that is a mistake; however, the question is, why would someone make that mistake? One answer might be that what is *in fact* a typical feature of philosophical discussion is implicitly assumed to be a *good* thing: the typical feature (viz, an aggressive argument style) is seen as ‘normative’ (to use Tannen’s expression). This being so, my suggestion that that typical feature might be off-putting to women is then read as claiming that women are deviant – they depart from the norm. And, as Tannen says, ‘it is only a short step — maybe an inevitable one — from “different” to “worse”’. Hence the inclination to read my suggestion as ‘demeaning’ to women – an interpretation that, as should be obvious, was not intended.

I have not yet addressed the question with which I started this section: whether the somewhat combative atmosphere of (what is in my experience) the typical philosophy seminar is, in fact, one that tends to alienate women. This is of course an empirical question; and it may seem to fall into the ‘hard’ category identified earlier, since it would appear to be a question about the *truth* of a stereotype (the stereotype in this case being that women are more averse to aggressive styles of argument than men are). But I want to suggest that the first question can be answered affirmatively without addressing the question about the *truth* of the stereotype. So the relationship between the two questions is a little like the relationship between ‘do girls tend to perform worse than boys in math tests?’ and ‘are girls worse than boys at math?’. The

answer to the first question is ‘yes’ (in stereotype threat-provoking situations at least) – and this is so independently of whether the answer to the second question is ‘yes’ or ‘no’.

As with the math test case, we need to set the issue in the context of the kinds of psychological influences to which female students (and staff) are exposed to outside of the seminar room. As Saul argues in her contribution to his volume, implicit bias is a pervasive feature of working environments, and there are no grounds for thinking that the philosophy seminar room is an exception. In addition, however, there is evidence that a range of more specific biases are at work within the sciences; and, as a discipline that bears some similarity to the sciences – both (at least in some areas of philosophy) intellectually and (in most areas) in terms of the under-representation of women – it is reasonable to assume that similar biases are at work in philosophy. In particular, there is plenty of empirical evidence that in the sciences, women are typically exposed to a vast array of influences that can make them feel uncomfortable, or even unwanted, in their chosen discipline (see Seymour and Hewitt 1997 and Margolis and Fisher 2003). These influences start early and can persist through their studies and beyond, and include not only implicit biases of various kinds (women are inherently worse at science; female science students are less attractive than their arts counterparts; women who do well get there through sheer hard work (bad) rather than natural aptitude (good); etc.) but also, in some cases, outright sexism from their peers and teachers.

Of course, the circumstances of philosophy are not identical to those of sciences such as mathematics, engineering and computer science. For example, as far as I know, philosophy doesn’t have the ‘geek’ image that mathematics, physics and computer science have; and philosophy is perhaps not seen as an intrinsically solitary, anti-social activity in the way that computer science is seen. So in these respects, philosophy may be less stereotypically ‘male’ than some of the sciences. On the other hand, the (by now historically uncontroversial) conception of reason as a distinctively male attribute is likely to play more of a role in philosophy than in other disciplines, including the sciences.<sup>7</sup> This is partly because reasoning *simpliciter* (as opposed to,

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<sup>7</sup> See for example Genevieve Lloyd’s *The Man of Reason: ‘Male’ and ‘Female’ in Western Philosophy* (1984). See also Sally Haslanger’s (2008) application of Virginia Valian’s (1998) notion of a ‘schema’ to the case of philosophy.

say, mathematical reasoning) is – or is generally regarded as – the cornerstone of philosophical methodology (or at any rate, it is in the areas of philosophy that I am familiar with), and partly also because reason is itself a part of the subject matter of philosophy.

Nor, in my experience, are professional philosophers in general prone to overt sexism; but it does exist. In particular, we need to remember that even if professional philosophers are immune from overt sexism, our students may not be. Two examples spring to mind, both of which I heard from the female students concerned. First, a female Masters student, having presented a paper at a postgraduate conference – indeed she was the only female presenter – was told afterwards by a male student from a prestigious British university that her paper was ‘quite good for a girl’. Second, in a postgraduate seminar a male PhD student made more than one comment – audible to everyone – about the size of a female PhD student’s breasts. These comments were met with an uncomfortable silence – but no comment or intervention – from the other students (all male) or the (male) member of staff chairing the seminar. (This is not to say that he condoned the student’s behaviour; I suspect he was so shocked that he was literally lost for words. But of course the students may have interpreted his failure to intervene differently.)<sup>8</sup>

At least some female philosophers, then, will have been subject to these kinds of influences to a greater or lesser extent during their studies – on top of the usual implicit biases that appear to exist within the general population. In that context, and given that it is surely uncontroversial that aggression and competitiveness are culturally associated with a masculine environment, exhibiting those traits in philosophical discussions is liable to provoke stereotype threat.

In her contribution to this volume, Saul focuses on the effects that stereotype threat has on performance (see Saul, §2.5, for a nice anecdotal description of the experience and effect on performance of stereotype threat in the seminar room). Here, however, I want to focus not on any effect on seminar performance that stereotype

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<sup>8</sup> Doubtless we would all like to think that cases such as these are rare and unfortunate exceptions to the normally entirely non-sexist behaviour of our colleagues and students. (For more such rare and unfortunate exceptions, see [beingawomaninphilosophy.wordpress.com](http://beingawomaninphilosophy.wordpress.com).) We might even believe that such behaviour would never take place in our own institution. However, it’s worth asking oneself how likely one would be to find out about it if it *did* happen in one’s own institution.

threat might engender (failing to give good answers to questions, say, or being less fluent in one's presentation), but on its broader psychological effects.

If you are a professional philosopher, consider the number of occasions in your professional life that you have been in a situation in which you have been the only member of an easily identifiable social category. If you are white, able-bodied and male, the answer is likely to be 'hardly ever'. If you are a woman (or black, or disabled), the answer is likely to be 'more times than I can count'.<sup>9</sup> Such situations might include, for example, being the only female candidate being interviewed for a job, being the only woman in the seminar room, being the only female member of staff in one's department, being the only female speaker at a conference, and being the only woman on a university committee.

Such situations are ones in which stereotype threat is a very real possibility, and it can manifest itself in a number of ways. First, you can feel that you are *representing* women philosophers in general. You might feel that a bad performance in a job interview, say, if you're the only female candidate, will simply reinforce the relevant stereotype, and of course this is probably not something you will want to happen. So – independently of whether your performance is affected – you are under additional pressure, relative to your male peers. As Claude Steele notes:

when you realise that this stressful experience is probably a chronic feature of the setting for you, it can be difficult for you to stay in the setting, to sustain your motivation to succeed there. Disproving a stereotype is a Sisyphean task; something you have to do over and over again as long as you are in the domain where the stereotype applies. (2010, 111)

Second, stereotype threat can operate in unconscious ways. Steele notes that when black students who underperformed in a stereotype threat situation were asked about how they felt while performing the test, they 'reported no more anxiety than those not under stereotype threat' (2010, 117). But when the standard physiological indicator of stress and anxiety is measured – raised blood pressure – it turns out that those in stereotype threat situations do indeed show raised blood pressure (2010, 118-

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<sup>9</sup> Of course there are more relevant social categories than I have listed here. In the UK, for example, one might add: having a strong working-class or northern English accent.

9). Moreover, there is a correlation between cognitive load and stability of heartbeat: the greater the cognitive load, the more stable the heartbeat. Again, those in stereotype threat situations display a more stable heartbeat than those who are not, indicating that stereotype threat induces an additional cognitive load. As Steele puts it, ‘our minds race ... We are defending ourselves and coping with the threat of being stereotyped. We’re probably aware of some of this defending and coping. But much of the time we may miss it, unless we try very hard to listen’ (2010, 123).

Let’s put all of this together. By and large, given the general lack of women in philosophy from postgraduate level onwards, and given that philosophy itself is an arena within which being female constitutes a negative stereotype, philosophy seminars are already pretty likely to be stereotype threat situations for women. Add in a dose of aggressive – and thus stereotypically male – behaviour (remember: it doesn’t matter whether or not the stereotype is *true*), and you make the situation worse for the women in the room by drawing attention to their gender, thereby increasing the threat. (Remember, doing or saying anything that might suggest that you think women are worse at philosophy than men is *not* needed, any more than seven-year-old girls need to be told that girls are worse at maths in order to underperform on the maths test. They just need to be reminded that they are girls.) You may or may not thereby cause them to underperform, or to keep the question they really want to ask to themselves, but you will probably increase their stress levels, whether they are aware of it or not. Add the fact that female graduate students in the room will be imagining themselves being the future target, as a speaker, of this kind of behaviour. Now repeat on a regular basis. Arguably, what you have is a recipe, or at least a part of a recipe, for discouraging women from staying in the profession. As Steele says, ‘when you realise that this stressful experience is probably a chronic feature of the setting for you, it can be difficult for you to stay in the setting, to sustain your motivation to succeed there’.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Of course, it’s an empirical question which (if any) situations trigger stereotype threat, and exactly what effects that has (if it exists) on women philosophers. However, the phenomenon has been found in a wide range of social groups (including white males) and stereotypes (from sporting prowess to mathematical ability) – see Steele 2010 – so there is every reason to think that it applies to philosophy. I am of course speculating about which specific situations trigger stereotype threat, but the seminar would seem to meet the required conditions.

The hard question remains, of course: do women in fact, in general – or perhaps just more often than their male colleagues – find the aggressive and competitive atmosphere that is often present in the philosophy seminar uncongenial, independently of any effect it may have via stereotype threat? I do not know the answer to that question. I myself do not enjoy being on the receiving end of aggressive and competitive behaviour, and, unlike Brian Leiter’s anonymous source, do not feel in the least bit demeaned by that confession. On the contrary: on my own personal list of thick moral concepts, these both fall under ‘vice’ rather than ‘virtue’. I cannot, of course, speak for others. But my point here has been that there are grounds for thinking that such an atmosphere is alienating for women – and hence good reasons to attempting to change the atmosphere of the seminar room when it is aggressive or competitive – whatever the answer to the hard question; so it is one that we can simply allow to lapse. The role of such an atmosphere in the pursuit of truth is, at best, neutral; at worst, it runs the risk of putting women off philosophy – thereby reinforcing the stereotype that philosophy is a man’s world.

### **3. Conceptual analysis, experimental philosophy, and deviant intuitions**

In this section, I switch attention to the fields of conceptual analysis and experimental philosophy. I shall summarise some findings in recent studies concerning gender differences in philosophical intuitions when it comes to standard philosophical thought experiments, and briefly discuss the importance of these findings for understanding one possible route to disengagement from philosophy by female undergraduates. I’ll argue that, from both philosophical and pedagogical points of view, the findings strongly suggest that we should be wary of dismissing the intuitions of our students when they differ from our own. We have good reasons not to treat students with differing intuitions as though they are obviously mistaken or wrongheaded or just don’t get it: from a philosophical point of view, we should not think of philosophical intuitions as akin to experimental observations, since this (modulo certain assumptions) is incompatible with the finding that there are significant gender differences in intuitions. And, pedagogically, treating students’ ‘deviant’ intuitions in this way is likely to discourage some able students, and perhaps more women than men.

A standard project in analytic philosophy since the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century has been that of conceptual analysis: the project of discovering the meanings of ordinary-

language expressions that are philosophically interesting or problematic (‘morally wrong’, ‘free’, ‘knowledge’, ‘cause’, and so on). A standard part of the methodology for finding a plausible conceptual analysis of a given term is the deployment of ‘intuition’, often in the context of a thought experiment. Thus for example Edmund Gettier (1963) argued that knowledge is not (contrary to received philosophical opinion at the time) a matter of justified true belief on the basis of a thought experiment in which, as every undergraduate knows, Smith has the justified true belief that Jones owns a Ford but, intuitively, does not *know* that Jones owns a Ford. Such intuitions are generally arrived at from the armchair, and their claim to being ‘normal’ or reliable or widely shared is typically measured by the rather dubious method of stating what, ‘intuitively’, is the right thing to say, and then sitting back and waiting to see whether anyone objects.

Recently, however, ‘experimental philosophy’ has become hugely popular. One (though not the only) aspect of experimental philosophy is, precisely, to put standard thought experiments to the test, to ascertain whether, or to what extent, philosophers’ armchair claims about what is intuitively correct or plausible (e.g. the claim that Smith does not know that Jones owns a Ford) are, in fact, widely shared in the general population (or rather, typically, in populations of undergraduates taking philosophy classes). The thought here – plausibly enough – is that if a philosopher is making a claim about the meaning of an ordinary-language term (such as ‘knows’), then that claim will only be plausible if in fact sufficiently many speakers of the language – and not merely some small number of professional philosophers who happen to be publishing papers on the topic – share their intuitions.

While it is perhaps not surprising that results of actual empirical experiments typically show that the general population (indeed even a group philosophy undergraduates) rarely delivers a unanimous verdict, one perhaps unexpected result has been that, in a range of cases, there are significant differences between different sub-populations. For example, Machery, Mallen, Nichols and Stich (2004) found that there are differences in philosophical intuitions between East Asians and Westerners when it comes to the intuitions that underpin standard competing theories of reference.<sup>11</sup> In a recent paper, Wesley Buckwalter and Stephen Stich (m/s) survey a

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<sup>11</sup> For a critical discussion of what exactly Machery *et al*’s experiments show, see Martí 2009.

large number of empirically-tested philosophical thought experiments that reveal significant differences in intuitions between men and women across a wide range of topics, such as knowledge, free will, physicalism and utilitarianism, and including standard cases such as the Trolley Problem, Brains in a Vat, and the Chinese Room. In a separate paper, Buckwalter (m/s) finds differences between men and women concerning whether moral features of a situation can determine causal and epistemic differences: roughly, men are more likely than women to judge moral features (in particular, whether the outcome is good or bad) to be irrelevant to attributions of causation or knowledge.

Buckwalter and Stich advance the hypothesis that this kind of phenomenon is at least partly responsible for the dwindling in women's enrolment in philosophy courses as they progress through their undergraduate programme. (They provide data for one US philosophy department, where the proportion of women drops from 46.2% in 100-level introductory courses to 29.3% in 400-level courses.) As they put it:

But now consider the predicament of a young woman in a philosophy class, who (like 71% - 75% of women in the Starbans and Friedman [m/s] study) does not find it obvious that the characters in Gettier vignettes do not have knowledge of the relevant proposition. Rather, her intuitions tell her that the Gettier characters *do* have knowledge, though her instructor, whether male or female, as well as a high percentage of her male classmates, clearly think she is mistaken. Different women will, of course, react to a situation like this in different ways. But it is plausible to suppose that some women facing this predicament will be puzzled or uncomfortable or angry or confused or just plain bored. If any or all of these alienating effects are the case, she may be less likely to take another philosophy course than a male student who (like 59% - 64% of the men in the Starbans and Friedman study) have the 'standard' intuitions that their instructor has, and who can actively participate in, and perhaps even enjoy, the project of hunting for a theory that captures 'our' intuitions. (m/s, §4)

Buckwalter and Stich thus suggest that 'part of the gender gap in academic philosophy can be explained as a *selection effect*' (*ibid.*). Given that the majority of a female undergraduate's teachers will be men, her intuitions have a higher chance than

do those of her male peers of conflicting with her teacher's intuitions; and of course the more philosophy courses she takes, the more frequently she is likely to encounter this phenomenon.

The extent to which this suggestion is plausible depends on a variety of factors. One important factor is the extent to which the gender difference in intuitions persists at the level of philosophy teachers. For example, take the intuitions about knowledge elicited by Starmans and Friedman. Exactly how much more likely is a female student's intuitive judgement than a male's to differ from those of her teacher? That depends on how likely it is that her teacher has the intuition that the Gettier case is (*contra* Gettier) a case of knowledge. If we assume that teachers' intuitions exhibit the same gender difference as students', the answer is: not much. Assume that 60% of male students and teachers, but only 30% of female students and teachers, think it is a case of knowledge, and that 25% of philosophy teachers are women. Then the chance that a female student's intuition will be the same as her teacher's is 48.7%, and the chance that a male student's intuition will be the same as his teacher's is only a bit higher: 50.7%. That would suggest that the selection effect is in fact not very significant.

On the other hand, very, very few philosophy teachers are likely to actually endorse the view that knowledge is, after all, justified true belief. If we assume that, say, 95% of philosophy teachers think that the Gettier case really isn't, intuitively, a case of knowledge – irrespective of their gender – then the selection effect is much more pronounced: the chance that a female student's intuition will be the same as her teacher's is 32%, and the chance that a male student's intuition will be the same as his teacher's is nearly twice as high: 59%. However, in other thought experiments, the intuitions that were more prevalent amongst female than male students have some claim (unlike in the Gettier case) to being the 'standard' intuition in the philosophical literature, specifically in the Brain in a Vat and Twin Earth thought experiments. In those cases, it is male students, rather than female, who are statistically more likely to have different intuitions to their teachers.

While the investigation of both the relative extent and the effects of 'intuition clashes' between female students and their teachers has a long way to go yet, for the purposes of the rest of this chapter I shall assume both that such intuition clashes are

more prevalent amongst female students than amongst their male peers,<sup>12</sup> and that Buckwalter and Stich are right in claiming that this plays a role in explaining the drop-off of female students as they progress through their undergraduate career.<sup>13</sup> My interest in the rest of this chapter will be in the philosophical consequences and pedagogical recommendations that arise from this assumption.

Let's begin with the philosophical consequences. Intuitions that have different rates of prevalence amongst different subpopulations (whether distinguished according to gender, ethnic background, or whatever) are philosophically problematic.<sup>14</sup> On the one hand, intuitions are often taken to be analogous to scientific observation; as Ernest Sosa puts it, 'the way intuition is supposed to function in epistemology and in philosophy more generally ... is by analogy with the way observation is supposed to function in empirical science' (2009, 107; quoted in Buckwalter and Stich *m/s*, §4). This conception of the role of philosophical intuition encourages the view that one's own considered intuitions, or perhaps those of the majority, are the right ones to have, and so anyone who disagrees is making a mistake: perhaps they have, as Ned Block nicely puts it, a 'tin ear' (see Buckwalter and Stich *m/s*, n.24). On the other hand, one would not want to respond to variation between subpopulations by adopting an 'anything-goes' view, according to which all intuitions are equally valid.

One compelling reason for wanting to avoid the latter response – the 'anything-goes' view – as a general principle is that some 'folk' intuitions are simply

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<sup>12</sup> I have been persuaded by Louise Antony that this assumption is a lot more contentious than I had previously thought; nonetheless, I think it is worth exploring its consequences, even if, ultimately, it turns out to be mistaken.

<sup>13</sup> Of course, this only applies in cases where (unlike, say, most English universities) undergraduates can choose between philosophy and non-philosophy courses. However, if Buckwalter and Stich are right about such cases, then presumably at universities where students are locked in to their philosophy degree programme at an early stage, the selection effect will be present but will have a delayed practical effect: women students cannot vote with their feet until they graduate and decide whether to continue to graduate study in philosophy. In the UK, there is a markedly lower proportion of women studying philosophy at Masters level than the proportion who get an undergraduate degree (see [\*REF to earlier stats here]).

<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the mere fact that intuitions vary amongst the general population is itself philosophically problematic: ignoring gender differences, if only about half of philosophy undergraduates think that Smith doesn't know that Jones owns a Ford, where does that leave the claim that it is intuitively compelling that knowledge isn't justified true belief?

not apt for accommodation in any remotely plausible philosophical theory. One example – presented but not discussed in Buckwalter and Stich’s paper – comes from a study by Zamzow and Nichols (2009) involving the Trolley Problem. Subjects are presented with a vignette in which five people can be saved by flipping a switch, thereby diverting a runaway train onto a side track, which would unfortunately result in the death of one person who is standing on the side track and would not have time to get out of the way. Should you sacrifice the one for the sake of the five? In one version of the case, subjects were asked to imagine that the person standing on the side track was their brother or sister. The results showed a gender difference: when responding to the claim ‘it is morally acceptable for me to pull the switch’ on a scale from 1 (‘strongly disagree’) to 7 (‘strongly agree’), men’s ratings were on average lower in the brother case than were women’s, and vice versa in the sister case. Of course, no sensible moral theory will endorse the claim that if you’re a woman it is better to save your sister than your brother, but if you’re a man the reverse holds. Whatever the psychological explanation for the difference displayed by Zamzow and Nichols’ subjects, the resulting intuitions are unsuited for taking as data on the basis of which to formulate a philosophical theory.

A second reason for resisting the ‘anything-goes’ view – or rather, a motivation for resisting it – is that it leaves the whole project of conceptual analysis in a very difficult position. If we take seriously the differences in intuition between men and women (or Westerners and East Asians, or whoever) concerning, say, knowledge, it seems that we are forced to conclude that there is no univocal concept of knowledge, such that *it* is susceptible to conceptual analysis.

Whether that is indeed the conclusion we should draw – and whether, or to what extent, a very standard ingredient of the method of analytic philosophy therefore needs to be revised or abandoned – is not a question I intend to try and resolve here. I myself remain optimistic that conceptual analysis still has a legitimate and important role to play in philosophical method. On the other hand, given the apparently pervasive gender differences in intuitions, it seems that it would be unwise, philosophically speaking, to take for granted the view that philosophical intuition is, as Sosa suggests, akin to scientific observation. For that would seem to lead us either to a kind of relativism that most analytic philosophers would not want to endorse – basically, in the current context, the view that men and women literally speak different languages (e.g. they mean different things by ‘know’) – or else to the view

that either male or female students are more susceptible to having a tin ear. And of course it's hard to see how this latter view might be justified on either philosophical or empirical grounds. In particular, there is no independent way of establishing *which* of the rival intuitions is the 'wrong' one: one cannot, unfortunately, make an appointment with the intuition-equivalent of an optician and take a tin-ear test.

If the claim that intuitions should not be conceived as akin to scientific observation is right, then – fortunately – it motivates a pedagogical approach to thought experiments and intuitions that might help to mitigate the 'selection effect' hypothesized by Buckwalter and Stich. We can take care to make it clear to students that minority intuitions, or ones that conflict with our own, are not thereby automatically mistaken or indicative of a tin ear, for example by not saying 'obviously ...', or 'you'd be crazy to deny that ...'. We can take the time to explore the philosophical implications of their intuitions rather than dismissing them and moving on. (For example, if you teach Gettier in such a way as to suggest that those students who think that Smith knows that Jones owns a Ford have a tin ear, that's likely to be around 40% of your male students and 60% of your female students who are in danger of thinking that they are tin-eared and therefore unsuited to philosophical study.) Or, at least, we can point them in the direction of respectable philosophical literature that sides with them rather than us.

These are small adjustments to class discussion, curricula and reading lists that anyone can implement without too much difficulty. To the extent that students are likely to become alienated or confused by the implication that their intuitions are off-key, they are adjustments that will benefit a sizeable proportion of students, whatever their gender, ethnicity, or whatever (again, if you're teaching Gettier to entry-level philosophy students, about half of the class simply won't find it obvious that Smith doesn't know that Jones owns a Ford). If they also help to reduce the sense that women in philosophy are 'deviant' – in this case by having the wrong intuitions – then that is surely a good thing.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This chapter has made two really quite small recommendations, which may be summed up as: 'no aggressive behaviour in the seminar room, please' and 'don't casually dismiss the intuitions of your students when they disagree with you'. In the first case, the aggressive, competitive, and occasionally downright hostile atmosphere

in professional philosophy seminars is, I have argued, a contingent feature of (some) philosophical discussions: it is entirely separable from robust philosophical criticism, and plays no useful role in the pursuit of truth. Failure to grasp this fact, I think, is – at least in some cases – due to an illicit slide between the normal and the normative: the discomfort that such an atmosphere can create in a speaker or audience member may not be statistically normal, but it is not thereby deviant in the normative sense that it is the discomfited person who is at fault for being inappropriately thin-skinned. And it is women who are the most likely to be discomfited, since it is women who, when situated in culturally masculine environment, are liable to be subject to stereotype threat.

In the second case, I have urged that non-standard intuitive responses to thought experiments should not automatically be regarded as deviant. To treat students' intuitions in the classroom as mistaken or a sign of philosophical bad judgement (or taste) is philosophically unjustified and pedagogically unwise, in that it risks alienating promising students from philosophy. Again, the danger of alienating women students may be greater than that of alienating male students, if the intuitions that are statistically more likely to be shared by male students are also the standard intuitions that are presupposed by the bulk of the philosophical literature. In other words, it may be women who are more likely to have 'deviant' intuitions: intuitions that differ from their teachers.

What connects the two issues is the notion of deviance, and in particular the idea that it is 'women who need to change'. Of course, women *do* need to change, inasmuch as female as well as male philosophers are well capable of contributing to an aggressive seminar atmosphere and dismissing their students' intuitions as tin-eared. But women who are on the receiving end of these phenomena do *not* need to change. There may be a powerful psychological connection between atypicality and deviance, but psychological connections need not correspond to objective connections; and where they do not, it is our thinking that needs to change.

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