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Philosophy, Sexism, Emotion, Rationalism

Nina Power

Something important is happening within and to Philosophy.¹ It is something that has happened a thousand times over, yet every time it repeats it happens as if for the first time. The difficulty is making this event stick. What is this event? The event of the disruption of Philosophy by its own outside, the outside that it pretends it does not have. Philosophy, by virtue of being the most universal subject, the most generic art, cannot imagine that there is something which it cannot capture or has not *already* captured, one way or another. But things fall apart. They fall apart a lot, and very quickly. I want to focus here on Philosophy as a discipline in its academic form, particularly in the UK and US, before turning to some of the claims made in the recent Xenofeminist manifesto² and the Gender Nihilism anti-manifesto³ regarding the feminizing of reason and the abolition of gender. I will ultimately agree with the Xenofeminist manifesto when it states that “[r]ationalism must itself be a feminism” and with the Gender Nihilist text when it argues that the subversion of gender is a dead-end. I want only to add

- 1 I have capitalized the word “Philosophy” throughout where I’m referring to it in its disciplinary, academic sense.
- 2 Laboria Cuboniks, “Xenofeminism: A Politics for Alienation,” <http://www.laboriacuboniks.net/qx8bq.txt>.
- 3 phoenixsinger, “Gender Nihilism: An Anti-Manifesto,” *libcom*, July 9, 2015, <https://libcom.org/library/gender-nihilism-anti-manifesto>.

that what usually gets sidelined and undermined as "emotion," and is frequently gendered as feminine or female, is *also* itself a rationalism, and that emotion and reason are in fact not mortal enemies, but rather inseparable branches of the collective experience of social and political life that Philosophy purports to address.

I want to focus on Philosophy in particular, not only because it is the subject I have studied since I was 18, nearly half my life, and taught in for the past ten years, as PhD student then as a lecturer. It is a subject and a way, or rather ways, of thinking that I have never left since I encountered it and it is hard to imagine I will move too far away from it, in whatever form that will take in the future. However, there is no doubt that Philosophy has a serious and a series of problems when it comes to sexism. A recent high-profile case, among many, concerns an American PhD student who had a relationship with a very high-profile moral philosopher. Towards the end of her anonymous account of her relationship with the philosopher, she addresses fears that he could sabotage her future career in the field, and reflects on the context in which Philosophy is taught at universities:

As a PhD student about to enter the world of professional philosophy, I now know better what I'm getting into. My hero, who regularly uses and condemns sexist practices in his lectures, said that Person N is not a real feminist, because she wears miniskirts when she gives lectures. He sat around with other renowned philosophers from the prestigious university in City Z, grumbling about how a stupid woman does not deserve her new prestigious university post. Now I understand better what they mean when they say that academic philosophy is a white boys' club. I am barely starting my career, but my eyes are already wide open.⁴

4 Anonymous, "I had an Affair with my Hero, a Philosopher who's Famous for being 'Moral,'" April 26, 2014, <http://thoughtcatalog.com/anonymous/2014/04/i-had-an-affair-with-my-hero-a-philosopher-whos-famous-for-being-moral/>.

When we are talking about sexism in Philosophy, there are multiple ways of considering the issue:

1. The subject itself: is Philosophy as a subject inherently sexist (and we could add racist: this is a “white boys’ club” as the student above notes)?
2. Is Philosophy sexist by omission, i.e., accidentally sexist, racist and that with a bit of work “the numbers” could improve over time?
3. Is Philosophy only contingently sexist in a different way, because of misconceptions relating to what the subject is — too difficult, too belligerent, etc.?

In her important 1982 essay, “Woman as Body: Ancient and Contemporary Views,” Elizabeth Spelman accuses Philosophy of a combination of somatophobia — that is, hatred of the body — and misogyny, as it is women who tend to be associated with the “loathed” body by male philosophers. Her focus, in part, is Plato and the mind/body distinction as it is this key division that sets the tone for much of what historically follows. She writes:

How a philosopher conceives of the distinction and relation between soul (or mind) and body has essential ties to how that philosopher talks about the nature of knowledge, the accessibility of reality, the possibility of freedom. This is perhaps what one would expect — systematic connections among the “proper” philosophical issues addressed by a given philosopher. But there is also clear evidence in the philosophical texts of the relationship between [how] the mind/body distinction, is drawn, on the one hand, and the scattered official and unofficial utterances about the nature of women, on the other.⁵

5 Elizabeth V. Spelman, “Woman as Body: Ancient and Contemporary Views,” *Feminist Studies* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 109–31, at 110.

Here Spelman makes a conceptual connection between Philosophy as a subject and misogyny — Philosophy as a subject is inherently anti-woman, because many male philosophers are. Women are implicitly or explicitly aligned with the body by Philosophy, leaving the mind/soul to be elevated above its bearer. The conceptual is personal.

Can we bring Spelman's argument about ancient thought to bear on today's questioning concerning the discipline of Philosophy and sexism? Can we explain why there are still so few women in Philosophy — numbers after undergraduate degrees (where 46% are women in the UK) drop off sharply with only around 29% of PhDs and 20% of permanent post-holders in Philosophy being women — putting it on a comparable level with maths, physics, and computer science — and very dissimilar number-wise to English and History.⁶ So it is clear that women in the first place aren't put off from studying the subject, but something happens at postgraduate level and beyond. Some have argued that Philosophy is off-putting because it is overtly combative, pedantic, and critical (although this wouldn't explain why a large number of female students choose to take the subject in the first place). Jonathan Wolff, UCL Philosophy Professor, in an article entitled: "How Can We End the Male Domination of Philosophy?" makes this well-worn argument and concludes by suggesting that "if philosophy is to be more 'gender friendly,' do philosophers have first to act, well, if not in more 'ladylike' fashion, then at least with greater decorum?"⁷ I find this suggestion somewhat patronizing, and the assumption that philosophers equal male in the first place unhelpful — I don't believe that women are inherently interested in "greater decorum" and certainly not when it comes to engaging with

6 See the careful report "Women in Philosophy in the UK: A Report by the British Philosophical Association and the Society for Women in Philosophy," Sept. 2011, http://www.bpa.ac.uk/uploads/2011/02/BPA_Report_Women_In_Philosophy.pdf.

7 Jonathan Wolff, "How Can We End the Male Domination of Philosophy?," *The Guardian*, Nov. 26, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2013/nov/26/modern-philosophy-sexism-needs-more-women>.

philosophical arguments. Certainly, I have encountered many male philosophers who behave unpleasantly, but this is because they appear to believe that as Philosophers they have a get-out-of-jail-free card regarding any kind of “normal” social behavior (civility, respect, compassion). But this has nothing to do with how we might argue *within* the discipline: it is perfectly possible to repeatedly enter a human bear pit and be a kind and gentle person as well — the problem is the social stuff, not necessarily the discipline stuff. But as someone who has never acted “ladylike,” nor do I think most women have, *not least because it doesn't mean anything*, I wonder about the value of promoting decorum *inside* the discipline: more important, perhaps, would be not acting in a hostile and dismissive manner to anyone perceived to be outside of it.

Hovering in the background of all this is a murky conglomeration of stereotypes and received wisdom. The British Philosophical Association and Society for Women in Philosophy joint report from 2011 suggests that

The point here is not that women are somehow less able to cope when aggressive behaviour is aimed at them, and so should be treated more gently than men. It is rather that aggressive behaviour, whoever it is aimed at, can heighten women's feeling that they do not belong by reinforcing the masculine nature of the environment within which they study and work.⁸

This is a clever and more subtle way of addressing a key issue — what does it mean to be constantly interpolated as an anomaly? What is masculinity in the context of Philosophy anyway? The problem here is less the stereotypes concerning women in Philosophy and more the unacknowledged, because faux-neutral, acceptability of tropes associated with masculinity. What happens when you stick out in this context? As the report states: “Stereotype threat is likely to be provoked where one is from a group that is negatively stigmatized in a certain

8 “Women In Philosophy in the UK,” 13.

context, one is in that context, and one's group membership is made salient,"⁹ i.e., being one of only a few women in a roomful of men is sufficient to make one's group membership salient. Given that this is routinely the case in Philosophy departments, I think recent efforts to identify stereotypes working the other way serve a useful function.

The jokey term "theory boy" has been around for a while, but serves to identify a specificity that usually passes itself off as a generality. As Toril Moi puts it in "Discussion or Aggression? Arrogance and Despair in Graduate School" from 2003, "Among graduate students there is often a feeling of depression, as if out of humiliation, or a feeling of disappointment, as if out of arrogance."¹⁰ She writes:

Every year some female graduate students tell me that they feel overlooked, marginalized, silenced in some seminars. They paint a picture of classrooms where the alpha males — so-called "theory boys" — are encouraged to hold forth in impossibly obscure language, but where their own interventions elicit no response.¹¹

Moi describes this situation in terms of symbolic capital, and following Bourdieu, describes "the relentless fight to become 'consecrated' as one of the legitimate heirs to institutional power and glory."¹² To become the heir of the concept appears to mean in practice the exclusion of those who are deemed to not belong to concepts as such — in this sense then, those marked out as "women" and non-white males are perpetually registered as being particular, rather than universal, even when making points in the "appropriate register." They cannot be heard because no one wants to listen. There is a kind of "double bind" of the uni-

9 Ibid.

10 Toril Moi, "Discussion or Aggression? Arrogance and Despair in Graduate School," *The Grind: Duke School Graduate Magazine* (July 2003): 1, http://www.torilmoi.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/Moi_Arrogance-and-despair_2003.pdf.

11 Ibid., 2.

12 Ibid., 1.

versal at play here, where those deemed minoritarian (even if, in a global sense, this isn't true) are encouraged to "play by the rules," to become bearers of the universal, the enlightened, the conceptual, the theoretical, for their own good and for the good of humanity as a whole. However, if they do they are somehow both no longer minoritarian (as any particularism magically vanishes) but also not really true players either, because suddenly the person sitting on the other side of the board has disappeared.

The recent "Xenofeminism Manifesto" (2015) takes up the challenge of the relationship between rationalism and universalism declaring that:

Xenofeminism is a rationalism. To claim that reason or rationality is "by nature" a patriarchal enterprise is to concede defeat. It is true that the canonical "history of thought" is dominated by men, and it is male hands we see throttling existing institutions of science and technology. But this is precisely why feminism must be a rationalism — because of this miserable imbalance, and not despite it. There is no "feminine" rationality, nor is there a "masculine" one. Science is not an expression but a suspension of gender. If today it is dominated by masculine egos, then it is at odds with itself — and this contradiction can be leveraged. Reason, like information, wants to be free, and patriarchy cannot give it freedom. Rationalism must itself be a feminism. XF marks the point where these claims intersect in a two-way dependency. It names reason as an engine of feminist emancipation, and declares the right of everyone to speak as no one in particular.¹³

While both acknowledging rationalism's male domination, and the way in which this holds science back, as well as the un-gendering, de-gendering, or a-gendering qualities of science, the Xenofeminist Manifesto nevertheless hankers after the voice from nowhere represented by the final line: "the right of everyone to speak as no one in particular." What is the relationship

13 Cuboniks, "Xenofeminism," 0x04.

between speaking "as" no one and speaking from a marginalized position? Can we not do both? Feminist scientists and feminist philosophers of science are no less universalist or rationalist than male scientists, but they do not pretend to be speaking from nowhere, and, indeed, it is their feminist commitments that often reveal precisely what has been overlooked in earlier research. Patricia Gowaty, to give just one example, revolutionized the way in which aviary sexuality was conceived in her work on extra pair copulations and intraspecific egg dumping because she focussed less on male birds' cuckoldry and more on the strategies of the female birds she was studying.¹⁴

Another recent piece, "Gender Nihilism: An Anti-Manifesto" recently appeared online.¹⁵ Like the Xenofeminist Manifesto it is anonymously authored (the Xenofeminist manifesto is perhaps less anonymous than this piece, given the six-part collective name "Laboria Cubonics" and some high-profile associations with the text) and perhaps collectively written (certainly the use of "we" as authorial voice would indicate this). Like the Xenofeminist Manifesto, the Gender Nihilism Anti-Manifesto rejects essentialism of any kind, right through to the ontological realm: "Who we are, the very core of our being, might perhaps not be found in the categorical realm of being at all."¹⁶ Both the Xenofeminists and the Gender Nihilists declare themselves "gender abolitionists," but while the former argue that the actual eradication of "gendered" traits under patriarchy "could only spell disaster" and suggest instead, in a slightly techno-hippie way, that we should let "a hundred sexes bloom!," the Gender Nihilists go much further, arguing instead that:

We are radicals who have had enough with attempts to salvage gender. We do not believe we can make it work for us. We look at the

14 See Michelle Elekonich, "Contesting Territories: Female-Female Aggression and the Song Sparrow," in *Feminist Science Studies: A New Generation*, eds. Maralee Mayberry, Banu Subramaniam, and Lisa H. Weasel (London: Routledge, 2001), 103.

15 phoenixsinger, "Gender Nihilism: An Anti-Manifesto."

16 Ibid.

transmisogyny we have faced in our own lives, the gendered violence that our comrades, both trans and cis have faced, and we realize that the apparatus itself makes such violence inevitable.¹⁷

And, as if in response to the Xenofeminists' blooming of the sexes argument, suggest that in the current moment "it becomes tempting to embrace a certain liberal politics of expansion [...]. We have heard the suggestion that non-binary identity, trans identity, and queer identity might be able to create a subversion of gender. This cannot be the case"¹⁸ and furthermore, that "[i]nfinite gender identities create infinite new spaces of deviation which will be violently punished."¹⁹ There are similarities between the two texts, though, particularly around what the Xenofeminist text describes as "the right of everyone to speak as no one in particular." As the Gender Nihilism text states: "it is not merely certain formulations of identity politics which we seek to combat, but the need for identity altogether." While there may be subtle differences between speaking as the generic "nobody" and speaking from the position of the abolition of identity, there is a parallel need for an escape route from an overcoded set of identifications deemed to be partial from the standpoint of a universal that fails to recognize its own specificity (for how else could we describe masculinity)?

How then can the gender nihilist and the Xenofeminist positions help us understand what happens in Philosophy? If we understand "gendered violence" to include what often takes place within the discipline, we can understand that to try to make the subject more palatable for other genders on the basis of stereotypes about people gendered in these ways (women are less combative, let's make the subject more approachable) are highly likely to fail, even where they are attempted, which is nowhere. Far better might be to operate under conditions of extreme transparency and a comprehension of the operations of domi-

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

nance. As the anti-manifesto puts it: "The gender nihilist says 'I am a woman' and means that they are located within a certain position in a matrix of power which constitutes them as such."²⁰

But how does rationalism overall fare in the Xenofeminist and gender abolitionist universe? What would a rationalism stripped of its masculinist history look like? I want to claim that this rationalism must also be an emotionalism, that is to say, a neglect of the *rational* basis for anger, misery, hatred, love, care, and so on will likely end up reinstating old oppositions and with them, gendered presuppositions about where thought "belongs." Spinoza in the *Ethics* already teaches us this. And this understanding, above all, a social question, a practical question. As Ericka Tucker puts it in "Spinoza's Social Sage": "Few, if any, communities are organized through reason alone. Affects and the imagination are the primary modes through which humans interact and join their power."²¹ Gender is the violence done to both reason and emotion by virtue of separating the two along sexed lines. Philosophy need not be the victim of this.

But where are we now? As the Xenofeminists suggest at the moment "the notion of what is 'gendered' sticks disproportionately to the feminine."²² It follows then, that Philosophy must not become more "ladylike," whatever that might mean, but must abolish and overturn the oppositions (mind-body, emotion-reason) that have sustained its endeavor as protector of a masculinized set of knowledges and methodologies. Philosophy is not "hard" because it makes a particular subsection of humanity feel strengthened in their identity-that-pretends-not-to-be-one, but because life is hard, and Philosophy should address its difficulties openly and collectively.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ericka Tucker, "Spinoza's Social Sage: Emotion and the Power of Reason in Spinoza's Social Theory," *Revista Conatus* (July 2015): 12.

²² Cuboniks, "Xenofeminist Manifesto," oxE.