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## **PASSION AND ALIENATION: WOMEN AS STUDENTS OF PHILOSOPHY**

*Erika Ruonakoski*

In the field of philosophy, women have always been underrepresented as students and as professionals. The exact percentages of female students and professionals vary significantly from one country to another and even from one university to another, but, generally speaking, the proportion of women declines steadily from introductory courses to more advanced courses, doctoral studies, and the professional level. Data from Great Britain, Australia and the United States show that women formed roughly 50% of students in introductory courses of philosophy, 37% of those taking more advanced courses, and finally, no more than 28% of staff members. The percentage was even lower, 17% to 24%, if only full-time and permanent positions were taken into account<sup>1</sup>.

In the Nordic countries, which were the basic setting of my research, the tendency is similar. This brings us to the following questions: Why are women underrepresented? Are there some mechanisms of discrimination at work, or do women just happen to prefer other disciplines to philosophy? If the first alternative is true, how can we change this situation? Can it be changed by means of pedagogy?

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g. BEEBE and SAUL, 2011; BISHOP, 2013; DEMAREST et al., 2017.

An in-depth analysis of all of these questions did not fall in the scope of my research, which was a part of the Nordic Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership *Gender and Philosophy* and dealt with gender-sensitive pedagogy of philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Luckily, some research on women's opting out already existed, which I complemented with a small background survey on the experiences of students. On the basis of this survey, some interviews and other studies, I drew the conclusion that female philosophy majors, just like their male counterparts, tend to experience what could be called a passion for philosophy. Nevertheless, there are also several alienating factors that play a more important role in women's relationship to philosophy as an academic discipline than in that of men. For this reason, any pedagogy that attempts to promote equality in the field, has to deal with the sources of that alienation.

In the context of my broader research as well as in this article, the concept of "alienation," which is defined in a number of ways in theories such as Hegelianism, Marxism, existentialism, and psychoanalysis, should be understood primarily as a specific form of social alienation, an experience of "not quite belonging," "a sense of incongruence" or "dissonance"<sup>3</sup>. My analysis is likewise influenced by W. E. B. Du Bois's discussion of double-consciousness<sup>4</sup>. According to him, it is typical for an oppressed group (African Americans) to observe itself not only from the viewpoint of itself but also from the internalized viewpoint of the

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<sup>2</sup> *Gender and Philosophy* involved four Nordic universities: University of Iceland, Aalborg University (Denmark), University of Oslo (Norway), and University of Jyväskylä (Finland), which was my home institution. The main part of the project was carried out in 2016 and in 2017. This was when four summer schools on feminist philosophy were held in the four countries. I am grateful to the members of the academic board of the project, Antje Gimmler, Tove Pettersen, Martina Reuter, and Sigridur Thorgeirsdottir, who organized the summer schools and discussed their pedagogical insights with me. I expect to publish a more comprehensive work on the topic in the near future.

<sup>3</sup> See ALLEN et al., 2008, p. 164, 177, 185. DOTSON, 2012, p. 13–14.

<sup>4</sup> DU BOIS, 1903.

oppressor (white Americans). In *The Second Sex*<sup>5</sup>, Simone de Beauvoir applied this idea to describe the different aspects of women's situation. In my research, I followed Beauvoir by discussing the historical, emotional, social, bodily and moral aspects of the learning situation as they present themselves to female students and the professor, indicating the sources of alienation in those aspects.

Yet another important source of inspiration for my research was bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress*<sup>6</sup>, in which she analyses the varied power relationships in the classroom. Through her, my research is linked to feminist pedagogy as well as to Paulo Freire's ideas of dialogical learning and questioning of the political "neutrality" of education<sup>7</sup>.

These theories form the backbone of my broader research and of this article, but I do not discuss them here in further detail. Instead, I focus on the question of how to solve the problem of alienation in practice. To this end, I first present the experiences of students as described by themselves. After that I give a brief analysis of the potentially alienating aspects of studying philosophy. The end of the article deals with the pedagogical tools that might help dismantle the sources of students' alienation from philosophy.

## **1 EXPERIENCES OF LEARNING PHILOSOPHY**

In my small-scale background survey, about forty students described their experiences of learning philosophy. In addition, I

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<sup>5</sup> BEAUVOIR, 1949.

<sup>6</sup> HOOKS, 1994.

<sup>7</sup> E.g., FREIRE and RAMOS, 1972.

interviewed twelve philosophy majors, minors and graduates. In comparison to some other surveys on the attitudes of philosophy students, this background research had the advantage of letting the students formulate their ideas freely, in their own words.<sup>8</sup> It had its limitations, however, as my aim was mainly to search for pedagogically relevant questions and starting points. Almost all of the respondents and interviewees were from Europe and North America, and many of them had an interest in questions of gender. Despite this limited geographic scope, their answers are revealing and provide insight into how the discipline of philosophy is experienced in a range of academic settings, and what kind of empirical research could bring more light to the issue.

In the survey, the answers to two of the questions were particularly informative. These dealt with the aspects of philosophy that made students “like” or “dislike” it. When the students reported what they liked in philosophy, no remarkable difference was found in the answers given by female students and those by male students. Most philosophy majors pointed out that they enjoyed the depth, critical attitude, rigor, breadth and openness of philosophy:

The issues discussed, the stringent mode of thinking, and the dedication to really get to the bottom of things. The clarity of writing and use of words. The dedication to really be on point. The curiosity to really dig deep into fundamental questions. Philosophy has made me see everyday things with new eyes. The tools you get to analyze, question, and understand parts of the world. (Female)

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<sup>8</sup> For the idea of the survey and the formulation of questions in the pilot study, I am indebted to Reuter, who was in charge of the Finnish contribution to *Gender and Philosophy* Strategic Partnership.

The [...] critical and rigorous thinking, thinking outside the box, identifying problems and providing applications for solving many kinds of complex problems or problematics. (Male)

The urge to take a critical look at something that has mostly [...] been taken as given. (Female)

I like philosophy as an attempt to understand the world. Not the world as individual objects but how they are connected and relate to each other—the structures of the world and how it works. (Male)

I find it challenging, and immensely satisfying when I create a powerful argument or when I dissect another's argument(s). (Female)

The fundamental impulse of uncertainty and radical questioning coheres very much with my general outlook on life and its many realities that I likewise do not like to get locked into fixed categories. Philosophy also gives me the ability to very quickly adapt to new theories and frameworks, and that is very helpful. (Male)

I like that it puts both rational and imaginative capacities to work. I like the critical spirit it encourages and the way it nourishes a desire to look at the world beyond the "macro" level. (Female)

On the basis of the answers given by female philosophy majors, the amount of passion they feel for philosophy is in no way smaller than that of male philosophy majors. It was evident that both female and male students felt that philosophy had life-altering potential. In addition, when the students reported on the different feelings that studying philosophy brought to them, an overwhelming majority identified joy as one of these feelings. On the other hand, quite a few reported feelings of inadequacy as well.



When the philosophy majors described what they do not like about philosophy, they pointed toward its rationalism, hierarchical nature, excessive interest in exegesis, disconnection from social concerns, and tendency toward empty pedantry:

The focus on being a rational individual. The feeling that emotions are in the way (instead of being harnessed into energy for individuals and groups). The feeling that I can never be good at this. Hard to say what is about philosophy and what is about the people doing it (and what is about both). (Female)

(1) The strong division between different disciplines which is partly even absurd, and (2) the naivety of Anglo-American analytic philosophy (e.g. in not reading the history of philosophy, not questioning the contradictory terms and concepts that are used in theories, etc.). (Male)

Sometimes too much focus on who said or claimed what, more than on the mere arguments. (Female)

The professional community can be a little frustrating to interact with (casual sexism, hierarchical thinking, etc.). I also find some contemporary philosophy especially irritating when it focuses on very small points or parts of arguments/views. Philosophy is a powerful tool, and I do not like to see it used badly or for trivial intellectual elitism/superiority. (Male)

[What] I found simplistic and “dangerous” [in philosophy was] its universal character, talking about universal and general truths without seeing the particular within its historic and social framework. And how different ideas might be taken from their context to [defend] and recreate ideas that are not substantial. (Female)

None of the students who participated in the background survey identified their gender as “other” than female or male in the questionnaire. This could be seen as either due to the possible

unattractiveness of philosophy to gender nonconforming students or their unwillingness to participate in the survey. When I interviewed a transwoman who had a degree in philosophy but had decided to pursue another career, she pointed out that people from the LGBT+ community do in fact appear to be rare in philosophy—or they are very good at remaining silent. She also suggested that it may be difficult for gay men to function within philosophy due to the “masculine structure” of the field.

On the basis of the students’ articulations of their views, it would seem that philosophy as a discipline is experienced as having a liberating core that serves a fundamental aspect of the existence of the thinking being. At the same time, however, philosophy is seen as prone to nit-picking, Eurocentrism, blindness to individual differences, and an uncritical canonization of works whose writers represent an extremely narrow part of humanity.

Because my research was situated at the intersection of philosophy and gender studies, female students of gender studies were the largest group of non-philosophy majors whose opinions were asked for. Many of them recognized that philosophy helped them to think critically and to question things more fundamentally, but the opinions expressed by others were not exactly flattering. One of the students of gender studies described what she dislikes about philosophy in one word: “PATRIARCHY!” According to others, philosophy was, at its worst, “futile,” “pointless hair-splitting,” “without any connection to real life,” and the attitude of philosophers was “arrogant.” From this perspective, the happy assertion of philosophers that philosophy is the mother of all sciences, and that they themselves are at the root of everything that is worth exploring, seems stupid and smug. Among my interviewees,

women with a background in gender studies paid attention to the tendency of women to speak less in philosophy class, and deplored the way some men tend to dominate the conversation.

Empirical studies on women's tendency to opt out from philosophy class have been steadily increasing. Comparing these studies is challenging, as they were made in different educational systems and from different starting points, but I will discuss some of their results briefly. According to some studies, women generally identify less with philosophy than men do<sup>9</sup>. Further, Debbie Ma, Clennie Webster, Nanae Tachibe and Robert Gressis<sup>10</sup> suggest that there is a correlation between women's perception of philosophy as *a masculine field* and their difficulty to identify with it. Consequently, it should be possible to pedagogically influence gender disparity in philosophy. To promote teaching that challenges the idea of the masculinity of philosophy would then be recommendable. Morgan Thompson, Toni Adleberg, Sam Sims and Eddy Nahmias, on the other hand, suggest that women less frequently enjoy thought experiments than men do. Therefore, using a wider variety of teaching methods and emphasizing the connections between philosophy and more practical problems might bring more women into philosophy<sup>11</sup>.

Other suggested remedies include increasing the number of female faculty members and including more texts by women philosophers in reading materials. These changes might make the field appear less "masculine," and they might also limit the homosociality of interaction in the field. In other words, they might reduce the commitment of

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<sup>9</sup> DEMAREST et al., 2017, p. 526–531; THOMPSON et al., 2016, p. 16–18.

<sup>10</sup> MA et al., 2017.

<sup>11</sup> THOMPSON et al., op. cit., p. 18.

faculty to the unspoken rules of sociality that tend to develop in an all-male or male-dominated environment.

Though it is difficult to point out a single reason for the alienation experienced by women students, there are numerous social and historical discontinuities that lead many women to seriously question their belonging to the field. This was also evident in the answers to the questionnaire: some women had doubted their abilities to pursue a career in philosophy and had subsequently been greatly surprised when they were applauded for their work. This is in contrast to the relative calmness and poise expressed by some men in their relationship to the field, demonstrating even a kind of fusion with it, as is evident in the characterization of one male respondent: “I experience philosophy chiefly as a mode of existence, I feel that philosophy ‘just happens’ to me, and I don’t particularly think that I ‘do’ it.”

It is certainly true that there are differences both among men and among women in how they relate to philosophy, but it is definitely more difficult to attain such an experience of fusion, when several modes of alienation are constantly operating against it. Here is a list of the different aspects of academic life that contribute to this alienation:

- 1) Many subtle mechanisms of discrimination are related to women’s minority position: implicit bias, microinequities and stereotype threat<sup>12</sup>. Some female students complain about one microinequity in particular: not being heard in the classroom because of their gender, and being interrupted and belittled by other students. This may produce what is called “stereotype threat”: the person becomes worried that their actions will confirm

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<sup>12</sup> MOSS-RACUSIN et al., 2008. BRENNAN, 2013. SAUL, 2013.

negative stereotypes of their group, and, as a result, they actually do worse than they would otherwise.

2) Depending on the case, a student organization may or may not be driven by male bonding and suppositions of a common background, common experiences, and common humor that play down differences and alienate minorities.

3) The connections of female students to the male-dominated faculty may remain more distant and formal than those of male students; yet comradely relationships with the faculty may play an important role in the student's intellectual development and later career.

4) There are few female role models.

5) While it is difficult to give exact numbers, sexual harassment of young women in particular is not uncommon in academia<sup>13</sup>, and philosophy is hardly an exception.

6) Women run up against difficulties when they attempt to establish a sense of “us” in the history of philosophy: the all-male (and all-white) canon of philosophy presents women as an object and as “the other.” What is more, the views expressed on women by these “major philosophers” are often misogynist. Women students could, of course, thematize this double consciousness (as subjects and negatively construed objects of philosophy) through a feminist approach and thereby find their own space within philosophy. Nevertheless, many may reject this choice as potentially marginalizing<sup>14</sup>.

I suggest that due to all of these issues, women may find it difficult to adopt a role as a full-fledged expert and follower of one of the philosophical traditions, and to play that role with the expected

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<sup>13</sup> See BONDESTAM and LUNDQVIST, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> This list resembles the one I presented in RUONAKOSKI, 2020.

seriousness. In other words, it may be more difficult for them to become rooted in philosophy than it is for men. This may not be a bad thing from the viewpoint of the philosophical attitude, which involves a certain readiness to question everything, including one's own commitment to what one is doing, but it does not exactly help women to be satisfied in their studies or professional life.

## **2 HOW TO DEAL WITH ALIENATION?**

How should we then tackle these issues? First, it is important to note that women students' situation cannot be addressed separately from the situation of other students, whether they belong to the majority or share one or more minority features. Whatever choices we make, they have an effect on all the students and on the practice of philosophy more broadly speaking.

Some of the issues considered above can be answered easily: lack of female role models can be corrected by hiring more women, as it was suggested above. Sexual harassment can be counteracted by arranging panel discussions on the topic or discussing the issue as an example in teaching—after #MeToo, it can, in fact, be difficult to avoid discussing it. At the very least, people will become sensitized to the issue. Discussions of privileges and differences can help create more inclusive cultures at the university and in student organizations. The questions of “being heard” and establishing a sense of “us” are more complex, however.

In one of the summer schools organized by *Gender and Philosophy*, “Feminist Thinking in Historical Perspective,” the question of the “we” of women in the history of philosophy was addressed by discussing the

birth of feminist arguments in their connections to the more general discussions by the influential male philosophers of the time<sup>15</sup>. This strategy simultaneously provided visibility for early women thinkers and a new perspective on the history of philosophy. It illuminated the history of philosophy in its intertwining of social debates and gendered concerns. In other words, making the history of women's philosophizing visible does not have to end in a brief discussion of a handful of historical figures and a lamentation that they are so few and that hardly any extracts of the writings of ancient women philosophers, for instance, have been preserved. It is possible to find more imaginative approaches to contextualize and question the history of philosophy not only from a gender perspective but from a number of minority perspectives.

The fact that the viewpoint of the philosophical canon is not that of all of humanity but predominantly white, European and male, should be thematized in all levels of education. Admitting this narrowness would hardly drive students away from philosophy. Instead, it would give them a more realistic understanding of the discipline and tools to forge their own position within it. They would not have to spend their energy first wondering about the hidden biases of philosophy, then protesting against them, and finally making their decision against or in favor of philosophy.

Another important and difficult question related to women's alienation is the experience of not being heard or of being actively ignored. Despite its good sides, the spontaneity of discussions can also produce hierarchies, unnecessary rivalry, and, in addition, silence in

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<sup>15</sup> This summer school was designed by Reuter, Sandrine Bergès and Marguerite Deslauriers and held at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland, in 2016.

some students and dominance in others. Therefore, dividing time up more democratically in a seminar and discussing predesigned assignments can help alleviate these ills, for this helps normalize the situation in which everybody's input is equally valuable. Another way of alleviating the trouble experienced by some students is to make clear from the start that when the students comment on each other's papers, the comments are expected to be constructive and encouraging rather than overly negative: the aim is to help the other students improve their work, not to tear it apart. These are simple matters, but they can be quite crucial in creating a trustful atmosphere within the class. An emphasis on ethical issues such as these at the beginning of the course can also prevent situations in which the input of other students, whatever their gender, ethnicity, class or other features, is belittled or ignored. However, there is only so much an individual professor can do in one course: you can try to change the detrimental group dynamics by indirect or direct intervention, but success is not always guaranteed. In any case, the least one can do is to show support for the marginalized person.

Unfortunately, professors often fail to show this kind of sensitivity, as they themselves can be more or less actively involved in the traditional roles and hierarchies of academic philosophy. I agree with hooks, who claims that a mind/body split is often played out in the classroom. It is not rare that even those philosophers, who have specialized in philosophy of the body, act in the classroom as if they were disembodied, minimizing all movement, expression of emotion, and genuine contact with the students. To be sure, they may not be any more guilty of this than other academics. If professors truly wanted to question the formation of hierarchies and competition in the



classroom, they should pay attention to the bodily strategies they employ in order to secure authority over the class: keeping their distance from the students, barricading themselves behind a desk, inhibiting spontaneous expressions of emotion, making themselves difficult to reach, and in all ways contributing to the role of the serious philosopher. Some students are in search of an authority figure and an intellectual role model, and another part of the story is that professors cannot avoid authority altogether, whichever methods they use. Even from these premises, however, professors can have a significant impact on the atmosphere of the class.

Hooks points out: “It’s really important to acknowledge that professors may attempt to deconstruct traditional biases while sharing that information through body posture, tone, word choice, and so on that perpetuate those very hierarchies and biases they are critiquing”<sup>16</sup>. For this reason, it is not at all sufficient to discuss hierarchies or misogyny in the history of philosophy, or to use any number of progressive teaching methods, if one at the same time protects and misuses one’s own position of power, reproducing hierarchies and biases. A pedagogy cannot be thoroughly liberating if it aims at liberation only in its topic or in its form. It is truly liberating only if the professor is sensitive to the group dynamics and the ethically challenging situations that will appear sooner or later, and focuses more on the potentials of the students and the mutually acquired insights than her own position of power. In terms of embodiment this means the teacher has enough trust in her students to let herself be seen as a living, feeling, and fallible body-subject, thereby allowing the

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<sup>16</sup> HOOKS, 1994, p. 141.

same attributes to her students. It is only by allowing digressions and obscurities that the teacher can help the group to attain a process of living thinking, rather than a repetition of old answers to old questions.

Yet it can be argued there is still an emancipatory element in the teaching and learning of philosophy as they are practiced in most cases. This is why philosophy majors, both women and men, tend to relate to philosophy with passion: philosophical thinking is joyful and brings satisfaction in itself. This view is already expressed by Aristotle, who argues that philosophical contemplation “would seem to be loved for its own sake”<sup>17</sup>. In *Enfranchisement of Women*, Harriet Taylor Mill assesses the motives for learning to think critically: “What makes intelligent beings is the power of thought: the stimuli which call forth that power are the interest and dignity of thought itself, and a field for its practical application”<sup>18</sup>. Practicing philosophy allows us to think broadly, rigorously, critically and without dogmas. This aspect, however, is in friction with other tendencies of philosophy: competition, debate for debate’s sake, the cult of the genius, and a know-it-all mentality. To be sure, these are aspects embraced by many, even if not all, young people. Later, these aspects easily turn into an attempt to find scholarly security and esteem in the display of knowledge in what is often a fairly narrow field of expertise. When we reinforce these aspects, we train technocrats of philosophy. There is, however, a better and more honest way of educating philosophers: to allow fallibility, vulnerability, emotions, embodiment and difference, and to make space for the faltering process of thought in the collective of the classroom. This

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<sup>17</sup> ARISTOTLE, 2001, X:7.

<sup>18</sup> TAYLOR MILL, 1983 [1851], p. 31.

difference is the difference between the fearful treasuring of expert power and venturing, as a group, into the unknown. For many of us, it is also the difference between alienation and passion.

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