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INTUITION, GENDER AND THE UNDER-REPRESENTATION OF
WOMEN IN PHILOSOPHY

Abstract

Recently, Wesley Buckwalter and Stephen Stich have argued that there are different gender philosophical intuitions and that these differences may play a role in explaining the marginalization of women philosophers. To the contrary, I defend the view that intuitions are in part socially constructed and the product of stereotypical behaviours. My paper has two aims: firstly, to offer some speculations about the effect of Buckwalter and Stich's hypothesis and to focus on whether 'intuition' is a gendered notion; secondly, to argue that Buckwalter and Stich's approach is inadequate, by showing that the data in the studies they report are insufficient to support their conclusion and that their thesis does not comply with the view that gender differs from one society to another.

Although in recent decades many departments have been committed to equal opportunity policies, women remain a minority in academia and are seriously under-represented in philosophy¹. What are the causes of this gender disparity? Might gender differences help to explain the gender gap in philosophy departments? Recently, Wesley Buckwalter and Stephen Stich (**hereafter B&S**) have argued that women and men tend to have different philosophical intuitions and that these differences may play a role in explaining the under-representation of women in philosophy in the English speaking world².

In what follows, I defend the view that intuitions are in part socially constructed and a product of stereotypical behaviours, and argue that philosophical intuitions are gendered. The paper is divided in two parts. In the first, I present

¹ Haslanger 2008; Valian 1998 e 2005.

² **B&S** precise that they have found this difference in contemporary American and Canadian women and men with little or no philosophical training.

B&S's view as characterized by two theses: (i) there are significant differences between men and women in intuitive responses to some philosophically important thought experiments; (ii) women's intuitions do not accord with those that professional philosophers insist are correct. In the second part of the paper, I indicate why **B&S**'s approach is inadequate, by arguing that their thesis does not comply with the view that gender is a social construction. Further, in the last two paragraphs, I discuss whether intuitions are gendered by showing the difference between weak and strong gendered notions, and I suggest that intuitions are gendered in a *weak* sense, namely they are appropriate to a social male role.

1. *B&S's hypothesis*

B&S stress that the gender imbalance in philosophy has more than one cause. Nonetheless, in their paper they focus on one of these factors that (they believe) may significantly contribute to this phenomenon, namely the differences in intuitions between women and men. According to them, the fact that women have the "wrong" philosophical intuition more frequently than men may be one of the factors that exclude them from the "Philosophers' Club"³. Although they note that the reason for the gender differences in philosophical intuition is still unknown, and while they do not claim to suggest that differences in intuitions are the only factor involved, their intention is to offer some speculations about the *effect* of these differences. **B&S** suspect that intuitions may be associated with gender. For example, women and men tend to differ with respect to Gettier-intuition or extended-mind intuitions⁴, and there is evidence of gender difference in other classic thought experiments as well⁵. In the light of the data, their hypothesis is that women and men have different philosophical intuitions and that men's intuitions conform more closely to philosophical intuition than do women's. But, if this hypothesis is correct, why does it help to explain the under-representation of women in philosophy?

Intuitions play an important role in Western philosophy, especially in analytic philosophy. By "intuition", **B&S** mean "philosophical intuition", namely «people's spontaneous responses to thought experiments»⁶. Usually, when they invoke an intuition, philosophers assume that the *propositional content* of that intuition is likely to be true. So, the *propositional content* of that intuition – philosophers believe – can be used as evidence. Intuitions play a role in philosophy similar

³ Buckwalter, Stich 2011.

⁴ Buckwalter, Stich 2014: 6-7.

⁵ Ivi: 8-28.

⁶ Ivi: 4.

to that of perception or observation in empirical science: namely, they are taken as evidence for or against a thesis⁷.

Still, philosophers take spontaneous judgments or answers as *philosophical intuitions*. More precisely, most philosophers take their spontaneous answers to be obvious and their intuitions to be evidence. Indeed, philosophers often disagree about their intuitions, but they do not usually try to defend them. When philosophers have an intuition that p and believe that the propositional content of p is likely to be true, they usually take p as premise in a philosophical argument. This is particularly evident, for example, in a Gettier-style thought experiment. If philosophers have the intuition that the character in a Gettier case does not know that p , they take the content of this intuition as evidence against the account of knowledge as justified-true-belief. More exactly, they use the propositional content of that intuition as a premise (S does not know that p) in the argument they are construing. So, they offer an argument which, from this premise, draws the conclusion that the justified-true-belief account of knowledge is false. In a case like this, philosophers rarely explain why this *intuitively supported* premise their argument relies on seems to them to be true. Rather, if someone denies that this premise is true, namely that the Gettier protagonist does not know that p , the philosopher might think that the interlocutor does not understand crucial details of the case at issue, is ignoring them, or does not remember them. So, given that in philosophy it is generally assumed to be obvious that the Gettier protagonist does not know that p , the philosopher might attempt to correct the interlocutor or convince them that they are mistaken. In the next section, I will concentrate on **B&S**'s explanation of the role played by intuition in philosophical education.

2. *Intuition as evidence in philosophical education*

The gender disparity, **B&S** suspect, may also have to do with the role that intuition plays in the teaching and learning of philosophy⁸. Let us consider a philosophy class in which, for instance, professor and students are discussing a Gettier problem. In a context like this, professors (mostly men) systematically correct students who have deviant intuitions. If it is the case that it is mainly female students who have the deviant intuitions, then these students may feel confused or uncomfortable; they may find the experience of having intuitions that do not coincide with those of their professors and male classmates puzzling and alienating. As a result, if they are told that they have the wrong intuitions, female students may feel discouraged from pursuing their interest in philosophy.

⁷ Ivi: 3-6.

⁸ Ivi: 29-37.

If this is so, it is plausible to think that female students may become convinced that they are not good at philosophy, drop out from their philosophy class or give up the idea of starting a career in academia.

The use of intuition as evidence in philosophical education may contribute to the gender gap in philosophy in a different way as well. The fact that it is mostly female students who have deviant intuitions may have a dramatic effect on the way professors select their students⁹. Becoming a good philosopher requires certain abilities and skills: being very clever and able to make interesting questions or answer them, being good at debating and at rigorous argument, and so on. Another requirement for philosophers is to be able to make *spontaneous* judgments and give *immediate* answers (i.e. intuitions) to questions posed by a philosophical issue that they are discussing together. Thus, professors may be inclined to think that male students are brighter than female students because male students – unlike the majority of their female classmates – participate actively in discussion and their intuitions do not conflict with those of professional philosophers. Given that female students often fail to meet the requirements for being good philosophers that we have examined above, many professors may conclude that they are not sufficiently bright and, consequently, discourage them from pursuing philosophy. And even if female students continue their studies, pursuing a successful academic career will probably be harder (or will take longer) for them than for males.

Therefore, **B&S** argue, if intuitions play an important role in philosophy education, then gender differences in intuition become a crucial factor in provoking a sequence of effects that «(shape) the demography of the profession»¹⁰. As a result, if it is true that there are systematic differences between the philosophical intuitions of men and women, this would also be a consequence of the intuition-based style or way of doing philosophy in Western countries. These results oblige us to review our methodological approaches to the teaching of philosophy.

Does it follow from this (namely, that women have ‘deviant’ intuitions) that there is a connection between having philosophical intuitions and being male? B&S’s proposal raises several problems, and a number of *objections* can be directed at it¹¹: i) they discuss only few cases and in many significant thought experiments they present (but do not discuss in the paper) no significant gender differences were recorded in intuition or, in some cases, it was the intuitions of men, not those of women, which were found to be discordant¹²; ii) their analysis seems to

⁹ Ivi: 33.

¹⁰ Ivi: 1.

¹¹ Antony 2012: 244-251; Schwartzman 2012: 307-316.

¹² Buckwalter, Stich 2014: 21-22, 26.

be excessively white-Western-centric. Moreover, they fail to consider the source of different intuitions. Even though this failure does not necessarily commit them to the idea that differences in intuition are somehow essential or innate to women and men, discussing the grounds on which women and men differ in their intuition is – I think – crucial if we want to explain why women are underrepresented in philosophy and if the source of different intuition might have to do with the different self-perception of intelligence or some process of socialization. If so, I believe, there is some danger in pursuing B&S's hypothesis: the claim that women and men have discordant philosophical intuitions may be branded as sexist¹³. Their hypothesis, in fact, might fuel gender essentialist claims which have had the effect of marginalizing women and intensifying their isolation. Also, B&S agree that gender difference in intuition is not the most relevant factor involved in the under-representation of women in philosophy. But, if the goal here is to find a solution to the gender gap in philosophy, one might ask: why should we focus on a factor that is not particularly relevant to this issue? Over-inflating gender difference, especially when there is so little scientific evidence, as in this case, has serious costs. This question is not just an academic concern: over-inflating gender differences may have an influence «in many areas, including work, parenting, and relationships»¹⁴. Sadly, the unwarranted claims about gender difference harm individuals *in* many different ways: undermining women's job opportunities, causing problems of self-esteem among female students, and *strengthening bias* and prejudice against women. Instead of mistakenly insisting that women and men are different, the point should be to try to manage these effects and show that it is fallacious to draw categorical claims about gender differences from such minimal statistics.

These serious reservations about B&S's thesis mean that we need to be cautious¹⁵, in accepting it as the main line of inquiry with respect to the under-representation of women in philosophy. Rather, what follows from their discussion of the role that gender difference in intuition play in philosophical education and the data they present is – I think – that philosophical intuition carries gender implications and that ideal philosophical intuition is stereotyped as male. In the next two sections, my purpose is to offer an alternative to Buckwalter and Stich's empirical thesis and a new explanatory hypothesis for the underrepresentation of women in philosophy. More precisely, I will offer this analysis as a way of capturing and defending the idea that the notion of philosophical intuition is gendered in the sense that is linked to the stereotype that having the 'male' intuition contributes, at least in part, to *male* success in

¹³ Antony 2012: 250.

¹⁴ Hyde 2005: 589.

¹⁵ Antony 2012: 241-243.

philosophy. Before doing that, in the next paragraph, I will focus on what a gendered notion in philosophy might be.

3. Is “intuition” a gendered notion?

Many feminists agree that most canonical philosophical notions require critical analysis to uncover gender bias. Nevertheless, the issue of how to define a gendered notion is a disputed topic within feminist philosophy¹⁶ and not all feminist philosophers believe that the link between certain canonical concepts and gender is a mere association. According to Sally Haslanger¹⁷, for example, to say that a concept is gendered is not simply to say that *this* concept is associated with women (or men) and femininity (or masculinity). Rather, concepts or notions are gendered «insofar as they function as appropriate norms or ideals for those who stand in [*certain*] social relations»¹⁸, and norms are gendered when they provide «ideals that are appropriate to the roles constituting gender»¹⁹. More precisely, a norm is *weakly* gendered «just in the case it is appropriate to a gender role»²⁰ and *strongly* gendered «just in the case it is grounded – either constitutively or contextually – in a gender role». Therefore, whether a notion is gendered depends on how gender and social norms are defined.

Following Haslanger, to say that intuition is a gendered notion is not simply to say that appropriate intuition is associated with men and deviant intuition with women. Rather, saying that philosophical intuition is gendered means that certain norms (e.g. ideal norms of philosophical intuition or “being a good philosopher”) are grounded in certain social relations or are appropriate to a social role. Thus, if we seek to understand whether intuition is male-gendered, what we need is a notion of gender and an account of what these norms are. I am assuming here the notion of gender that many feminists share²¹: gender is, by definition, hierarchical²² and should be defined relationally²³. Let us consider then whether the norms of intuition are *weakly* or *strongly* gendered.

If we take intuition as a *strongly* gendered notion, one might conclude that satisfying the norm of intuition would discriminate between individuals

¹⁶ Witt 2006 e 2007.

¹⁷ Haslanger 1993: 246.

¹⁸ Ivi: 217.

¹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰ Ivi: 220.

²¹ Haslanger 2000; MacKinnon 1989.

²² Haslanger 1993: 225.

²³ Ivi: 224

of different gender/intuitive ability. Why? If philosophers consider women's intuitions as deviant and take the right philosophical intuition to be the one that only men have, then requiring that "accepting the norm of intuition" is a precondition for being a good philosopher is offensive because whoever satisfies the norm will see female intuition as wrong and will regard women as bad at philosophy. Actually, one might say, this is what happens in our departments. As Buckwalter and Stich argue, philosophers (mostly men) who conform to the norm of assumed philosophical intuition are recognized as good philosophers. If true, we should reject this ideal because – under conditions of social hierarchy and gender inequality – promoting ideals of philosophical intuition means promoting oppressive gender roles. In the context of Western academia, certain intellectual activities like philosophy are viewed as exclusively male. More precisely, for a certain privileged group of men in Western contexts, the ideal norms of philosophical intuition are grounded in the social roles defined for them (namely, being privileged and *intellectually superior* to women) and are part of the male gender norm.

Nevertheless, this thesis seems to me to be overstated. Satisfying the ideal of philosophical intuition is not always offensive. For example, having the standard intuition (e.g. that "S does not know that *p*" in the Gettier case) is not *per se* offensive and whoever has this intuition does not necessarily want to promote oppressive gender relations, nor necessarily views women as intellectually inferior. Moreover, women may have the standard intuition under gender-fair conditions. More plausibly, the norms of philosophical intuition are – I suggest following Haslanger's definitions – gendered in a *weaker* sense. In the next section I will show how male intuitions are appropriate to the male role.

4. *Male intuition?*

Being a good philosopher is in part a social issue. The category of philosopher is a social constructed; specific philosophers are constructed as kinds of people. Namely, the notion of being a philosopher we have and the norms associated to this social identity are socially constructed²⁴. This does not mean simply that social forces influence this notion. As I noted above, in order to be a philosopher, one has to satisfy certain relation properties: for example, being part of a network that an institution (e.g. a university) provides. Being recognized as a philosopher has to do with how one is viewed and treated in a philosophical community. As we saw, one is a philosopher by virtue of standing in a certain relation to others in a particular social context, and the philosopher's role is situated within a complex social system. To be a philosopher means to satisfy the

²⁴ Haslanger 2003.

norms function in this role, and this depends on contextual factors. In contexts where the norms of “being a good philosopher” functions as a serious model of evaluation and of selection, it is a common belief that philosophical behaviour is the result of certain traits and capacities that are the real basis for the evaluation. Being a good philosopher means, in part, acting in a certain way. Certain norms fix, namely, what is to be like a good philosopher working in academia: getting research articles published in professional journals and presenting them at conferences, being intellectually acute, performing well during a talk, showing evidence of excellence in teaching, being invited as speaker to international meeting, to name a few. Also, as Buckwalter and Stich have shown, philosophers tend to take intuition as masculine, and male intuition as part of the ideal for “being a philosopher”. In the Western philosophical scenario, only those who act as good philosophers receive the approval of academia.

Still, a norm is appropriate to a role when «satisfying [it] would make for, significantly contribute to, success in that role»²⁵. Norms are relational, contextually sensitive and grounded in social relations. Philosophical norms are norms taken to be appropriate for a philosopher. On the basis of these norms, the philosophical community considers certain performances in this role as good and others as not. Also, Haslanger argues, a norm is *weakly* gendered when satisfying it contributes to successful fulfilment of the social role associated to the norm. Thus, if we take philosophical intuition as *weakly* masculine, then those who function as philosophers are successful in this role, at least in part, because they have male intuitions. In the traditional Western white scenario, having an intuition conforming to the male model helps philosophers to function successfully in the role defined for them.

From this, it follows that the notion of philosophical intuition is gendered in the sense that having the male intuition contributes, at least in part, to *male* success in philosophy. If the male intuition is the only right one and the norm of philosophical intuition is appropriate to the philosopher’s role, then whoever satisfies the ideal norm of intuition (mostly men) has a better chance of functioning well as a good philosopher and of receiving the approval of academia. As we know, the norm of intuition not only contributes to success as a philosopher, but also to the standard the philosophy community uses to evaluate philosophers or students. Having no standard intuitions that differ from the philosophical norm makes women’s and men’s experience of philosophy different. More precisely, under the non-gender-fair condition, the requirement of having standard intuitions to be a good philosopher favours men and may deter women from pursuing their studies. This norm strengthens the idea that women lack the features the philosophy community sees as appropriate for the philosopher’s role. Since this causes gender inequality in the discipline, it seems

²⁵ Ivi: 219.

to reinforce the social and political arrangement on which the hierarchical relation between the two genders relies. If this is so, Buckwalter and Stich are right in arguing that we should review our philosophical pedagogy and methodology.

But, here a question arises: how could we revise and improve our philosophical methodology in order to actively challenge the gender gap in philosophy? This could be done, I think, in different ways. Perhaps we could make the weakly masculine norm of intuition gender-neutral. Alternatively, one might think that a re-examination of the role the intuition plays in philosophical education means simply that we should give up the view that intuitions are methodologically important. There are reasons for proceeding in one way or the other, but, I will not commit myself here to supporting either solution and I leave this issue open. Surely, **B&S** were making a serious point by proposing a change in our methodology in philosophy and I believe we should accept their invitation. However, the position I am about to defend here is that we should review our philosophical methodology not because, as **B&S** argue, women and men have different philosophical intuitions, but because some philosophical contexts undermine women's performance (in this specific case, for example, by not having the standard intuition) and certain philosophical norms have the effect of promoting the idea the women are not well equipped for philosophy.

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