

Against the (main) stream: feminist thinkers and the philosophical canon

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Abstract: The philosophical canon has long been criticized for its lack of diversity, particularly in terms of gender. Feminist thinkers have challenged this tradition, arguing that it reflects a narrow and exclusionary view of the world. The present article examines the ways in which feminist philosophers have contributed to expanding the philosophical canon through their critiques of traditional philosophy and the inclusion of previously marginalized perspectives. Drawing on the principles of intersectionality, feminist thinkers have highlighted the ways in which various forms of oppression intersect and reinforce one another. By doing so, they have exposed the limitations of traditional philosophical approaches and expanded the scope of philosophical inquiry. This article argues that the work of feminist philosophers has not only enriched the philosophical canon, but also helped to challenge and transform the dominant cultural narratives that have historically excluded marginalized voices. Ultimately, this article advocates for greater recognition and inclusion of feminist perspectives in the philosophical canon, as a means of promoting a more diverse and inclusive understanding of the world.

Key-words: feminism, philosophy; philosophical canon; diversity; intersectionality; feminist philosophers;

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Introduction: current state of research

Over the last 25 years, there has been a significant surge in feminist literature analyzing the philosophical canon, which is comparable to similar developments in disciplines such as literature and art history. Given that much of this writing critiques the traditional approach, it is reasonable to question why feminist philosophers place importance on the history of philosophy. This inquiry is based on the assumption that the history of philosophy is significant for feminists, a viewpoint that is supported by the large body of feminist literature on the subject. This entry delves into the various approaches used by feminist philosophers in engaging with the Western philosophical tradition.

Feminist philosophers who aim to reinterpret and reshape the philosophical canon have identified two significant concerns. The first issue relates to the problem of historical exclusion. The traditional view propagated in the canon is that women are not philosophers, or if they are, their contribution is negligible. The exclusion of women from the philosophical canon can be attributed to several factors. One is the historical marginalization of women in education and intellectual pursuits, which meant that women were excluded from philosophical debates and unable to contribute to philosophical texts. Some feminist philosophers have argued that the exclusion of women from the philosophical canon is not only unjust but also reflects a broader problem with the way knowledge is constructed and transmitted in society. They argue that the privileging of certain forms of knowledge, such as those produced by men, perpetuates systemic biases and reinforces inequality.

Another factor is the philosophical tradition itself, which often relied on patriarchal assumptions and views about the nature of women. Canonical philosophers have often expressed their opinions about women and their characteristics. Typically, philosophical concepts such as reason and objectivity are defined in opposition to traits deemed feminine, such as the irrational or the material. Through images, metaphors, or explicit language, the tradition communicates that everything associated with women and the feminine, including philosophy itself and its norms, is excluded from the realm of reason and objectivity. Efforts to diversify the philosophical canon have included the recovery of historical contributions

made by women to the field of philosophy. These efforts have been led by feminist philosophers, who seek to challenge the traditional understanding of the field and make it more inclusive and representative of diverse perspectives.

Theoretical framework

Feminist philosophers have raised concerns about both the exclusion of women from the philosophical tradition and the negative portrayal of women and femininity within it. Starting from the volume edited by Carol Hay, *Philosophy - Feminism*, Macmillan Reference (2017), which is a milestone in the feminist philosophy, we can separate the various responses to the history of philosophy into three major camps: the critics, the defenders, and the appropriators. Although members of all three groups start with a critique of the canon, the defenders and appropriators attempt to go beyond criticism by picking up philosophical ideas and reinterpreting or developing them. Critics, on the other hand, aim primarily to show just how serious the flaws are. The strongest criticism of the canon of Western philosophy charges that it is sexist through and through and should therefore be rejected. This charge is supported in various, subtly different ways. Some feminist critics simply point to all of the material mentioned above (and more, much more).

Virtually, all philosophers in history made sexist remarks, they say, and we can take these remarks as evidence of their views of women as subordinate by nature, or by marriage, or both. Other feminist critics focus not so much on particular philosophers' sexist remarks but on the intrinsically gendered nature of their thinking. The charge is that the canon, or major figures in the canon, are sexist not only because of what was explicitly said about women but because the concepts that are used are themselves gendered.

So feminist philosophers have highlighted the conceptual flaws of the philosophical tradition, particularly the gendered nature of its fundamental norms such as reason and objectivity, which are typically associated with masculinity.

As Hay notes, "Given that women have been almost completely absent from the Western philosophical canon,(...) there are at least three questions to consider:

(1) What did the male philosophers in this canon have to say about women?

(2) What should we make of what these men said?

(3) What can be said about the few women who did manage to be philosophers?" (Hay, 2017, XIX)

Feminist criticisms aim to expand the philosophical canon and challenge its norms, ultimately striving to include women as part of the philosophical community. Further, we are going to make a more detailed analyze of each of the three categories, explaining how can feminist and intersectional perspectives be used to challenge the dominance of the Western philosophical canon and promote more inclusive and diverse approaches to philosophy.

Feminist Critiques of the Philosophical Canon

The feminist philosophy movement emerged in the mid-20th century as a response to the underrepresentation of women's voices and experiences in traditional philosophical texts and discussions. Feminist philosophers have since challenged the notion of objectivity in philosophy, called for a more diverse and inclusive range of perspectives, and developed new theoretical frameworks that center women's experiences and perspectives. This movement has had a significant impact on the field of philosophy, pushing for greater attention to issues related to gender, race, and other forms of marginalization.

In the introduction to the Handbook, the editor Carol Hay states that feminist critiques of the philosophical canon challenge the notion of objectivity that has traditionally been associated with philosophy. Feminist philosophers argue that objectivity is not a neutral stance, but rather reflects the interests and perspectives of those in positions of power. As such, feminist critiques call for a more inclusive and diverse range of perspectives to be incorporated into philosophical discussions. As we stated before, of the key contributions of feminist philosophy has been the recognition that traditional philosophical frameworks often exclude or marginalize women's perspectives and experiences. As philosopher Alison Jaggar states in *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (1988), feminist philosophers reject the claim that the exclusion of women and women's experience from philosophy can be justified on the grounds

that women have nothing to say that is relevant to philosophy (Jaggar, 1988). Instead, feminist philosophers argue that a more inclusive and diverse range of perspectives is necessary for a truly objective and comprehensive understanding of the world. In addition to this critique, feminist philosophers have also developed new theoretical frameworks that center women's experiences and perspectives. For example, care ethics emphasizes the importance of relationships, emotions, and caring labor, and has been used to challenge traditional ethical theories that prioritize abstract principles and individual autonomy. Intersectional feminism recognizes the ways in which gender intersects with other social identities, such as race and class, to produce unique forms of oppression and marginalization.

The impact of feminist philosophy can be seen in the growing recognition of the importance of gender and other forms of diversity in philosophical discussions. For example, in recent years there has been increased attention to issues related to sexual harassment and gender discrimination in philosophy, as well as efforts to diversify the demographics of the field. Feminist philosophers have also played a role in expanding the scope of philosophical inquiry, with increasing attention to issues related to reproductive rights, care work, and social justice. Also, as Jaggar notes, by exploring women's perspectives and experiences, feminist philosophers have developed new ways of thinking about a wide range of philosophical issues, including the nature of knowledge, the meaning of morality, the structure of language, the ontology of the self, and the nature of political power and by that all philosophy can be significantly enriched by incorporating women's perspectives (Jaggar, 1988).

To answer the research question of this article, we must first go back to Carol Hay's analysis in the Macmillan Interdisciplinary Handbook of Feminism, there are three major camps of feminist responses to the history of philosophy: the critics, the defenders, and the appropriators. The critics camp within feminist philosophy is perhaps the most radical response to the history of philosophy, as it calls for a complete rethinking of the philosophical canon and the inclusion of marginalized voices and perspectives. This approach is based on the recognition that the exclusion of women from the canon is not simply a historical oversight but is rather deeply ingrained in the assumptions, biases, and values that continue to shape philosophy and the broader society.

The critics argue that the exclusion of women from the philosophical canon reflects the broader marginalization and oppression of women in society, which is rooted in patriarchal power structures and cultural norms. Feminist philosophers such as Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, and Judith Butler have criticized traditional philosophical concepts such as the Cartesian subject, the metaphysics of presence, and the universal human subject as reflecting male-centered perspectives and erasing the experiences and perspectives of women and other marginalized groups.

While the critics camp within feminist philosophy is often seen as the most radical response to the history of philosophy, it has also been criticized for being overly dismissive of the contributions of male philosophers and for failing to engage with the broader cultural and historical contexts in which the philosophical canon was developed. Nonetheless, the critiques of the critics have played an important role in expanding and enriching feminist philosophy and challenging the exclusionary practices that have long characterized the discipline.

The defenders camp within feminist philosophy is a response to the critics' radical call for a complete overhaul of the philosophical canon. Defenders acknowledge the patriarchal biases that have historically excluded women from the canon but argue that there are still valuable insights and contributions to be found within the tradition.

Defenders point out that there have been women philosophers throughout history, albeit in smaller numbers, and that their work should be recognized and valued on its own terms, rather than simply as a corrective to the male-dominated canon. They argue that there are ways to read and interpret the canon that reveal its hidden feminist and anti-patriarchal themes and that this approach can provide a way to integrate feminist insights into the canon without rejecting it altogether.

One way defenders propose to integrate feminist insights into the canon is through a reinterpretation of traditional philosophical concepts. For example, feminist philosophers have reinterpreted the Cartesian subject as a relational and embodied subject, rather than the autonomous, disembodied subject traditionally associated with Descartes. This approach can help to bring feminist perspectives to bear on traditional philosophical debates and to reveal the ways in which feminist insights have always been present in the philosophical tradition.

Another strategy employed by defenders is to highlight the contributions of women philosophers and to work towards greater inclusion of their work in the canon. This involves not only bringing attention to overlooked figures such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir, and Hannah Arendt but also working to create spaces within the discipline for contemporary women philosophers to contribute to ongoing debates and to shape the future direction of the field.

While the defenders camp is often criticized for its perceived timidity and reluctance to challenge the dominant canon, defenders argue that their approach allows for a more nuanced and complex engagement with the philosophical tradition. They argue that a wholesale rejection of the canon would be intellectually dishonest and would risk losing valuable insights and resources that can be used to advance feminist philosophical thought.

The defenders camp within feminist philosophy represents a more moderate approach to the challenge of integrating feminist perspectives into the philosophical canon. While it may not be as radical as the critics' approach, defenders believe that it provides a way to bring feminist insights to bear on traditional philosophical debates and to work towards a more inclusive and diverse discipline.

The appropriators' camp within feminist philosophy represents a response to the challenges posed by both the critics and the defenders camps. Appropriators acknowledge the patriarchal biases that have historically excluded women from the canon and the valuable insights and contributions within the tradition. However, they argue that the traditional philosophical canon is not sufficient for feminist philosophy to make a significant impact in the field.

Appropriators propose that feminist philosophy should not be seen as simply adding to the existing canon or merely interpreting it in a new way. Instead, they argue that feminist philosophy needs to create its own canon and its own philosophical vocabulary. This approach involves both recognizing the contributions of women philosophers within the traditional canon and identifying and promoting new works that are relevant to feminist philosophy.

One of the key strategies employed by appropriators is the use of intersectional analysis to identify and promote marginalized voices and perspectives. Intersectional analysis recognizes that people experience

oppression in complex and intersecting ways, and therefore, any feminist philosophical inquiry must take into account multiple forms of oppression. Appropriators seek to bring the perspectives of women of color, queer and trans individuals, and other marginalized groups to the forefront of philosophical inquiry. They also emphasize the importance of language and the creation of new concepts to better capture the experiences and perspectives of marginalized groups. This involves developing new philosophical vocabularies that better capture the experiences of individuals who have historically been excluded from the traditional canon. For example, feminist philosophers have created new concepts such as “hermeneutics of suspicion” to capture the ways in which marginalized individuals are often subject to suspicion and mistrust in society.

In order to challenge and transform the exclusionary practices of the philosophical canon, the appropriators propose a repurpose of the philosophical tradition, which involves not only the inclusion of women philosophers but also a fundamental re-evaluation of the assumptions and values that underlie the canon. The appropriators propose a new canon that includes the voices and perspectives of marginalized groups, including women, people of color, and LGBTQ+ individuals. This new canon would be developed through a critical and transformative engagement with the philosophical tradition, challenging and reworking its assumptions and values in order to reflect the full range of human experience and diversity. By creating its own canon and philosophical vocabulary (see the term “hermeneutics of suspicion”), appropriators seek to challenge the dominant frameworks of the discipline and to make room for the perspectives and experiences of marginalized groups. While this approach may be seen as more challenging and disruptive than the critics’ and the defenders’ approach, appropriators argue that it is necessary to create space for feminist philosophy to make a significant impact on the field.

Intersectionality in the Feminist Philosophy: Broadening Perspectives and Challenging the Status Quo

As we stated in the previous chapter, Feminist philosophers have transformed the history of philosophy by repurposing its concepts and ideas to serve feminist goals. Some scholars view the history of philosophy as a resource primarily for identifying the theories and thinkers that were

most misguided in their treatment of women. However, other feminist historians of philosophy have found valuable resources for feminism even in the works of canonical philosophers who are typically associated with negative views about women. For example, philosophers such as Aristotle, Plato, Descartes, Kant, Nietzsche who are often regarded as the worst offenders of the negative canon, have still produced concepts that feminist philosophers have found useful. As Witt (2020) stated, "it is interesting to note that some of the very same philosophers who were cast as the villains of the negative canon are also mined by feminist theorists for useful ideas." Recognizing the historical exclusion of feminist voices within the Western philosophical canon, intersectionality in feminism acknowledges the importance of addressing the interconnected nature of various forms of oppression, and thus, creates a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to feminist theory and activism. This is a term that was created by black feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 that refers to the complex and interconnected nature of social identities, such as race, gender, sexuality, class, and ability, and the ways in which they interact to create unique experiences of oppression and privilege. Crenshaw's work highlights that an intersectional approach is necessary to fully understand and address the experiences of marginalized communities.

In feminist philosophy, intersectionality has become an important framework for understanding the complexities of social inequality and for developing more inclusive and effective strategies for social change and it is specific to the 3rd wave of feminism.

Further, we are presenting some prominent names regarding intersectionality in feminist philosophy, and their contribution on our understanding of gender, race, class, and other social identities.

In Genevieve Lloyd's "Man of Reason" is the ways in which traditional conceptions of reason and rationality have been gendered and used to reinforce patriarchal power structures. Lloyd argues that the ideal of the "Man of Reason," who is detached from emotion and embodiment, has been used to exclude women and their experiences from the realm of knowledge and to justify their subordination. By highlighting the gendered nature of traditional conceptions of reason and rationality, "Man of Reason" makes an important contribution to the intersectional analysis of power and oppression. It shows how the exclusion of women and their

experiences from the realm of knowledge is just one manifestation of a larger system of intersecting oppressions.

An important way in which intersectionality has expanded the scope of feminist philosophy is by highlighting the ways in which women of color experience unique forms of oppression that are often overlooked by mainstream feminist theory.

For instance, Patricia Hill Collins argues in her book "Black Feminist Thought" that the experiences of black women cannot be understood solely through the lens of either race or gender, but must instead be understood as a complex intersection of these and other social identities. Collins' most well-known and influential work was first published in 1990 and has since become a classic in the fields of feminist theory, critical race theory, and sociology. In it, the author argues that Black women's experiences are shaped by multiple forms of oppression, including racism, sexism, and classism, and that these experiences have been largely overlooked or marginalized within dominant feminist discourse. In addition to introducing the concept of intersectionality, "Black Feminist Thought" also critiques traditional feminist theory and its failure to account for the experiences of women of color. Collins argues that much of feminist discourse has been dominated by white, middle-class perspectives, and that this has led to the exclusion of the voices and experiences of women of color. She proposes a more inclusive and intersectional approach to feminism, in order to address the complex and interconnected forms of oppression.

Audre Lorde's essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" (1984) argues that mainstream feminism has historically excluded women of color and other marginalized groups, and that a more inclusive and intersectional approach is necessary. In this essay, Lorde critiques the limitations of traditional feminist movements and argues that simply incorporating marginalized groups into existing power structures is not enough to effect meaningful change. She asserts that these structures and systems are inherently oppressive and that simply adopting the tools of the oppressor will not result in liberation.

Intersectionality has also expanded the scope of feminist philosophy by highlighting the importance of sexuality and gender identity in the experiences of oppression and privilege. For example, Judith Butler's book "Gender Trouble" argues that gender is not a fixed and inherent

characteristic, but is instead a social construct that is created and reinforced through performative acts. Butler's work has been influential in the development of queer theory, which explores the ways in which gender and sexuality intersect and interact to produce unique experiences of oppression and privilege.

Conclusions

In conclusion, feminist philosophers face a range of challenges in gaining recognition in a male-dominated field, including marginalization, gender bias, and limited representation in academic publishing and professional organizations. However, feminist philosophers have made significant contributions to the field and continue to push for greater recognition and inclusion of diverse perspectives in philosophy.

Intersectionality has significantly expanded the scope of feminist philosophy by highlighting the interconnectedness of social identities and the ways in which different forms of oppression intersect and reinforce one another. This has led to a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of social inequality, which has allowed feminist philosophers to address a broader range of issues related to race, sexuality, and other forms of oppression.

The key insights of intersectionality is that social identities are not mutually exclusive, but rather are interlocking and mutually constitutive. For example, a woman may experience discrimination and oppression on the basis of her gender, but if she is also a person of color or a member of a lower socioeconomic class, she may face additional layers of discrimination and oppression that are not accounted for by a simple analysis of gender alone. Similarly, a person with a disability who is also a member of the LGBTQ+ community may face unique and intersecting forms of discrimination that are not experienced by non-disabled members of the same community.

In conclusion, intersectionality has significantly expanded the scope of feminist philosophy by highlighting the interconnectedness of social identities and the ways in which different forms of oppression intersect and reinforce one another. This has allowed feminist philosophers to address a broader range of issues related to race, sexuality, and other forms of oppression.

Intersectionality is important in feminist philosophy for several reasons. First, it recognizes the diversity and complexity of women's experiences and highlights the ways in which different forms of oppression intersect and reinforce one another. Second, it provides a more nuanced and inclusive framework for understanding social inequality, which allows for the development of more effective and comprehensive strategies for social change. Finally, it encourages a more critical and reflexive approach to feminism, one that recognizes the limitations and blind spots of traditional feminist theory and practice and works to address these.

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