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The All-Female Number

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# The All-female Number

MARY MIDGLEY

Your correspondents protesting in April 1979 against the all-female issue of *Philosophy* in April 1978 mystify me somewhat, first by making so much fuss about it, and second by their unrealistic attitude to the force of prejudice.

On seeing my own article in that issue, I grinned slightly and thought, 'That's funny. Now, why did I notice that at once? How quick would I have been to notice if it had been all-male?' This led me to brood quite profitably about the nature of prejudice, and was all the thought I gave the matter. The idea that the articles might have been accepted on a lower standard specially for this issue never struck me. Nor do I think that it would strike any unprejudiced reader, because editors plainly are not such fools as to spoil their journals deliberately with inferior material. (The only thing which could make them print it would be the dark design of using it to illustrate some thesis of their own. But then they would need to print that thesis too, and there wasn't one.) And if any perverse person *did* have that suspicion, he could check it anyway by reading the articles and seeing if they were actually of the normal standard.

So I do not see that there was, or even seemed to be, anything which could be described as 'reverse discrimination'. The Editor had simply used the right (which Providence gives to editors in compensation for having to read all those articles) to arrange his material according to his own ideas to form a balanced issue. Here again, the reader could check whether this was successfully and normally done. If so, the central point of the issue remained the ordinary one—an interesting spread of philosophical articles—and any importance a particular reader might attach to the gender angle depended as much on his own interests and preoccupations as on the journal itself. He didn't even have to see it at all. This makes the project quite different from that of compiling a *book* of philosophical articles by women, which does seem to me a pointless and mistaken idea. Books ought to be unified by their theme, and classification by sex of authors would be bound to cut across and obscure this principle. Journals need no such unity, and this was a perfectly normal journal issue.

All the same, you may ask, was there any point in doing it that way? Was it necessary? 'There is no need of welcoming us to a world where we are ordinary citizens' says Amélie Rorty ('I'm all right, Jill'. . .). Kathleen Wilkes inclines to agree, and adds that even if this is not so, 'Insistence on behalf of a group identified by an irrelevant factor *upon* the irrelevant factor

cannot help but foster the very prejudice against which it is pitted'. Now I too direct a great deal of my life by one or other of these assumptions, and object to Maenads. But I think it is quite short-sighted to suppose that they are always adequate, or that gestures are never called for. It is quite true that, to erode prejudice, the first thing needed is simply to do one's job properly. But prejudice is a tough weed, and this policy has to be supplemented by an occasional yank with a spade.

There should be more of us. It is too hard to get started. Kathleen Wilkes says, 'It is impossible to argue that the sex of an individual is relevant to his or her ability to teach or write philosophy'. But—if one may mention so crude a fact—we cannot teach philosophy without teaching it to *students*, or write except for *readers*, and all of them are of one sex or another. They take notice of the sex ratio. People who have been taught almost exclusively by women when they were small children, and are then taught almost exclusively by men at universities, draw conclusions from that fact which are liable to affect their lives. It is hard to break the circle of habitual expectation. I agree with Kathleen Wilkes that it is no good increasing the number of women by regulation. 'Inequities that are socially caused must be met by a social response.' But this *is* a social response; it is not a regulation, there is nothing official about it. By varying the form of a journal, editors can—and often do—comment unofficially on the unofficial habits of thought current among academics and therefore offered to students. The habit of viewing men's ideas as normal and central, and women's as an occasional optional variation, is simply one such habit.

Need we still, at this time of day, protest against it? If prejudices were easily killed and could be shot out like rubbish we would not need to. But in fact to get rid of them is not a quick destructive job of this kind; it means developing *new* habits of thought. It is natural to think that a truth can go without saying at the point where one accepts it oneself and does not find it denied by one's friends; later repetitions seem boring and frivolous. But prejudice is many-stranded; it keeps taking new forms. 'Women can write novels no doubt; they have intuition, but they are not scholars.' 'But some of them win Nobel prizes . . .' 'Ah, but those are freaks—you don't find women forming the solid backbone of scholarship—you couldn't for instance fill a learned journal with their work without lowering the standard.' Just so I remember being told more than once when I was young that Jews, no doubt, were often very clever and cultivated—they could be good interpretative musicians—but they lacked force and originality—Heine and Mendelssohn were their top-fliers; they couldn't *innovate*. This view clearly belonged to people who hadn't noticed Marx, Freud or Einstein or even Spinoza, but it was not the view of specially nasty or stupid people. It is the normal working of prejudice under attack. And of course it means that there will always be another stage of play: 'Yes, no doubt they can write ordinary academic articles, but where is the originality?' And this too must

## Discussion

simply be answered by supplying the goods. But in doing so, we really do have to have some notion beyond sinking into the background without trace and becoming invisible. There certainly is a separate contribution to make, however badly that idea may have been travestied. As Virginia Woolf put it:

We are between the devil and the deep sea. Behind us lies the patriarchal system; the private house, with its nullity, its immorality, its hypocrisy, its servility. Before us lies the public world, the professional system, with its possessiveness, its jealousy, its pugnacity, its greed. The one shuts us up like slaves in a harem; the other forces us to circle, like caterpillars head to tail, round and round the mulberry tree, the sacred tree, of property. It is a choice of evils (*Three Guineas*, Chapter 2, p. 135).

If we want to watch out for the second evil as well as the first we shall probably have to put up, from time to time, with the embarrassment of asserting our distinctness. Plato, after all, had reason for invoking Diotima. To be indiscriminating is not necessarily a virtue. The philosopher de Selby, justly celebrated by Flann O'Brien in *The Third Policeman* and elsewhere, could not tell the difference between men and women. But even his admirers did not think this was an intellectual advantage to him.

There may be societies—people tell us that the Chinese have one, but who knows?—in which differences of sex genuinely are not noticed, and in them it might be sensible to tackle the matter abstractly, from first principles. Our own society is about as far from that position as it can get. Everything shouts at us '*vive la différence*'. Honest and realistic responses must start from that datum and make the best of it.

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