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WHERE ARE THE WOMEN?: CLOSING THE DEMOGRAPHIC GAP IN PHILOSOPHY

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Written by **Cynthia Turner**

It would seem no surprise if a college student, when asked, was unable to think of the name of a single female philosopher from history. Today there are not many barriers which blatantly exclude women or minorities from philosophy, but these groups are still shockingly underrepresented relative to other fields of study. The 2003 Digest of Education Statistics released a study showing that of those graduating with doctorate degrees, 27.1 percent were women. At the same time only 16.6 percent of tenure-track and tenured positions in philosophy departments were held by women. Not only are too few women entering the field, those who do have few prospects for sustainable careers. Even more jarring is of the 13,000 philosophy professors included in the study, there was not a single woman of color.

Philosophy, the study of argument, influences how society chooses to critically understand government, technology, and current events. It is a field that has broad implications, yet the majority of its contributors are white men. Caroline Kristoff, a teaching assistant and graduate student in UT's philosophy department commented, "it still isn't uncommon to go through your undergraduate studies and not have a single female philosophy professor."

Kristoff explained that one of the primary factors discouraging women from pursuing careers in philosophy is that "right now there is not enough representation for women in philosophy meaning women don't see it as a relatable field." The majority of introductory philosophy courses are taught by white men and follow syllabi covering predominantly philosophical works written by white men. For women and minorities, it becomes all too easy to be deterred by the question, "where do I fit in?" Classrooms show the consequences of lacking diversity. Kristoff points out that the biggest drop off for women and minorities tends to be after those introductory philosophy classes.

However, Kristoff feels optimistic about the efforts being made to increase women and minority inclusivity in philosophy. An organization at UT called Minorities and Philosophy (MAP) engages undergraduate and graduate students to combat these issues. MAP hosts speaker-series events designed to inspire women to pursue philosophical studies. The organization additionally facilitates dialogue that addresses the theoretical issues facing individuals of minority backgrounds.

None would deny the importance of including women and minority voices in such an important field, but concerns circle around how university philosophy departments can proactively make changes to close the statistical gap. Organizations like MAP are pushing in the right direction by raising awareness of the demographic disparity. More tangible efforts by philosophy departments should be made to encourage women and minorities to seek out tenure/tenure-track positions as well as educate male philosophers to become allies to women and minorities. Philosophy departments and students should tackle the issue even before the onset of college by initiating programs that expose economically disadvantaged students to philosophy in secondary school.

These efforts can help establish a more receptive academic and work environment for women and minorities in philosophy. "Overall," Kristoff says, "prospects are a lot better for women and minorities now than a few decades ago, but there is still a long way to go."

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