

COLLOQUIUM IN THE HISTORY OF MORAL AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

The Canon Revisited: Women Philosophers

INTRODUCTION

In the winter of 2020, from the 20th to the 21st of January, the Center for Ethics, Politics and Society (CEPS) organized and hosted the 5th Braga Colloquium in the History of Moral and Political Philosophy, an international annual conference held at the University of Minho in Braga, Portugal. Little did we know that this would be the last in person event we would be hosting up to the moment this introduction is being written, and we still don't know when the world will be back to normal, whatever that may turn out to be. For many of the people who attended this international conference – where more than 40 papers were presented and discussed, out of close to 70 submissions, and people from 15 different nationalities participated – this would be their last academic travel so far. It remains to be seen whether the effects of the pandemic will translate into a sort of mixed practice, with some events continuing to be held online while others go back to in person presentations.

No doubt there has been losses and gains in this necessity to go online. It is easier to assemble people from different parts of the world, but the social aspect of the in-person events, which turns out to have scientific consequences as well, is missing. People meet and talk during breaks, there is a more informal exchange of ideas, and the contact between early career participants – 40% of the participants this year were graduate students and around 50% were either non-tenure track scholars or tenure-track scholars – and those who already possess a solid body of work and experience is promoted, which has always been one of the Centre's goals when organizing this type of conferences. Discussions continue beyond the formal sessions around lunch, dinner, or a drink.

Friendships are made, affinities discovered. It has been very rewarding for us to see people wanting to keep participating in our annual events, and to establish cooperation with researchers and institutions from various places. Just as it has been very rewarding to have our invitations to keynote speakers be accepted by scholars who are prominent in their fields of research. In this respect, the 2020 edition of the Braga Colloquium was no exception: we had two splendid keynote speakers. Professor Sandrine Bergès, from Bilkent University, in Turkey, a leading scholar in Wollstonecraftian studies and more, has been engaged in retrieving from obscurity works that change our perspective on the history of philosophy and urge us to wonder why they have been forgotten or erased, and why they must be read and take their place in the philosophical canon. And Professor Ruth Hagengruber, from the University of Paderborn, in Germany, one of the more active researchers on women philosophers in the history of philosophy, both through her individual academic work and through the Center for the History of Women Philosophers and Scientists.

The work of these two philosophers has carried on the trend started in the 1980's by the pioneering and influential studies of Mary Ellen Waithe and Eileen O'Neill, who highlighted the overwhelming, though staggeringly overlooked, presence of women in early modern philosophy. It has been pivotal to our present appreciation of the place, importance, and sheer number of women in the philosophical tradition in which we have been formed and trained, most of us never having learned or heard a word about their works or even their existence. As it has been taught throughout western universities, the philosophical tradition is a long line of male philosophers engaging with each other's thought through time from the ancient Greeks to the present. Those male philosophers constitute the canon which is now being questioned and discussed, as historians of philosophy in the last few decades have taken a keen interest in women philosophers from the past. One would expect them to be very few, given the historical hurdles women have met with in all areas of academy and public life, on top of the burdens of the private sphere. But they have not been as few as that after all. And their intellectual output has been achieved in the context of the philosophical discussions of their times, in communication with, and often through the influence of, their male counterparts. This suggests that the apparent absence of women philosophers from the tradition, and the canon, of western philosophy, is the result of a deliberate selection, and not the mere reflection of an actual absence. The canon of western philosophy has been constituted not

only through the exclusion of women philosophers, especially when it comes to philosophy before the second half of the 20th century, but also by positioning a (partial) model of human thought that ignores the experiences, concerns and values historically associated with the feminine. Revising the philosophical canon in a way that is not biased by the male perspective thus implies answering two different questions. First, *who* counts as a philosopher?; and, second, *what* counts as philosophical?

Accordingly, one aim of this colloquium has been to add to the movement of retrieval of women philosophers which is already underway and to deepen our understanding of the reasons for the persistent male canon one is confronted with when looking at the discipline's history. A second aim has been to challenge the invisibility of contemporary work by non-male philosophers, in particular within moral and political philosophy, but also in other areas of philosophical inquiry that may be more generally relevant to address feminist moral and political issues.

The goal of this issue, by no means comprehensive, is to offer a selection of original texts, representative of the challenge to the canon. Some articles explicitly target *who* questions, while others are more focused on *what* questions. Yet, given the intricate relationship between the two questions, many articles end up answering both.

The latter is precisely the case of our opening article “The Descent of Women to the Power of Domesticity: From Margaret Cavendish to Laura Ingalls Wilder” in which Sandrine Bergès traces the evolution of the concept of domesticity as discussed by women throughout the history of philosophy and the associated debate on whether it consists of a realm for the affirmation of women's civic power or rather one of abiding subservience. Focusing on the early modern period, particularly in the late 18th century, Bergès goes on to argue that the so-called 19th century “Cult of Domesticity” –shortly, the idea of domesticity as a power for women– while apparently conservative, has in fact its roots in the republican thought of eighteenth-century France. Here, and despite not being granted the right to vote, women are given for the first time in history significant power in civic affairs. Prior to that, says Bergès, the status of women was such that it did not even allow for the exercise of power within the private sphere.

The second article “Erotics as a Branch of Philosophy: The Legacy of Diotima of Mantinea” is also found at the intersection of *who* questions and *what* questions. In it,

Georgina Rabassó examines the decisive influence of Diotima's thought on the foundation of Erotics as a full-fledged philosophical discipline, concerned with such topics as love, sexuality, gender identity, and interpersonal relationships – most notably, friendship. Leaving aside the shady controversy over Diotima's historical existence –for many authors, a mere product of a sexist disbelief in the existence of such an intellectually capable woman– Rabassó stresses a persistent, though hidden interest in the Western tradition of women's thought in addressing these issues. This should entail a methodological shift. That is, instead of focusing on identifying women thinkers in the history of philosophy, Rabassó proposes to position Erotics as a legitimate philosophical discipline, thereby recognising the contribution of women's thought to the canon and, in so doing, transforming it.

Though often overlooked, Ancient Greece was a site of much debate on gender relevant issues, even if often indirectly. Our third contribution corroborates this idea by examining a set of gender concerns considered by the Stoics, namely the appropriateness of what we would today call gender roles. In “What should women do? The Stoics on gender-role division”, Gabriele Flamigni examines the controversy surrounding the alleged commitment of the Stoics to the claim of suitability of certain activities according to gender. The article challenges this idea by stressing that a reasonable understanding of the Stoics' thinking, in particular, the notion of appropriate activity (*καθῆκον*), will necessarily lead to reconstructing the traditional narrative on the social role the Stoics assigned to women. In the Stoics' ideal community, says Flamigni, social differences between men and women are undoubtedly mitigated with respect to convention, albeit not completely abolished. This is significantly explained by the Stoics' stand within their cultural environment and their aim at improving, rather than restructuring, juridical and traditional norms.

Leaping a few centuries, we land in the 18th century with Evelyn Groot's investigation on the role of “Public opinion and political passions in the work of Germaine de Staël”. The article claims that De Staël's commitment to the liberal principles of civil equality and liberty led her to position public opinion as a necessary emancipatory political tool. Yet, by being sensitive to the complexity of human psychology, De Staël develops a multilayered analysis of public opinion, stressing its potentially discriminatory and harmful political usage. A paradigmatic example of the latter is the trial of Marie-

Antoinette, in which it becomes clear how the purpose and effects of public opinion become entirely dependent on human passions.

Well into the 20th century, the next contribution addresses a central topic in the so called “second wave” feminism, the private-public divide, through the lens of the understudied contribution of Françoise Collin. In “Fracturing the private-public divide through action: Reading *Les Cahiers du Griff*”, Teresa Hoogeveen takes “*Les Cahiers du Griff*”, the first francophone magazine of feminist thought within this period, as an illustration of the blurring between the private and the public, through which women, by way of action, burst into the public sphere with a plurality of concerns and voices traditionally confined to the personal realm. According to Hoogeveen, *Les Cahiers* represent the materialisation of what Collin called women’s “heritage to be transmitted”, a fertile and complex corpus of women’s experiences, whose difficulty in being examined should be understood not as an obstacle to research, but rather as a confirmation of the valuable plurality it contains.

The following article proceeds by examining better known authors of the 20th century. In “From innate morality towards a new political ethos: Simone Weil with Carol Gilligan and Judith Butler”, Aviad Heifetz discusses Simone Weil’s proposal of a more fundamental and meaningful declaration of human obligations, as opposed to a declaration of rights as a way to more effectively address major social problems afflicting humanity in the 20th century. Heifetz claims that the lack of support received by the proposal can be explained by its failure to take into account a more relational dimension of needs. This shortcoming may nonetheless be overcome, says Heifetz, by enriching Weil’s proposal with aspects of Judith Butler and Carol Gilligan’s political ethos, in particular, Butler’s notion of aggressive nonviolence, thereby restoring the declaration of human obligations as a contemporary source of robust political inspiration.

Finally, in “Análisis del concepto canon: debate en torno a la presencia femenina en el canon filosófico” (Analysis of the concept of canon: discussion around female presence in the philosophical canon), Concha Escrig Ferrando carries out a normative analysis of the philosophical canon, from its initial formation in the 4th century to its consolidation in the 18th century. It argues that a canon should aspire at establishing a global narrative which is inclusive of the contributions of all human beings to the understanding of themselves and the world around them, which is not, of course,

compatible with the exclusion of women and their perspectives. Escrig Ferrando calls for a recognition within philosophy of such a flagrant misrepresentation of a large part of humanity and the corresponding transition towards a methodological practice which is aware of historically marginalized groups.

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