

New Member Presentations: Induction 2015

On October 10, 2015, the American Academy inducted its 235th class of members at a ceremony held in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The ceremony featured historical readings by **Vicki Sant** (The Summit Foundation) and **Roger W. Sant** (The AES Corporation), as well as a performance by the Boston Children's Chorus. It also included presentations by five new members: **Phil S. Baran** (The Scripps Research Institute), **Patricia Churchland** (University of California, San Diego; Salk Institute for Biological Studies), **Roland G. Fryer, Jr.** (Harvard University), **Sally Haslanger** (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), and **Darren Walker** (Ford Foundation). Their remarks appear below.



Sally Haslanger

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It is a great honor to be here and to be invited to speak. I come before you as a philosopher. That, in itself, is a source of great pride for me, for women have rarely been allowed the title of “philosopher” in the history of Western philosophy. The inclusion of women and members of other marginalized groups remains a struggle in the discipline.

Let me offer some examples. The best data we have suggest that there are approximately 13,000 academic philosophers in the United States, including graduate students and independent scholars. Of these, 156 are Black, and 55 of them are Black women. Of the 10,000 employed philosophy faculty, we think that roughly 17 percent are women in tenured or tenure track positions, and fewer than 30 are Black women. These numbers are staggeringly low and, aside from physics, are plausibly the lowest in the academy.

There are problems across the board, but philosophy is an outlier.

I believe that these low numbers indicate that the academic world is not a genuine meritocracy. But I'm not going to talk about that. (I hope that is sufficiently obvious.) I am going to talk about diversity. I know that for many, this is a very tired topic. But I'm hoping that it will enable us to reflect on our collective efforts to understand ourselves and the world, and philosophy's place in it.

It is striking that diversity is a problem in philosophy because philosophy is a discipline within the humanities. It is striking for two reasons. First, most of the humanities recognized the importance of inclusion decades ago: women, the working class, people of color, and those from other nations and speaking other languages have authored brilliant works, have created cultures within and intertwined with ours. Interdisciplinary work, for example, in women's and gender studies, African American studies, LGBT studies, disability studies, and other area studies, has engaged the disciplines to transform their methodologies and disrupt their canons. This has prompted a glorious expansion of inquiry in the arts and humanities, full of energy and creativity. Philosophy is so far behind. Why have we not been part of this?

Second, philosophy's mandate is to offer tools of thought, to reflect on the nature of being, knowledge, language, justice, goodness, and beauty. As a humanistic discipline, we seek (cultural) self-understanding, but in philosophy we also undertake normative inquiry into how we *ought* to think and live. How can we plausibly undertake this by consulting only (or mostly) the introspections of a few, especially when the few are those who are in every way culturally privileged? Who, upon reflection, would trust the introspections of any dominant group as a basis for inquiry into how we ought to understand and organize ourselves? The

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problem is that knowers are socially situated and, as such, are vulnerable to epistemic bias. Conversations with the like-minded are not a reliable way to discover or correct for such bias.

One explanation of these two striking features is that philosophy's domain of inquiry is not the actual, but *the ideal*. Philosophers are not concerned with the messy practices of knowledge production, but with the criteria for knowledge. We are well aware that our world is ridden with injustice, but to address this issue we seek to know what justice is. Inquiry into the ideal depends on our capacity to abstract away from our particular circumstances, to set aside partial and parochial assumptions. If we are capable of this abstraction – and exercises to develop this ability are a crucial part of philosophical training – then diversity looks much less important. We are social beings, but social beings capable of recognizing ourselves as such, and taking that into account.

Such a defense of philosophy's persistent social homogeneity may seem hopelessly naive. But it points to something important. I grant we should resist the epistemic goal of "aperspectivity," a view from nowhere. I am unwilling, however, to reject the possibility of inquiry that abstracts from our individual social positions. Abstraction is at the core of any systematic inquiry. No adequate theory is a report of little fact after little fact. And abstraction is crucial to our ability to live together. How would we manage if we couldn't abstract from our own particular experience in order to find common ground

with others? Acknowledging the situatedness of inquiry does not leave us with only interesting observations from different vantage points.

Abstraction is too thin a characterization of what is really at stake, however. I may be able to abstract from my actual experience of lunch to consider lunch in general; lunch need not be soup or salad at midday, after all. But mere abstraction does not generate awareness of the full range of possibilities. I do not learn from abstraction that for some lunch consists of mealworms or grasshoppers. Others unlike us are an important source of information: grasshoppers are not only edible, but eaten, even enjoyed! The value of such information should not be downplayed. How and what we abstract *from* allows us to extend the range of our theory. But more importantly, it generates new questions: Why are they eating grasshoppers? Are grasshoppers nutritious? Why don't we eat grasshoppers? How do they catch the grasshoppers? Who does the catching?

Notice that these questions are not only about the information we have gained, but are also about *us*: Why don't we eat grasshoppers? Taking difference seriously offers a glimmer of perspective on us. This is a moment of critical reflection. And critical reflection is at the heart of any search for knowledge. I have chosen an example of a social practice: lunch. But even if our inquiry is about tectonic plates or nanoparticles, an encounter with something radically new prompts the question: why didn't we see

this before? What else are we missing? How can we improve our practices of inquiry to avoid missing things like this again? These too are questions *about us* and offer opportunities for self-criticism.

So far I have suggested that although all knowers are situated, we need not be trapped in our parochial perspectives. We can abstract from what information is available to us; we can trust the testimony of others to gain new information; we can critically reflect on what we ask and how we process information. And at each stage, we benefit from serious engagement with others whose epistemic position is different from ours. The expansion of the arts and humanities demonstrates how much was neglected and how much more there is to know. Philosophy's lack of diversity is not only an injustice; it makes our work less credible. But it is easy to become complacent, even in the arts and humanities. Disciplines can incorporate new areas of research without achieving a critical stance.

In women's studies we describe a certain inadequate approach to diversity: Add women and stir. (This extends also to other groups.) Don't get me wrong. This can be a huge achievement. But adding spice to a recipe is not the same as asking: Why are we cooking this dish? How did we get these ingredients? Who is going hungry? Part of the value of diversity in the academy is this self-reflective, *critical* move. Feminist theorists have asked why economists and historians ignored women's work in the home; critical race theorists have asked why Black voices were not included in the canons of literature and philosophy. Of course, theory is inevitably selective. Attending to neglected phenomena is a first step. But critical inquiry poses a further reflective question: what is being revealed and what occluded by our methods? What matters, and why? What questions should we really be asking?

When norms conflict, how do we choose between them? What counts as bias? What are the right criteria for knowledge?

Critical reflection is importantly value-laden. When I ask why we don't eat grasshoppers, I am not just looking for a sociological or anthropological explanation. I am also raising the possibility: Should we eat grasshoppers too? Diverse inquirers are in a position to challenge us: from their social position, different phenomena matter, different questions are pressing. (One doesn't need to be trained in a discipline to pose these challenges.) Being seriously confronted with another way of doing things, guided by different norms – whether in cuisine or inquiry – causes my own norms to be challenged. In order to gain the benefits of critical reflection, I must step back from my practices and engage in normative inquiry: how *should* we proceed? Is there a better way?

This takes us back to the philosophical questions: when norms conflict, how do we choose between them? What counts as bias? What are the right criteria for knowledge? I have argued that to answer these questions, diversity matters: having many diverse sources of information is good. Critical reflection prompted by exposure to unimagined alternatives is good. We must rely on others to challenge us, hold us accountable, and expand the possibilities worth considering. But this doesn't give us answers.

Of course, I can't answer the normative questions for you. Not because value is subjective and each of us must answer for ourselves. Rather, normative questions concern how *we* should organize ourselves to achieve *our* legitimate ends, be they truth or nutrition. This is not something that can be discovered individually or a priori. I cannot say how *we* should proceed and neither can you, only *we* can do that together. This

is an essentially collective enterprise. We might each start by inviting someone who seriously challenges us and our ways of doing things, perhaps someone from a marginalized group, to have lunch. (Don't assume that grasshoppers taste like chicken!) Ask them what matters to them, and why. Listen to them as if you have something to learn from them, because you do.

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