

If intuitions are associated with gender this might help to explain the fact that while the gender gap has disappeared in many other learned clubs, women are still seriously under-represented in the Philosophers Club. Since people who don't have the intuitions that most club members share have a harder time getting into the club, and since the majority of Philosophers are now and always have been men, perhaps the under-representation of women is due, in part, to a selection effect.

# Gender and the Philosophers Club

STEPHEN STICH AND WESLEY BUCKWALTER PRESENT  
AN EXPERIMENTAL PHILOSOPHY PARABLE

Once upon a time, a club was started by some really clever people. It was a very prestigious club whose members were thought to be some of the deepest thinkers in all the world. Since the members of the club were lovers of wisdom, they were called "Philosophers". To get into the club, one had to be very bright and very well educated; one also had to relish argument and debate and

be very good at it. The club was founded a long, long time ago, back in the days when men got to do all the cool stuff, and women were treated as second-class citizens (or worse!). So there were no women in the club.

In addition to being very clever, and very good at argument and debate, there was also another requirement for getting into the club, and that will take a bit of explaining. In their arguments and debates, Philosophers frequently come up with rather odd hypothetical cases – thought experiments, as they are sometimes called – that pose interesting philosophical questions. Some of these thought experiments

**Stephen Stich** is professor of philosophy at Rutgers University, and **Wesley Buckwalter** is a PhD student in the department of philosophy at the City University of New York Graduate Center



focus on whether a character in a hypothetical story really has knowledge of some proposition; others ask whether an action recounted in the story was just or morally permissible; still others raise questions about free will, personal identity, meaning and other matters. Here's an example that focuses on knowledge.

Bob has a friend, Jill, who has driven a Buick for many years. Bob therefore thinks that Jill drives an American car. He is not aware, however, that her Buick has recently been stolen, and he is also not aware that Jill has replaced it with a Pontiac, which is a different kind of American car. Does Bob really know

that Jill drives an American car, or does he only believe it?

Thought experiments like this one are called "Gettier cases" since a man named "Gettier" first proposed them. Philosophers often find that they can make spontaneous judgements about these questions. After hearing or reading a thought experiment, a compelling answer just pops into their minds. They have no conscious awareness of the psychological processes that lead to that answer. Nonetheless, the answer seems to be true. Philosophers call these judgements *philosophical intuitions*.

For some thought experiments, members of

the club found that they had different intuitions. But there were quite a number of philosophical thought experiments about which just about everyone in the club agreed. Club members took those intuitive answers to be *obvious*. They very rarely tried to defend those obvious answers, however. Rather, they suggested, the capacity to come up with a correct intuitive answer to a question posed by a philosophical thought experiment was a bit like a perceptual capacity. If I'm looking at a British post box and conditions are more or less normal, it's *obvious* that the box is red. I have no conscious awareness of the psychological processes that lead to that judgement, and if I were asked to defend my judgement, I wouldn't know what to say. There is also another important analogy between intuition and perception. Intuitive judgements, like perceptual judgements, are often taken to be *evidence*. When Philosophers have the intuition that *p*, they assume that *p* (the "content" of the intuition) is likely to be true, and they often go on to use *p* as a premise in philosophical arguments.

Now to get into the club, it wasn't required that one agree with other Philosophers about *all* the thought experiments on which there was a widely shared consensus. But the more one's intuitions differed from the consensus, the harder it was to get in. Some Philosophers, back in the old days, had a disparaging term for people whose intuitions differed from the consensus – they were said to have a "tin ear". People with tin ears had a hard time getting into the club and they rarely made it into the upper echelons of that rather hierarchical organisation.

In the early days, all the members of the Philosophers Club were men. However, many contemporary Philosophers are strongly opposed

to gender-based discrimination, and in recent decades they have welcomed qualified women into their club. While many women were admitted, they remain a surprisingly small minority – to this day men make up almost 80% of the club. In times gone by, the Psychologists Club, the Biologists Club and lots of other learned clubs were also pretty much restricted to men. But in most of these other clubs, the gender disparity has all but disappeared. In the Philosophers Club, for some reason, it remains stubbornly in place.

About a decade ago, a new line of inquiry emerged in the Philosophers Club, which came to be called "Experimental Philosophy". Inspired by the work of cultural psychologists like Richard Nisbett, who had shown that there are important cognitive differences in people with different cultural backgrounds, the Experimental Philosophers wondered whether it might be the case that people with different cultural backgrounds had different philosophical intuitions. To find out, they began running experiments. And what they found was pretty interesting.

It turned out that there was actually quite a lot of disagreement in philosophical intuition, and that some of it was correlated with culture. People in some cultural groups tended to have one set of philosophical intuitions, while people in other groups tended to have a different set, though there was plenty of diversity in intuitions among members of each cultural group. These were intriguing findings that came as a surprise to many members of the club. Moreover, as quickly became evident, they posed a problem for the philosophical practice of using intuitions as evidence. For if different people had different

philosophical intuitions – if, for example, someone whose cultural background was Western European had the intuition that in the Gettier case Bob's belief is *not* an instance of knowledge, while someone whose cultural background was East Asian had the intuition Bob's belief *is* an instance of knowledge, one can't simply assume that the contents of *both* intuitions are true. Nor is it obvious how one could determine which group tended to have the right intuitions since, as noted earlier, Philosophers usually don't argue for or defend their intuitions. Their intuitive judgements are treated as premises, not as conclusions, and, like perceptual judgements, they are usually regarded as more obvious than any argument that might be offered in their defence. The trouble is, what seemed obviously true to most East Asians seemed obviously false to most Westerners. Some Experimental Philosophers went on to argue that in those areas of philosophy where cultural differences in intuition had been found, Philosophers should no longer rely on the venerable method of using intuitions as evidence. And as time went on, intuitions in more and more areas of philosophy were shown to be culturally variable.

The reaction to all this among more traditional Philosophers was hardly enthusiastic. And that's not surprising, since in some parts of philosophy, intuition-based evidence is just about all the evidence available. Some traditionally minded Philosophers denounced the Experimentalists, saying they "hated" philosophy. Others asked hostile questions when Experimentalists gave talks, and then tried to shout them down when they answered. But most of those who were unenthusiastic about the

Experimentalists' proposals responded by doing what Philosophers do best: they offered arguments. Some of the arguments focused on the design of the experiments that the Experimentalists had used. Had they, perhaps offered experimental participants too few options? Had they made sure that the participants understood the thought experiment in the way that the experimenters intended? Might different groups of participants be relying on different background assumptions? These were significant challenges, leading the Experimentalists to design better experiments. A productive dialogue ensued, a dialogue that is still very lively.

Some of the critics, however, adopted a much less constructive stance. The Experimentalists, they complained, typically used ordinary people – often students – as experimental subjects. But asking for an ordinary person's judgements about philosophical thought experiments, they complained, was a bit like asking for the man in the street's judgements about X-rays. For both X-rays and philosophical thought experiments, they insisted, the judgements that count are the judgements of *experts*, and in the case of philosophical thought experiments, the experts are the members of the Philosophers Club. Moreover, while ordinary folk might have quite different intuitions about some standard thought experiments, there seemed to be much less disagreement among members of the club. Indeed, though most members of the club were from the West, even those few whose cultural background was East Asian usually shared the club's consensus.

The Experimentalists were not much impressed by this response. In the case of X-rays, ❧

they noted, there are a variety of independent ways of checking on the judgements of experts. If an expert says that a shadow is a cancer, surgery will reveal whether she's right. But there is no independent check on the accuracy of a philosophical intuition. As for the consensus among members of the club, well that's hardly surprising, since people who don't have consensus intuitions have a hard time getting into the club.

While all of this was going on, the debate took a new and unexpected turn. And it is at this point, gentle reader, that we, the authors, make an appearance in our own parable. About a year ago, a pair of psychologists began circulating a paper in which they reported that women and men tend to have dramatically different intuitions on some Gettier cases that were similar to those that had played a central role in epistemology over the last 50 years. This led us to wonder whether that was an isolated finding or whether there were more cases in which gender is correlated with philosophical intuition. To find out, we searched the literature, surveyed other Experimental Philosophy researchers, and ran a cluster of new studies using well known philosophical thought experiments that had never been used by researchers interested in gender differences. We found that in many cases, including those that are most commonly used in undergraduate philosophy textbooks, there are indeed gender differences among college-aged Americans with little exposure to philosophy. In lots of other cases, no gender differences could be detected. There is no obvious pattern in these findings, and no readily discernable way to predict when gender differences will be found in cases that haven't yet been studied, and when

they won't. Nor do we know how widespread these gender differences are. Since philosophical intuitions can vary from one culture to another, there is no reason to assume that the gender differences found in college-age Americans will be found among other demographic groups. The only way to find out is to do more experiments. At the time of this writing, the explanation for these gender differences in philosophical intuition is unknown, and we think it would be premature to speculate about what the explanation might be.

We have, however, offered some speculations about the *effects* of these gender differences. If intuitions are associated with gender, we have suggested, this might help to explain the fact that while the gender gap has disappeared in many other learned clubs, women are still seriously under-represented in the Philosophers Club. Since people who don't have the intuitions that most club members share have a harder time getting into the club, and since the majority of Philosophers are now and always have been men, perhaps the under-representation of women is due, in part, to a selection effect. Of course, this selection effect might be justifiable if the intuitions shared by most club members were correct. The selection process would then be filtering out people with mistaken intuitions, who might have little aptitude for philosophy. But as we've seen, the traditionalists in philosophy rarely offer any reason to think *their* intuitions are correct. They just insist that they are *obvious*, that most of the other members of the club agree, and that members of the club are experts in these things. In light of the evidence uncovered by Experimental Philosophers in recent years, we

think these self-congratulatory proclamations of expertise have become something of a scandal.

We have also noted another way in which the use of intuitions as evidence in philosophy could contribute to the under-representation of women. In her important and widely discussed work, Carol Dweck has found that people differ in how they conceive of intelligence and intellectual abilities. Some people view intellectual abilities as a gift – you either have them or you don't. Others think that intelligence and intellectual abilities are malleable and that they can be cultivated and expanded with effort and practice. The distinction is important since it is correlated with a surprising range of other traits, particularly in the domain of education. In the current context, the most important of these is that people who view intellectual abilities as a gift tend to get discouraged and lose motivation when they encounter puzzling or confusing material.

People who view intellectual abilities as malleable are significantly less likely to lose motivation in this way. There is also a fair amount of evidence that, among contemporary Americans, men are more likely to view intellectual abilities as malleable, while women are more likely to view them as a gift. Let's consider how all of this might fit together. Suppose you are a student in a university class in philosophy and you encounter a philosophical thought experiment that raises a question about whether a character in the story really has knowledge. Your intuitive response is "Yes" and this seems obvious to you. But your professor, like most members of the Philosophers Club, insists that the answer is "No" and that this is obvious. Regardless of your gender, it would not

be at all surprising if you found this quite puzzling. But if you are a woman, you would be more likely than your male classmates to conclude that you may not have any talent for philosophy and to lose your motivation to study it further. The single most well established finding in Experimental Philosophy is that there is *plenty* of disagreement in philosophical intuitions, particularly among students and others with little philosophical training. So events like the one just described are likely to be a fairly common occurrence. And events like that, we suggest, might play a significant role in generating the egregious under-representation of women in the Philosophers Club.

There is still a great deal to be learned about demographic differences in philosophical intuitions, the processes that generate them, and the reactions people have when they encounter other people – particularly individuals in positions of academic authority – whose intuitions differ from their own. But if the speculations set out in the last two paragraphs are on the right track, then it may well be the case that the venerable practice of relying on intuitions as evidence in philosophy generates an unintentional bias against women. In addition to a number of other factors, including the explicit bias that some male Philosophers may have against women, the ubiquitous practice of using intuitions as evidence in philosophy may also be an important part of the explanation of why there are so few women in the Philosophers Club.

Parables, as we understand them, don't aim at historical accuracy. Rather they tell a story that tries to teach a moral lesson. For readers who would like a less fanciful account of these matters, visit <https://wfs.gc.cuny.edu/JBuckwalter/gender.html>