

BOOK REVIEW

Philosophy for Girls: An Invitation to the Life of Thought

Melissa M. Shew and Kimberly K. Garchar (editors). New York: Oxford University Press, 2020 (ISBN 978-0-19-007292-6)

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This book is a fine example of why people should support the American Philosophical Association's Fund for Diversity and Inclusion, which helped support editorial meetings to get this book published. Although it's a book "for girls," according to the title, it is, more broadly, a book to show the world (philosophical and otherwise) that girls and women of all kinds do philosophy of all kinds, and "good philosophers are not limited by gender" (2). The editors are fed up with the idea that "girl" is used to be demeaning and dismissive; they reclaim "girl" as a power label—for example, "you go, girl!" (3).

After a short introduction that lays out the appalling and entrenched gender gaps in representation in philosophy as a profession, and explores some recommendations for addressing them, the book offers a variety of essays from woman-identifying authors on topics including the nature of the self, the nature of knowledge, how social structures and power relations shape our realities, and ethics.

Each chapter starts with a short narrative example—from fiction or real life, but always focused on philosophical issues arising in the lives of women and girls—and then delves into the relevant philosophical issues in an accessible and engaging manner. Consider several examples the reader is invited to puzzle over:

- issues of identity with a Jainist monk who aims to protect and respect all life but then faces mortality and decides to accept a donated liver, which means he relies on immuno-suppressant drugs tested on animals;
- questions about autonomy for Starr, the main character from *The Hate U Give*, as she code-switches and strategizes her life path while trying both to be true to herself and to recognize her multiplicity;
- seeming contradictions in the virtue and value of pride, as Jane Eyre rightly exhibits pride by standing up for herself, but also understandably feels frustrated by others' claims to pride that seem vicious;
- surprising obstacles to self-knowledge through a consideration of Jane Austen's character Emma, who has a difficult time seeing how others interpret her speech and actions;
- the meaning of "scientist" with a look at eighteenth-century artist/scientist Anna Morandi, whose wax molds of human body parts demonstrated her expertise as an anatomist, despite her lack of recognition as a scientist.

There are many more wonderful and compelling introductory stories and cases, from fiction, mythology, and real life. This consistent structure through the collection ensures that the philosophical work done in each chapter remains tethered to real-world problems and experiences. Readers with all levels of expertise in philosophy will appreciate the grounded nature of the inquiries.

As a whole, the book offers a great introduction to philosophical questions that are clearly tied to gender, even though all of them *matter* for anyone who takes them up. Rather than trying to cover all twenty chapters in this brief review, I highlight a few that stood out as particularly compelling and satisfying to me.

In chapter 2, on autonomy, Serene Khader explores what it is to be autonomous. Using the examples of Starr from *The Hate U Give*, and Kiara, a blogger who posts about beauty and being Black and short (and not widely labeled beautiful), Khader recognizes that we all “can act in ways with which we do not identify” (27), and that we can even hate ourselves for so acting. Yet sometimes even when we are performing in ways that can feel alienating, we are strategically playing a role (for example, Starr performing the version of herself that fits at the predominantly white, private school she attends that is far from her own Black-dominant neighborhood). Does Starr act autonomously when she plays that role?

Khader surveys feminist work on autonomy, noting the importance of recognizing how we are all socially shaped in our values and actions. Indeed, we often rely on trusted others to help us be ourselves: “We have all experienced moments where our friends remind us who we really are, yet if our real selves were ones that were uninfluenced by others, such moments would be impossible” (29). Khader briefly surveys both the highlights and difficulties of coherentist, reasons-responsive, and socially constitutive views of autonomy, and leaves the reader with an enticing challenge: keep puzzling over what it is to be autonomous and make the question your own. We need not have a fully resolved answer to the question about what makes a person autonomous in order to benefit from the inquiry. For instance, Starr might come to understand that her school self *is* part of her, and also that her environment, social circles, and internal preferences and values all influence her autonomy. Knowing that might help Starr to avoid self-hatred for her school self (Williamson Starr) even as she understands the constraints on that part of herself and seeks a supportive social structure to help her understand herself and the world.

Chapter 3 is a treat from Claudia Mills, who digs into the philosophical complexities of pride. We often think of pride as a vice, as when someone is overly self-focused, thinks highly of themselves, and looks down on others. Pride is often associated with vanity and arrogance, and people can feel undeserved pride for who they are (for example, children of wealthy parents). But we also commonly think of pride as a virtue—it demonstrates a kind of proper self-respect and recognition of dignity. Given the idea of virtues inhabiting a space between excess and deficiency, we might think that what is key is how *much* pride someone has (too much, and it’s a narcissistic vice; too little, and they become a “mousy doormat”). But Mills points out that Jane Eyre, a fictional heroine, has *enormous* pride that still seems fitting and virtuous. How might we understand what makes pride virtuous?

Mills leads the reader through a variety of tempting but insufficient possibilities. Maybe proper pride is less about the amount, and more about having a realistic assessment of one’s attributes? Not so quick—Jane’s wealthy relative does indeed have high social standing and money, and she’s proud of it. But that pride is not admirable. Maybe what matters is the *object* of the pride (for example, things that are truly

valuable, like one's own dignity as a human or one's hard-earned victories rather than one's undeserved material goods)? This answer seems appealing, but Mills points out that knowing what is worth being proud about is not so straightforward. Is it something that I am responsible for? But even if I work hard and earn a fortune, should I be proud of my *money*? And if I am instead proud of my *effort*, isn't the capacity to keep trying itself something that is not (entirely) my own? A supportive family and a focused brain might be just the kind of luck that allows for sustained trying. Yet surely we can sometimes take proper pride in our accomplishments (for example, winning a prize for something valuable and effortful, like a Pulitzer for writing or an Olympic medal). But if we focus on effort toward and achievement of something valuable as the proper object of pride, what could be more valuable than a good character? Mills amusingly notes the oddity: "The better the aspect in which one takes pride, the odder it is to take pride in one's superiority in this regard, vis-à-vis others. One of the most valuable traits is a good moral character . . . Yet truly good people do not seem to spend a lot of time thinking about how good they are, or in fact focusing on *themselves* at all" (45–46). As she wryly points out, "'I'm morally better than you are!' is an exceedingly strange proclamation from the lips of someone who is morally good" (46). Indeed!

So why is Jane Eyre (rightly) proud? Maybe proper pride isn't about what we have or do, but is instead about our equality—we each ought to have absolute pride about our dignity as human beings (45). On this view, standing up for ourselves against those who would demean us—even as we acknowledge the others who helped us achieve as well as our own disappointments and limitations—is conducive to proper pride. The twists and turns in this essay are delightful, and they will leave you puzzling with pride.

Shanti Chu's captivating chapter (chapter 15) takes up what it means to be "living a queer-alien-mixed consciousness" through an exploration of how W. E. B. DuBois's double consciousness expands to triple consciousness (208) in intriguing ways for multiracial people, who can feel like outsiders to both (or all) of their racial groups. Chu pulls from feminist theorists such as Linda Martín Alcoff, Sara Ahmed, and Gloria Anzaldúa to interrogate multiplicity in identity and the need for recognition. She compellingly describes her own experience this way: "I gave up on trying to be at home" and embraced instead ambiguity and hybridity (211).

Another powerful piece is Myisha Cherry's "Anger" (chapter 16). It starts with a retelling of the Medusa myth, a woman who is wrongly punished, blamed for being a victim, and ends up full of rage. As such, she is perceived to be dangerous rather than understood to be in an extremely tough position for which anger is appropriate. Cherry compares the myth to the victim-blaming that is all too common today: "she asked for it" (based on what she was wearing), or "she knew what she was getting into" (looking at comments about the documentary *Surviving R-Kelly*), or she is "trying to bring a black man down" (about Anita Hill's testimony at the Clarence Thomas nomination hearings) (221).

Women are made to feel responsible for their unjust treatment, or ashamed of feeling angry about it. But anyone who is valuable deserves respect, and if respect is denied, anger is justified. When women express their anger, they are too often controlled—"smile, baby, smile!"—to keep them in their place (224). If girls internalize this expectation, their righteous anger can be smothered. And if they express it, they are often treated not as passionate leaders, but as irrational and bitchy (225). "When a woman monitors herself so as not to appear full of rage and therefore a threat, she is giving in to the controlling and conquering efforts that the [Medusa] trope aims to achieve" (228). How to escape this trap? Cherry acknowledges there is much work to be done

by the problematic stereotypers (to break down the angry woman/Medusa trope), but more important, she suggests women *embrace* the Medusa trope as a form of moral protest. Because anger motivates us to act, we *need* it to create a better world: the danger of Medusa's anger "is not pejorative but necessary, and even beautiful" (230).

Many of the other chapters are stimulating in creative ways and deserve attention beyond the confines of a short review. Meena Dhanda's chapter on identity highlights the many ways in which our identities are dynamic and embodied (chapter 1); Karen Stohr's chapter on self-knowledge grapples with the perplexity of needing others in order to understand ourselves fully (chapter 5); Monica Poole's chapter on credibility explores epistemic injustice, gaslighting, and the need for resistant imagination (chapter 11); and Charlotte Witt's chapter on gender offers a quick breakdown of the meaning of gender, with attention to the problem of binaries and assumptions about relationships between sex and gender (chapter 14). Even gender self-identification, though, runs into issues of internalizing oppressive gender norms. Witt offers a Parable of the Talls and the Shorts (194) to give the reader a little distance for recognizing a huge variety of unexplored assumptions about gender. There is so much to admire here.

Finally, Melissa Shew's chapter on questions explores what it means to do philosophy (chapter 4), noting the need to have the "living warmth" (from Beauvoir) to truly invite and engage in philosophizing (as opposed to merely trying to answer difficult questions). When we puzzle together, we are sharing our epistemic curiosity. And, in the company of others, we may learn to see anew. Philosophy can be found anywhere. Quoting the text (excerpts from the novel *The History of Love*) that starts her essay, Shew beautifully captures the ideally open spirit of philosophy: "nearly anything can become a real question if a person listens closely enough" (52). When we pay attention to one another and strive to make or find meaning together, philosophy is not merely an intellectual debate (fun though that may be at times). It is a vocation, a way of being in the world with others. One of my favorite lines from the whole book is in this chapter: When people say "Philosophy, huh . . . what are you going to do with that?" Shew now replies, "Live better" (59).

Readers of this valuable collection of essays will puzzle and ponder, but I suspect they will also *live better*. I recommend this volume for people just coming to philosophy, as it offers a broad perspective on what philosophical questions are and how they fit into the lives of girls and women. The short essays on a wide variety of topics from metaphysics to ethics would be useful for university intro courses in philosophy, philosophy at the high-school level, or just for people curious about the intersections of gender and philosophy.

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