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Philosophy as Passion for Knowledge: What Kind of History of Philosophy for the 21st Century?

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Abstract: This article is a slightly adapted version of my inaugural lecture as Professor of Philosophy presented on 21 June 2024 at the University of Copenhagen. Given my seniority and as the first woman ever to be appointed professor of philosophy at the University of Copenhagen, I decided to take this opportunity to address a broader and more fundamental topic: namely, what is philosophy, what role does philosophy play in today's university systems, and what kind of history of philosophy do we need for the 21st century. My lecture has three parts. First, I present and defend a specific understanding of philosophy focussing on the notion of knowledge for its own sake. Second, I outline some of the challenges for contemporary and future historiography of philosophy. Third, I conclude with some remarks on the societal relevance of feminist history of philosophy.

Keywords: philosophy; passion; knowledge; narratives; historiography of philosophy; feminist history of philosophy

1 Philosophy as Passion for Knowledge

Our discipline – philosophy – has a very long history. In the tradition of European thought, it dates back to Greek antiquity. Philosophy found one of its paradigmatic depictions in Plato, who described the philosopher as *a lover of wisdom*, as someone who strives after wisdom but does not possess it. As Diotima, the prophetess and philosopher from Mantinea, explained to Socrates: only the gods are in the possession of wisdom. That is also why no god philosophizes. Hence, “Philosophers (οἱ φιλοσοφούντες) are neither the wise (οἱ σοφοὶ) nor the ignorant (οἱ ἀμαθεῖς)” but “those who are in-between (οἱ μεταξύ)” (Diotima in Plato 1903, *Symposium* 204a).

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However, philosophy is not the only discipline with a very long history. The same holds true, for example, for theology, law and medicine, which, together with philosophy constituted the four faculties of medieval universities. These four faculties also constituted The University of Copenhagen, when it was established in 1479, as a result of the efforts and visit of Danish Queen Dorothea (1430–1495) to Rome in 1475 (Jahnke 2014; Olesen 2020).

Yet, there is, and – in a sense – always has been, something peculiar and odd about philosophy, and this is its lack of an immediate and concrete purpose. While the purposes of medicine, law, or theology, seem straightforward (namely, to cure people, secure justice in society, and educate lawyers, physicians and priests), the purpose of philosophy is more elusive. There appears to be no concrete and binding purpose for philosophy. This sometimes vexes non-philosophers, especially parents of future philosophy students, who, when confronted with their child's wish to study philosophy, first have to take a deep breath and then ask: What is this good for? Are there any jobs for philosophers? And what is philosophy anyway?

On the one hand, everyone seems to know what philosophy is. Every company, every restaurant has its own philosophy, which you can find on their websites or menus. Here, philosophy refers to a set of values or theoretical assumptions that underpin and shape the specific activity, production, or service of a company. But on the other hand, people who describe themselves as philosophers often disagree on what philosophy really is. So, what is philosophy?

Are there any core topics, methods, or questions that qualify as philosophy and bind the discipline together? I share the view of Richard Rorty that philosophy is not a *natural kind*. This means that the discipline of philosophy is not constituted by a core feature – such as a specific set of topics, methods, questions, problems, or theories – that has remained the same across all ages and places (Rorty 1984, 63). Rather, philosophy appears to be constituted by what Ludwig Wittgenstein referred to as *family resemblances* of overlapping features and similarities, without there being any single feature common to all.

While there are many ways to understand philosophy that have been influential at different times in history, and many features of philosophy that deserve to be highlighted, and on which I could focus – such as philosophy as a first science, a strict science, a fundamental science, philosophy as a way of living, as a life form, applied philosophy or experimental philosophy – on this occasion, I will focus on a specific aspect of philosophy that is particularly dear to me, and that constitutes an important dimension of philosophy, namely philosophy as *the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake*.

Let's consider philosophy as the realm of *disinterested knowledge*. Pursuing knowledge for its own sake, stands in opposition to instrumental research that serves concrete and practical goals. By *disinterested* I do not mean neutrality on the part of

the researcher, but rather research settings dissociated from immediate utilitarian goals, material interests, and short-term benefits. As such, philosophy has always been in a precarious state. From the very beginning, philosophy was ridiculed for opposing the *common sense* approach to the world. The story of the Thracian handmaid comes to mind. According to this story, told by Plato, the philosopher Thales fell into a well while looking up at the stars. A handmaid from Thrace came along and mockingly said that “he was so eager to know what was going on in heaven, that he could not see what was before his feet”. A “jest”, as Plato continues, “which is equally applicable to all philosophers” (Plato 1903, *Theaetetus* 174a).

Yes, there is something ridiculous about philosophy – especially given the challenges we face today, such as wars, the climate crisis, mass migration, global anti-democratic movements. Yet this very feature of philosophy constitutes also its dignity and, at least in my view, one of humanity’s most precious goods. As Italian Humanist Cassandra Fedele, the first woman “to speak in a public, city forum and the first to address public issues in her own voice” (Robin 2000, 154) said during her 1487 oration at the university of Padua: “What is more suited to the grandeur of cities (*ad urbium splendorem*) than the study of philosophy (*philosophiae studia*)?” (Fedele 1636, 198) I believe it is time we remember the value found in disinterested knowledge.

At universities, especially within the humanities, our goal is to shape and cultivate minds not to produce machines. These minds we wish to allow to grow, to wander freely, to explore the depth of human understanding as well as the breadth of its various perspectives. This requires both time and freedom. Before being pragmatic, seeking compromises, and settling on what is feasible, I think it is crucial to allow minds to explore what could (or even should) be possible, to view things from multiple perspectives, and to re-think the great problems, ideas and ideals of human life, society, and nature.

For me, there are at least three aspects that highlight the value of disinterested knowledge: the development of *critical* thinking, *creative* thinking, and *historically informed* thinking skills. Each of these capacities offer significant long-term benefits: *Critical* thinking capacities are essential for challenging established ideas and for building up mental resilience against authoritarian thought and manipulation. *Creative* thinking capacities are crucial for developing new ideas and visions for the future, as well as for imagining pathways for overcoming challenges faced by today’s and tomorrow’s society. *Historically informed* thinking capacities help us to understand how we became who we are and prevents us from making the same mistakes all over again. These skills and this knowledge are vital for securing and defending the open democracy we strive for, especially in a modern knowledge society characterised by increased use of technology and artificial intelligence. They will be bitterly missed if the core values of our society come under threat again.

Empirical research is based on and measures what we – human beings – actually do, what we think, and why. This is crucial for obvious reasons: it mirrors us and reveals who we are under specific historical and geographical conditions. However, empirical research cannot measure the *potential* that lies in human thought. It cannot guide us to thinking and imagining what we want to become, how we might want to live, what our core values should be, or how we want to shape society. This knowledge is acquired by a different kind of research.

The cultivation of minds is not a one-time task; it cannot be summarised in a textbook and simply be “learned”. Instead, it must be undertaken again and again with each generation of students and future scholars. This highlights one of the differences between work in the humanities and work in technology and applied sciences, where one can take up where others have left. The cultivation of the mind begins anew with every generation. And again: this requires time and space.

Yet, there is a growing pressure in academia, both in education and in research, to cater to short-term objectives. So, the time and space for disinterested research need to be carved out and defended against the pressure of seemingly more urgent concerns. This necessitates some resistance against the economization of education and research. My comments pertain specifically to philosophy as an academic discipline, whose benefits cannot be adequately measured by short-term goals and aims. Ultimately, this issue affects all academic disciplines where disinterested knowledge is practised.

Denmark has a long tradition of cherishing knowledge for its own sake. This can be illustrated by the writings of the 13th century cleric and philosopher Bo the Dane, better known as Boethius of Dacia (around 1270), who wrote in his work *On the supreme good* (“De summon bono”): “To know the true (*cognitio veri*), to do the good (*operatio boni*), and to delight in both constitutes human happiness (*beatitudo humana*). (...) This is the life of the philosopher (*vita philosophi*).” (Boethius of Dacia 1976, 369; 371). We might also consider the writings of translator and philosopher Birgitte Thott (1610–1662), who stated in her work *On the path to a happy life* (“Om Weyen till et Lycksalligt Liff”), in the context of her defense of women’s learning and studying philosophy, referencing Solon: “even if I had one foot inside the grave, I would still like to learn something”.¹

When I used the expression *passion for knowledge* to characterise philosophy, rather than the more literal translation *love for wisdom*, I borrowed a term from Friedrich Nietzsche, who explored the idea of philosophy as *Leidenschaft der Erkenntnis* in his writings (Ebbersmeyer 1995). Nietzsche re-vitalised the idea of

¹ Birgitte Thott, *En Tractatt Om Weyen till et Lycksalligt Liff* unpublished manuscript in folio, s.d. MS A VI 19, fol. 186r; and unpublished manuscript in quarto, s.d. MS A VI 20, fol. Q 274v. In: Karen Brahes Bibliotek, Roskilde Kloster, Municipal Library, Roskilde.

philosophy as striving for knowledge towards the end of the 19th century and in the light of his own philosophical views: “In us, knowledge has transformed itself into a passion that is not afraid of any sacrifice and fears nothing but its own extinction.” (Nietzsche 1988, 3: 264).

For Nietzsche, it was crucial to understand the philosopher’s desire for knowledge as a *passion*, meaning as an *embodied affect* shaped and developed within specific cultural and historical circumstances. It is no longer sufficient to ask: “Is this idea true?” We must also critically ask ourselves: “How did we find our ideas? What is their driving force?” (Nietzsche 1988, 9: 232). This implies that we should critically reflect upon and question our own assumptions. And this brings me to the second part of my lecture.

2 What Kind of History of Philosophy for the 21st Century?

Over the past few decades, traditional accounts of the history of philosophy have become more and more questionable. Currently, large research projects are re-thinking the way we narrate philosophy’s past. Some might argue that this “re-thinking” and “re-writing of our history” is wrong or misguided, as it introduces a politically motivated (likely left-wing) agenda into research and academia, which has supposedly been purely objective and neutral. For instance, why discuss gender or race, if these categories do not play any role in the universality and neutrality of philosophical thought? My response to this objection is: I wish this were true. I wish philosophy, academia, and the world we are living in were free of prejudices. Unfortunately, this is not the case. While I strongly agree that philosophers and researchers *strive* for neutrality and objectivity, we must also acknowledge that philosophers are only humans, and that research settings and institutions are shaped by human beings and the biases of their times.

We cannot see the blind spots of our own research. However, historical distance allows us to identify the prejudices and shortcomings of previous accounts of the past, necessitating critical re-writing. This is not a new insight. To quote Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), one of the most distinguished writers in the German language, who wrote in his *Materialen zur Geschichte der Farbenlehre* (1810): “There is no doubt in our day that world history must be rewritten from time to time.” He continues: “Such a necessity does not arise, however, because much of what has happened has been rediscovered, but because new views are presented, because the comrade of a progressive age is led to standpoints from which the past can be surveyed and judged in a new way.” (Goethe 1948–1971, 16: 412).

Today, traditional narratives of the history of philosophy, which mostly follow patterns developed during the 18th and 19th centuries, are being challenged for various valid reasons. Before addressing some of these challenges, I will briefly comment on the term *narrative*. Narratives in the history of philosophy are patterns of thought that help us make sense of the past and of the development of past thought. They function like background assumptions that help us structuring our discipline. Moreover, they define what we do and do not do, and what it is that we do.

Discussing narratives already carries an element of subversion. The term narrative indicates that history of philosophy is not merely a neutral report of past events or the result of an objective and disinterested selection process that presents its findings as necessary to the reader. Instead, the term narrative suggests that the history of philosophy is understood as a *story told*. A narrative consists of *actors* (whether people, ideas, or theories), a *sequence* or *plot* that unfolds over time, and a *narrator*. The term narrative originates from the Latin *narratio*, which had a specific function in rhetoric (see Quintilian 1970, *Institutio oratoria* 2.4.2). Today, the term is significant in literary studies and film studies. Thus, the term narrative connects the history of philosophy with techniques used and analysed in literature, rather than, for example, in science.

The term narrative is very different from other terms used in the history of philosophy, such as the German term “Grundriss” (*outline*), as used in Friedrich Ueberweg’s renowned and comprehensive history of philosophy.² The term *Grundriss*, which is also the German word for a ground plan used on construction sides, suggests that everything relevant is presented in a systematic and historically accurate manner, with each element given its proper place within the rationally constructed edifice of philosophy. However, the term *Grundriss* obscures the selection processes behind such projects. For example, in Ueberweg’s case, this led to a near-total omission of women philosophers in many of its volumes.

Talking about narratives implies a different understanding of how we approach the history of philosophy. It acknowledges that the history of philosophy is written from a specific perspective and shaped by particular interests and preferences. It also recognises that we adhere to some tacit assumptions that define what we consider an *important problem*, an *interesting question*, or a philosophical topic *worthy of investigation*. These tacit assumptions may not always be consciously considered; indeed, they very often are not. They can be Hegelian or neo-Kantian, colonialist or misogynistic, or something else entirely – and we may not even realize it.

² The work appeared in various editions, the latest one still in the making. For the first version see Ueberweg 1863–1866.

The term narrative makes it explicit that the history of philosophy is always written from a particular point of view. There is no history of philosophy written entirely from “the view from nowhere”, to borrow a famous formulation from Thomas Nagel (Nagel 1986). Of course, this does not absolve us from striving for objectivity. We must reflect on the limits *and* validity of objectivity. Thus, discussing narratives prompts us to reconcile our individual perspectives with the view from nowhere.

Narratives can become questionable for various reasons. They might be based on assumptions we no longer share. They might exclude certain figures, topics, and traditions that we now consider worth studying but which do not fit into standard narratives. Most fundamentally, we might question traditional historiographical accounts because we find them *historically inadequate*. Many prevalent narratives in the history of philosophy originated during the 18th and 19th centuries and no longer align with current research. Hence, traditional narratives are increasingly challenged because they clash with new research topics and interests, as well as with the advanced state of research. This does not mean that standard narratives are inherently illegitimate (although there is no excuse for excluding women from a philosophy course reading list). The task is rather to uncover the assumptions on which these narratives are built and assess their validity today. We might also ask to what extent these narratives stimulate new research or impede new insights and perpetuate outdated power relations.

Instead of a neat *Grundriss*, the history of philosophy might perhaps be better represented by a building still under construction, much like Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s painting *The Tower of Babel* (1563). One cannot be certain how many rooms there are in this building and where to find them. Some ceilings might collapse, others might be repaired, and some might be discovered only after extensive research.

Let us now turn to some of the most problematic yet pervasive patterns in traditional narratives, focussing on the history of early modern philosophy.

2.1 Linear Accounts of the Past: The Story of Progress and Success

Let’s examine a common narrative: The early modern period is a pivotal chapter in our history, which set the tracks for the emergence of modern sciences, the modern state, and the modern individual, thus shaping modern European identity. It represents the triumph of reason over religion and superstition, of light over darkness. This is a story of success and a story of progress, and it is, in fact, a very old story.

We find the first traces of this narrative at the beginning of the Renaissance when Italian Humanists proclaimed a “new era of light” in contrast to what they termed the “dark Middle Ages”, a term intended as a polemical concept. Lamenting the loss of ancient books, Coluccio Salutati (1331–1406), chancellor of Florence and a fervent admirer of Francesco Petrarca (1304–1374), wrote in a letter: “I will not blame our era for this fault; this loss happened earlier. For six centuries and further back still, literary studies were so in ruins that books were destroyed; but especially the historical works perished, whereof I cannot stop being sad about” (Salutati 1891–1905, II: 296). In another letter he refers to the new era, the modern one, as an era of light (Salutati 1891–1905, IV.1: 245).

This idea spread throughout Europe during the early modern period and was prominently adopted by Diderot and d’Alembert in their influential *Encyclopédie*. In the famous *Discourse préliminaire* (1751), d’Alembert (1717–1783) writes: “The masterpieces that the ancients have left us in almost all genres have been forgotten for twelve centuries” (D’Alembert 1751). Then, during the 16th century, a new era of light began, still hampered by scholasticism: “Scholasticism, which made up all the so-called Science of the centuries of ignorance (*des siècles d’ignorance*), still harmed the progress of true Philosophy in this first century of light (*ce premier siècle de Lumière*)” (D’Alembert 1751). From then onwards, we can follow a continuous progress towards better understanding.

The notion that the Middle Ages were philosophically irrelevant and that true and modern philosophy began only in the 17th century is still evident in Hegel’s influential lectures on the history of philosophy. He writes: “The second period extends into the 16th century and thus again covers 1.000 years; to get over this, we will put on seven league boots” (Hegel 1979, 492). It is only with Descartes, Hegel let us know, that we can say “we are at home”, because Descartes understood the importance of self-consciousness. Critics of Hegel, such as Bertrand Russell, followed the same line of thought when stating in his influential *History of Western Philosophy* (1946) that: “Until the seventeenth century, there was nothing of importance in philosophy” (Russell 2004, 455).

Sure, many seventeenth century philosophers, including Descartes, Hobbes, and Spinoza, actively promoted this idea deluding the reader by concealing their own sources and presenting their works as the product of solitary, independent, and pure thought. The persistency of this idea illustrates the conservative nature of the history of philosophy, which aims to preserve and transmit well established thought.

However, this narrative has faced significant criticism, and this is not a recent development. For a long time now, renowned historians of philosophy and science, such as Pierre Duhem, Anneliese Maier or Thomas Kuhn, among many others, have challenged the idea that *modernity* and modern philosophy emerged like a *Deus ex machina* during the 17th century. As a scholar of Renaissance philosophy, I believe it

is crucial to recognize that the philosophical thought of the centuries preceding the 17th century was richer and more complex than often assumed. Our ignorance of this period limits our understanding of the development of early modern philosophy.

Secondly, this narrative has also faced criticism from another perspective. There is growing skepticism about viewing the story of early modern philosophy as one of success. Instead, it might be more accurately described as a series of escalating catastrophes. Indeed, the legacy of the early modern period has also its dark sides which are becoming increasingly apparent. Environmental problems, rising nationalism, misogyny and racism are some of the major concerns that urge us to reconsider our intellectual heritage.

Horkheimer and Adorno provided a paradigmatic analysis of the costs associated with the so-called “progress” in their seminal work *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1944). They explored the “destructive side of progress” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, xvi) arguing that “Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 1) With the Enlightenment, “power” becomes “the principle of all relationships” (5). And this power dynamic is identified as patriarchal: men ruling over women. This also impacted our understanding of the natural world, as “the mind, conquering superstition, is to rule over disenchanted nature” (2).

Ecofeminist philosopher Carolyn Merchant further examined the interrelationship between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature during the early modern period. In her classic book *The death of nature* (1980), she writes: “The world we have lost was organic. (...) The metaphor of the earth as a nurturing mother was gradually to vanish as a dominant image as the Scientific Revolution proceeded to mechanize and to rationalize the world view” (Merchant 1990 1–2).

If we take this criticism seriously, we have good reasons to be skeptical of the narrative of success and progress. When challenging this narrative, we might be interested in philosophers, topics and theories, that did not win out. We might look at the losses, the unfulfilled promises, and the dark sides of the Enlightenment. We might reconstruct the thought of philosophers who opposed these developments, who were critical of the exploitation of nature, who advocated for women’s rights, for abolition, and for an alternative understanding of nature.

2.2 Exclusive Focus on Few Prominent Figures: Scenius Versus Genius

The study of early modern philosophy has long focussed on a select group of few notable figures. Typically, this includes Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, Berkeley,

Hume and Kant, to quote a list provided and analysed by Lisa Shapiro (Shapiro 2016). I think no one will be surprised; these are the usual suspects. It is reasonable to assume that this list, with some variations, mirrors the syllabi found in many history of philosophy textbooks and classrooms across Europe as well, albeit with some nationalistic variants and preferences.

What is wrong with such an approach? Firstly, it excludes a myriad of other philosophers who participated in early modern philosophical debates. Additionally, it limits early modern philosophy to the topics and problems addressed by these select philosophers. Finally, it creates the impression that each great early modern philosopher (notably, all men) independently identified and solved a problem, which then led to new problems resolved by the next great philosopher. We know this is an idealisation. Of course, we need idealizations and generalizations if we want to say anything at all. We also need role models to inspire us. However, every now and then, it is also crucial to critically reflect on them.

Take, for example, Descartes. Descartes is probably one of the figures who will always be included in such a list. Since the 18th century, Descartes has been considered “the father of early modern philosophy”, credited with revolutionising philosophy through his *Metaphysical Meditations*, a text that presents itself to the reader as the result of a solitary and rigorous examination of the fundamentals of knowledge. Descartes was, so it seems, a genius. However, if we consider Pierre Daniel Huet’s arguments presented in his *Censure of Cartesian Philosophy*, Descartes’s *Meditations* were not original at all but rather a poor copy of earlier thoughts, most notable those of Augustinus (Huet 1689).

We might not share Huet’s radical view, but most of us would agree that Descartes did not develop his thought in a philosophical vacuum. If we examine Descartes’s works, we see that his metaphysical treatise constitutes only a small part of his oeuvre. The larger portion consists of his correspondence with other philosophers, politicians, theologians, and scientists. When Leibniz reflected in a letter to Thomasius on the recent renewal of philosophy, he mentioned Descartes as *one among many* other innovators (*novatores*).³

Therefore, I believe our task is not to replace or remove canonical authors, texts, and theories, but rather to put them into perspective and context. Isolating individual figures distorts one of the characteristic features of early modern philosophy, namely that it was a collaborative project involving many thinkers with different backgrounds, interests, and skills. The ‘best of’ or ‘mountaintop-hopping’-model fails to capture this aspect. Hence, we need alternative models. Sarah Hutton suggested

3 Leibniz to Jacob Thomasius 20/30 April 1669: “Patrizi, Telesio, Campanella, Bodin, Nizolio, Fracastoro, Cardano, Galilaeo, Bacon, Gassendi, Hobbes, Descartes, Basso, Digby, Sennert, Sperling, Derodon, Deusung”. Leibniz 1923-, II i N. 11. 24.

what she calls the “conversation model of philosophical history” meaning that “we treat the history of philosophy as a conversation between philosophers across time” (Hutton 2015, 17). This approach highlights that philosophers generate their ideas while they are in dialogue with other philosophers (alive or dead) and allows for the inclusion of a variety of different voices.

When discussing these problems in class, one of my students once referred to the musician and producer Brian Eno, who coined the term *scenius*. Eno understands *scenius* as “the creative intelligence of a community”.⁴ Whereas the traditional concept of genius tends to focus on a few outstanding individuals, the concept of *scenius* emphasizes the embeddedness of any genius within a scene, consisting of many participants who contribute to the development of creative ideas. Considering a *scenius* at the core of our discipline, rather than a few geniuses, will change the character of our discipline in the long run. Hopefully, it will become richer and more diverse, surprising us with unexpected insights.

2.3 Marginalization and Neglect of ‘Non-Western’ Traditions

In today’s globalized world, it becomes increasingly problematic and embarrassing to narrate the history of philosophy solely as a story of ‘Western philosophy’.⁵ Compared to other disciplines, philosophy has been notably slow to incorporate comparative and global perspectives, not to mention decolonial approaches.⁶ This also applies to the history of philosophy.⁷

This neglect is problematic for several reasons. First, it is a myth to assume that philosophy in Europe developed in isolation from the rest of the world. From the very beginning, philosophical thought from Asia and Africa had an impact on philosophy in Europe as it developed in Greek and Latin Antiquity, during the Middle Ages and into the early modern and modern periods. In fact, there has been a tendency in standard accounts of the history of philosophy – particularly during the 18th and 19th centuries – to marginalise and exclude ‘non-western’ traditions of thought and an

⁴ Brian Eno on Scenius: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=77mbz2HbY5Y> (accessed 25 August 2024). See also Wilshire 2022, 87–91, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351111959-8>.

⁵ See Garfield and Van Norden 2016. The term ‘western philosophy’ (and its counter term ‘non-western’) is in itself highly problematic. A recent invention that came into frequent use only during the 20th century, the term can be understood as “vague and ambiguous at best, and the product of distorted, racist historiography at worst”, as argued by Platzky Miller 2023.

⁶ See, e.g., Alcoff 2007; Baggini 2023; Gordon 2023.

⁷ In recent times, an increasing number of works on this topic written from various perspectives and with different purposes are being published. These comprise global histories of philosophy (e.g., Baggini 2018), works on the historiography of philosophy in global perspectives (e.g., Arisaka and Graness 2022), as well as new methodological approaches (e.g., Elberfeld 2024).

effort to disentangle European thought from Arabic, Jewish, Indian, Chinese and Japanese influences, to name just a few that had a significant impact on philosophy in Europe.⁸ Therefore, it is historically inaccurate to reconstruct the history of philosophy in Europe as disentangled from other philosophical traditions and as if it were a purely European project, isolated from and developed without any substantial impact from other parts of the world.

Moreover, the ignorance of philosophical traditions outside the ‘Western’ canon prevents us from engaging in meaningful dialogue with these traditions. We miss the opportunity to gain new and relevant insights by contextualising the topics we study with ideas developed in other parts of the world. While knowledge about philosophical traditions, for instance, in India or China, might thrive in departments of culture or languages, it is often sparse in philosophy departments in Europe. Given philosophy’s aspiration to reflect human thought in general and to address and discuss universal standards of rationality, this neglect seems hardly justifiable and raises concerns of epistemic injustice and ‘white ignorance’ (see Frickers 2007; Mills 2015). Finally, the history of philosophy has been slow to address questions of racism and colonialism. By not addressing the issue, it tacitly assists in covering-up and belittling the damaging effects of colonialism and runs the risk of (intentionally or unintentionally) perpetuating outdated power structures.

2.4 Sexism, Exclusion of Women Philosophers and Misogynistic Patterns

For many decades, feminist historians of philosophers have challenged traditional accounts of the history of philosophy. They have exposed biases against women philosophers, the mechanisms that kept women out of historical records, and the misogynistic patterns found in the writings of many revered philosophers.⁹ Take, for example, Aristotle, who argued that the female was a natural deficiency, and that men rule over women by nature.¹⁰ Or think of Immanuel Kant, the great German Enlightenment philosopher and staunch advocate of universal reason, who famously claimed that Enlightenment consists in “the human being’s release from self-incurred immaturity”.¹¹ He encouraged all men to make use of their understanding independently and to become autonomous individuals – except that Kant denied this

⁸ See i.a. Park 2013; Graneß 2023.

⁹ There are too many works to be mentioned here. Good starting points include O’Neill 1998; Witt and Shapiro 2023.

¹⁰ For a nuanced and comprehensive analysis of Aristotle’s thought on women, see Connell 2021.

¹¹ Immanuel Kant, *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?* [1784]. In, *Akademie Ausgabe* (=Kants Gesammelte Schriften. Abteilung I: Werke), VIII, 35.

autonomy to women. He explicitly stated that women should remain under men's authority for their own good and for the benefit of society.¹²

Here, however, I would like to focus on the women who have been part of philosophy from its very inception to the present day. Why is it, that we don't know these women philosophers, who were once famous and contributed to the philosophical debates of their times? Why do we often not even know their names? The answer is complex. However, one thing is very clear and simple: We need a feminist history of philosophy because women are *grossly misrepresented* in the standard historiography of philosophy.

One of the most persistent patterns that has supported the marginalization of women in the history of philosophy is the denial of their status as *philosophers in their own right*. Historically, this pattern was upheld by the assumption that women's nature is *passive* and *reproductive*. Women's contributions to philosophy were defined as being in accordance with this assumed nature, namely as passive. This supposed passivity was then used to justify women's limited and restricted roles in philosophy – not as philosophers in their own right, but merely as *students, followers, or assistants* of prominent male philosophers. As I've shown elsewhere (Ebbes-meyer 2019), this pattern was already consolidated in the historiography of philosophy during the 18th century and became widespread throughout the 19th century. Since then, women's marginalization in the history of philosophy has been perpetuated repeatedly, often without any direct reference to this pattern or explicit knowledge of its historical justification.

How this pattern perpetuates the marginalization of women in the history of philosophy until today can be illustrated by an example from British historiography and from an entirely different philosophical tradition than those mentioned so far. Bertrand Russell (1872–1970), in many regards a radical and innovative thinker, and one of the founders of analytic philosophy, published a *History of Western Philosophy* in 1946. The back cover of the 2004 edition advertises the book with the following slogan:

First published in 1946, *History of Western Philosophy* went on to become the best-selling book of the twentieth century. A dazzlingly ambitious project, it remains *unchallenged to this day as the ultimate introduction to Western philosophy* (emphasize added). (Russel 2004, back cover)

While the book has already been challenged for various reasons, let's focus on how women philosophers are represented (or rather ignored) in this work. In this book

¹² Kant, *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht* [1798]. In, *Akademie Ausgabe* (=Kants Gesammelte Schriften. Abteilung I: Werke), VII, 209. For more on Kant's sexism (and racism) see Kleingeld 2019.

exceeding 700 pages, only a handful of women are mentioned. Of the 517 names listed in the index of the work, only 24 are women's names.¹³

There are some notable omissions, especially concerning early modern philosophy: Damaris Masham (1659–1708), known for her treatise on education and her correspondence with Locke and Leibniz does not appear in the book. Neither does Anne Conway (1631–1679) who is famous for her metaphysical treatise critiquing the mechanistic approach to nature, nor Margaret Cavendish (1623–1673), author of several innovative writings on natural philosophy. Yet Hobbes, Locke and Hume are, of course, mentioned. The renowned Enlightenment philosopher Emily du Châtelet (1706–1746) who contributed to debates in natural philosophy and metaphysics is also absent, although Voltaire with whom she collaborated appears in the volume. Even the famous political philosopher and advocate of women's rights, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797), is missing, while her daughter Mary Shelly, the author of the novel *Frankenstein*, is included.

So, who *is* mentioned in Russel's *History*? Out of the 24 women listed in the index, only nine are related to philosophy, while the others are mythological or historical figures, or authors of novels. Excluding the three lovers of Rousseau, who are all mentioned by name, there are six women left: Aspasia (c. 470 – after 428 BC), Hypatia (c. 350–370–415 AD), St. Monica (c. 332–387), Héloïse (c. 1092–1164), Christina of Sweden, (1626–1689), and Elisabeth of Bohemia (1618–1680). Let's see what Russell has to say about them: Aspasia assisted male philosophers and kept a disorderly house (Russel 2004, 68; 81); Hypatia was a distinguished lady, more a mathematician than a philosopher, and was stripped naked and lynched (342); St Monica “was a very earnest Catholic” (327–8) and exhorted Augustine to chastity, but in vain (325); Héloïse might not have been the author of her part of the famous correspondence with Abelard (405); Queen Christina of Sweden wasted the time of great men (513); and Elisabeth of Bohemia motivated Descartes to write his work on the passions of the soul (513).

To sum up: Not a single woman mentioned in Russell's *History* is referred to as a philosopher in her own right. Apart from a few brief non-philosophical comments on the six women philosophers mentioned above, there are no references to women philosophers of Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period. Women philosophers of the 18th, 19th and early 20th are completely absent.

¹³ The following women's names appear in the index of the 2004 edition: Agnes, Empress; Aphrodite; Artemis; Aspasia; Austin, Jane; Boleyn, Anne; Catherine of Aragon; Christina Queen of Sweden; Constance, Empress; Elisabeth of Bohemia; Elizabeth, Queen of England; Harrison, Jane; Héloïse; Hypatia; Irene, Empress; Justina, Empress; La Vasseur, Thérèse; Lucretia; Mary, Queen of England; Monica, St; Shelly, Mary; Theodora, Empress; Vercelli, Madame de; Warens, Madame de.

Today we can no longer ignore the philosophical contributions made by women. Extensive research has brought to light the thought of women philosophers from Antiquity to the present day. Therefore, we must actively challenge these outdated misrepresentations of women philosophers in canonical historiographical accounts.

The four problematic aspects of traditional narratives in the history of philosophy, briefly addressed here, are interconnected. Changing one will most likely impact the others. And while they tackle different issues, they share similarities. They all advocate for broadening philosophy to include a wider range of diverse voices in the history of philosophical thought. They also suggest that future histories of philosophy should be more reflective and explicit about their foundational assumptions. Finally, these seismic shifts in re-thinking the narratives of the history of philosophy prompt us to critically reconsider the very notion of philosophy itself.

3 Why Does all of This Still Matter Today?

Practicing philosophy and the history of philosophy is not an innocent activity. By selecting certain authors, topics and theories, and by ignoring others as less relevant, we perpetuate – intentionally or unintentionally – intellectual, cultural, and political agendas that we might no longer share. Narratives in the history of philosophy also serve as *justificatory narratives*¹⁴ that assist in maintaining normative orders of domination. They exclude some and promote others. As historians of philosophy, it is our task to be aware of the tacit assumptions and prejudices that are deeply rooted in our discipline and, consequently, in the way we conceptualize the past.

While there are many relevant lessons to be learned from this, I would like to conclude with some reflections on the topic of gender inequality. Although we live in a privileged part of the world regarding gender equality, we have not yet eradicated the problem. Our societies are still structured according to gender differences, and the power structure between the sexes remains unequal in terms of access to positions of power, wealth, and prestige. The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has called this masculine domination a “particular form of symbolic violence” (Bourdieu 2002, 227) meaning that we are dealing with power relations that pass through knowledge, where one group imposes norms on those of the subordinate group (Bourdieu 2002, 229).¹⁵ The history of philosophy is, of course, only one of many discourses in our society and institutions that perpetuate masculine domination through unconscious patterns of thought. Still, the responsibility of our discipline rests with us. If we do not analyze these patterns and work actively against them, we will most likely contribute

¹⁴ On the term *justificatory narratives*, see Gosepath 2023, 185. Gosepath builds on Fahrmeir 2013.

¹⁵ See also Bourdieu 1990.

to perpetuating gender inequality far into the future. In a recent paper for the United Nations, Londa Schiebinger and colleagues focused on the challenges and opportunities of Artificial Intelligence and warned: “This unconscious gender bias from the past amplifies gender inequality into the future” (Schiebinger 2022, 6).

The extent to which these patterns still shape Danish society becomes apparent if one looks at Danish media. A recent survey has shown that women are seriously underrepresented when it comes to “expert” views in the media (Siegmundfeldt 2024), perpetuating the idea that the “smart people in society are men” (Kirkebæk-Johansson and Mortensen 2024). This also indicates that the knowledge produced by women and from their perspectives is not considered and represented as equally valid and important.

The problem of gender biases and sexism is also evident at universities in Denmark (Einersen et al. 2022). A recent study on sexism at Danish universities revealed that “37 % of the female PhD students have experienced at least one verbal act that objectifies, excludes or degrades them on the basis of their gender during their PhD education” (Lesner et al. 2024). This includes malicious sexual comments, unwanted physical contact, and sexual coercion. I think everyone agrees that this is unacceptable. While I assume that the matter is taken seriously and appropriate measures are underway to quickly improve the situation, it reminds us that there is still a way ahead of us.

I would like to end my lecture with a quote from classicist Mary Beard. I believe her insight from *Women and Power* also applies to academia: “You can’t easily fit women into a structure that is already coded as male; you have to change the structure” (Beard 2017, 86–7). Such a change requires the joint effort of many people. Let’s take it one.¹⁶

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¹⁶ For further research and activities on these and related topics, see “Center for Interdisciplinary Research on Women in the History of Philosophy: INSPIRE”. <https://inspire.ku.dk/>

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