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Three Cheers for the Token Woman!

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Abstract

Concerns about the under-representation of female academic philosophers and about the stereotype that philosophy is best done by men have recently led to efforts to make academic philosophy a more inclusive discipline. An example is the Gendered Conference Campaign, encouraging event organisers and volume editors to include women amongst invited speakers and authors.

Initiatives such as the GCC raise worries about tokenism. Potential invitees may be concerned about unfairness towards those who would have been invited in their place in the absence of affirmative action and about the way in which affirmative action can (be perceived to) affect the quality of the conference or volume in question. And women philosophers often worry that, if formal rules or significant social pressures towards gender inclusiveness play a role in selection processes, their achievements will be discounted.

I argue there is no good reason for these fears: there is no pure meritocracy in academia, nor is the ideal of pure meritocracy either feasible or desirable. There are several legitimate grounds — independent of professional competence — for including people in positions of visibility and prestige; gender is such a legitimate reason.

Enhanced Article Feedback

1. The Spectre of Tokenism

Many people are reluctant to accept an invitation to speak at a conference or participate in an edited volume if they think that being a woman played a role in receiving that invitation; in these cases they believe they are being tokenised. This article provides reasons to overcome one's reluctance by arguing that affirmative action in these contexts is legitimate even when it does not improve the *status quo* with respect to meritocracy.

By 'token woman' I refer to a woman asked to occupy a position of power or prestige partly because she is a woman but without the organisers intending to actually address the deep forms of sexism in the culture of an institution. For instance, institutions may engage in tokenism by appointing a woman on their board of directors and thereby suggest that this has solved the problem of sex discrimination. My focus is on women philosophers invited to participate in a conference or edited volume; I claim that philosophers who suspect they are invited to speak or write as token women should not allow the stigma of tokenism weigh against a decision to participate. Although tokenism is wrong, affirmative action is desirable even when some of the women invited as a result of it are being tokenised. While defenders of affirmative action deplore tokenism, they cannot prevent it — since they cannot control the intentions of event organisers — and they can rightly encourage women to accept invitations even while suspecting they are being tokenised.

The issues discussed here apply to other kinds of 'token participants': say, the token African American — chosen on grounds of race — or the token homosexual — chosen on grounds of sexual orientation. For reasons of simplicity, the present discussion is restricted to token women.

Current informal discussions of the pros and cons of affirmative action in the context of academic conferences and publications recapitulate many of the points made in the general debates on affirmative action that took place over the past decades (as I indicate below.) However, I shall argue, selection for conferences and invited chapters is special in the sense that various criteria other than academic merit unavoidably, and perhaps felicitously, have a say in determining who is invited. If this is correct, it means that it is important to reflect on the legitimacy of non-meritocratic criteria.

This article advances two claims, the second of which is more controversial. First, that for reasons of both epistemic and practical limitations, it is infeasible to select speakers on strictly meritocratic criteria. Second, that even if it were possible to implement pure meritocracy, it would be desirable to take into consideration certain non-meritocratic criteria in selecting for conferences and invited publications. Each claim is sufficient to lend support to affirmative action on grounds of sex in these contexts (and in

other contexts sharing the relevant features that make pure meritocracy infeasible, undesirable or both.)

2. The Good of Female Quotas

There are good reasons to think that something like a female quota in politics, business or academia — either as a formal and enforceable rule, or as an informal but nevertheless explicit aim — would be a good thing. Generally, female quotas are deemed desirable for increasing women's visibility and better integrating them into positions of power. These, in turn, are considered good for reasons of both fairness and social utility: women's better visibility and integration are part of what it takes to give them due recognition and are likely to be instrumental in preventing future discrimination.¹ And, in the longer term, the hope is that female quotas will result in more female role-models, encourage more women to participate and thus harness women's talent which, in less inclusive contexts, is likely to be lost. In academia, in particular, defenders of affirmative action usually point to its benefits in terms of attracting and retaining students who belong to minority groups and to the educational benefits of diversity. Another, straightforward way for making a case in favour of female quotas (especially in academia) is to argue that women's contributions are essential to achieving epistemic goals; standpoint theory supports this claim. The main line of reasoning in this article, however, does not depend on the controversial belief that merely being a woman makes it very likely that one will bring a new point of view to the discussion. (There are more specific reasons for having female quotas in particular areas of social life, which I will leave on one side for the purposes of this article.)

At the same time, women may think it is humiliating to accept a position if they have been offered it because of their sex. And women often think that, if there are rules to include them in positions of visibility or prestige — or if significant social pressures towards gender parity play a role in selection processes — their achievements will be discounted. Hence, the belief that one is, or is perceived as, a token woman can fuel resistance to both formal and informal female quotas. I hope to show that, luckily, there is no good reason for this worry.

If the proposal was that women should be invited on the *sole* ground of their sex, female quotas would be unfair, and accepting an invitation would indeed pose the threats of humiliation and of undermining women's achievements.² But nobody suggests including women on the sole ground of their sex; being a woman should be acknowledged as one of the legitimate grounds, alongside a minimum threshold of professional competence, for being included. Here, I argue that in some contexts there are several legitimate grounds — independent of professional competence — for including people in positions of visibility and prestige and that sometimes sex is such a legitimate reason. If this is true, there is nothing wrong with accepting that one is, or is perceived as, a token woman — although a lot is wrong with what makes tokenism possible! Also, it is important to overcome the ambivalence about participating in academic events of those who may be, or be perceived as, token women.

I focus on attempts to give more visibility to women in academia, and, even more specifically, in philosophy; such attempts include the gendered conference campaign, a recent initiative that encourages conference organisers to invite more women to speak, and campaigns to invite more women to author chapters in edited books. Much of what I say applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to attempts

to increase women's presence in politics and business by establishing all-female short-lists and female quotas in political bodies or business boards. But, in the latter cases, the discussion about quotas faces the additional complication that individuals are *elected* to positions, which raises special questions concerning not only the fair treatment of competitors for office, but also of their role in representing those who elect them. By contrast, academics are being invited, not elected, to give talks and write papers. They do not represent others. And it is far from clear that anybody has the right to be invited, or even to stand a fair chance of being invited, to a particular conference or to write for an edited volume. The fairness issue is less prominent, but not absent in this case; being invited to speak or author are forms of privilege and I will engage with the question of why female quotas are not unfair in these cases.

3. The Gendered Conference Campaign

The gendered conference campaign³ (henceforth the GCC) is an initiative supported by a growing number of philosophers who believe that the discipline of philosophy is overly dominated by men. The GCC supporters believe that conference organisers and volume editors should strive to include women philosophers amongst the invited speakers and authors in order to fight the stereotype of philosophy as a male subject.⁴ Male domination is both expressed by and perpetuated through having too many male-only conference and edited volumes. This state of affairs is deemed to contribute to the (possibly unconscious) stereotype that philosophy is best done by men, a stereotype which the proponents of the GCC think is detrimental to women in two ways. First, because it undermines the self-confidence of women who aspire to become professional philosophers, or to remain in this exceptionally competitive profession. Second, the stereotype feeds the conscious or unconscious biases against women, held by people who decide the fate of those who aspire to become or remain in the profession. Implicit bias refers to the attitudes or stereotypes that people hold unconsciously and which affect their thinking and behaviour; often the content of the implicit bias of an individual is significantly different from the content of the explicit attitudes and beliefs held by that same individual. Research suggests implicit bias is robust and pervasive and activated automatically.⁵ Several philosophers have argued that implicit bias against women, in conjunction with other factors, can explain their under-representation in philosophy.⁶

In spite of robust evidence, the existence and scope of implicit bias is disputed.⁷ Even when not disputed in principle, philosophers may (mistakenly, I think) believe that they are less likely than others to yield to its influence, thanks to the long philosophical tradition of critical reflection and self-scrutiny. The present argument does *not* depend on the existence of implicit bias against women. If implicit bias is as pervasive and uncontrollable as the proponents of the GCC believe it is, this lends additional force to my present reasoning. But it is helpful to consider a case in favour of initiatives such as the GCC that is independent from the existence of implicit bias. Even if there was no implicit bias — and if male domination was entirely due to past and present forms of explicit sexism⁸ — it would be reasonable to think that more gender-balance within professional philosophy could contribute to fairer chances for existing and would-be female philosophers, by making sex a less salient characteristic, and so sending the general message that people of both sexes can be professional philosophers.

Now imagine that you, a woman, are invited to speak at a conference whose organisers openly subscribe to the gendered conference campaign. The mere fact that some people decided to do

something about women's inclusion in the profession has of course not changed the profession overnight; you may still be one of the very few women around, whose presence is primarily meant to signal an intention to change things. In less happy cases, the organisers may be motivated by an intention to conform to mounting social expectations of female inclusion; often you cannot be sure whether this is the case. And you know that you may not be taken as seriously as you would be, should you be a man. In these senses, you are a prospective token woman.

Moreover, you know that in the absence of the GCC you would probably not have been invited. Someone else — most likely a man — would now be speaking in your place. Your sex most likely played a causal role in your being invited and in this sense, too, you are a token woman. Should you feel embarrassed, humiliated or otherwise unhappy with this situation?

At first blush yes, it does make sense to feel uneasy. As with other forms of affirmative action, something like an aspirational female quota in conferences and volumes entails that at least some of the women selected to take part as speakers or authors are not selected exclusively on merit, but also based on their sex. If speakers are not selected exclusively on merit, the usual criticism goes, this is bad both for the quality of the conferences or edited volumes in question, and for all the women speakers and authors in general, who have reason to wonder if their work is really deemed valuable to the profession. This gives you several things to worry about, if you are invited as a result of the GCC:

- i. whether the person who would have been invited in your place, in the absence of affirmative action, was unfairly excluded;
- ii. whether the quality of the conference or volume in question is any worse for your presence;
- iii. and whether people will think less of your work merely because you are a token woman.

I take it that the last two worries are closely connected: if you think your presence is not detrimental to the quality of the event, you should think that people have no reason to discount your work merely because you were invited due to the fact that you are a woman. It is, however, worth considering the possibility that people's reactions are not fully rational, and hence (iii) stands independently from (ii).

Before discussing ways to dispel them, note that even if all of the above worries were warranted, it could still be true that initiatives such as the GCC and other forms of promoting female professional philosophers are, on the whole, a good idea. Suppose such initiatives can indeed eliminate, or at least seriously mitigate, the stereotype that philosophy is a male activity and that they help, in the long term, attract and retain talented female philosophers.⁹ Assume, also, that women can make valuable contributions to philosophy and that they deserve a better chance to do so if they wish. Then it is possible that unfairness to some individuals who get the short end of the affirmative action stick — that is, who miss an opportunity to be invited — plus a potentially lower quality of academic events and the disparaging attitude of some towards the token women are prices worth paying. If (i), (ii) and (iii) were reasonable worries, affirmative action would indeed be a very mixed blessing to women who receive invitations. Fortunately, however, one need not concede these worries.

4. The 'Levelling the Playing-Field' Argument

One way in which people often respond to criticism of female quotas is by formulating the levelling the

playing-field argument:¹⁰

The levelling the playing-field argument points out that the field of professional philosophy is already biased against women.¹¹ In practice, this means that women are — other things being equal — less likely to be invited to conferences or edited volumes than a man. As a consequence, qualified women are more likely to be left out than qualified men, and affirmative action to include women is merely trying to level the playing field such that women of equal talent and qualifications are treated on a par with men.

The levelling the playing-field argument speaks convincingly to *part* of the worries above. If correct, it shows why the *particular people* — most likely, men — who would have been invited in the absence of any affirmative action are not treated unfairly if affirmative action is taken. If the GCC and similar initiatives merely level the playing-field of professional philosophy rather than tilt it in favour of women, this means the men thereby excluded had no claim to be included in the first place.¹²

But this argument does not speak to the further problem that, under a purely meritocratic system, *different people* — perhaps different women — would have been invited in the place of the women invited thanks to affirmative action. There is no guarantee that organisers and editors following, for instance, the GCC, will end up inviting the same individuals that would have been invited according to purely meritocratic rules; that is, in the absence of — amongst others — both the GCC and (explicit or implicit) bias against women. There are several reasons to believe this. First, it is extremely difficult to single out all individuals who are likely to enjoy unfair advantage or suffer from unfair disadvantage; for instance, some of the best women philosophers may have left the profession and other potentially excellent women philosophers may have failed to develop their abilities to the extent to which they would have in the absence of sexism.¹³ Second, there are additional reasons to think that organisers and editors will fail to always invite the most qualified women philosophers (those whose merit would have prevailed in ideal circumstances), reasons concerning the difficulties of defining merit and of letting merit-alone guide the invitation. I will elaborate on this latter point in the next section.

So, even if the levelling the playing-field argument shows that affirmative action is not unfair to all, perhaps to most of, the people who miss out on some invitations because of it, it cannot go all the way to dispel the uneasiness one may feel when finding oneself in the shoes of a token woman. As an invited speaker or author you may reasonably continue to nourish the doubt that, in a world of ideally organised academic events, you wouldn't be there. Moreover, as a female professional philosopher, whether you have in fact directly benefited from affirmative action or not, you have reason to worry that people who evaluate your accomplishments will think you were 'a mere token woman' in conferences and volumes where your work was presented, and hence refuse to give you credit for your talks and invited publications. As long as sexist attitudes persist, it is difficult to know who is and who is not a token woman.

Not only is the levelling the playing-field argument unable to fully address the worries of fairness; worse, this argument appeals to an ideal of pure meritocracy. If this was a valid *and* feasible ideal, it would probably limit the legitimacy of the GCC to the extent to which this initiative can conflict with advancing pure meritocracy: there is no reason to think that, in virtue of following the prescriptions of

the GCC, organisers and editors will always invite the *best* women philosophers. Then, if pure meritocracy were feasible and desirable, the GCC could undermine at the same time the self-confidence of the invited women and the social recognition of female academic philosophers in general.¹⁴

Finally, if pure meritocracy were feasible and desirable, and if the GCC failed to advance it, women philosophers who thought they ought to be invited even without the GCC could complain that the existence of the GCC casts doubt on their merit. This complaint is sometimes voiced by people who say that ‘talented and qualified women surely do not want to be invited to give a public lecture, or a conference paper, or to write an article for a book because of a female quota.’

The following sections explain why meritocracy is infeasible but also (and more controversially) undesirable. If this is correct, then being invited because you are a woman is in no way objectionable. On the contrary, one should *welcome* it — independently of how talented and qualified one thinks one is.

5. Is There Pure Meritocracy in Academia?

Initiatives such as the GCC raise the above-mentioned worries only if it is both feasible and desirable that organisers select participants to academic events exclusively on merit. But is pure meritocracy a truthful representation of how the selection of speakers and authors in philosophy works, or could work, or should work? In this section I address the first question before turning to the next two.

The criteria of excellence in philosophy are themselves contentious; let us assume, for now, that the ability to put forward the most convincing views, whether critical or constructive, determines who are the ‘best philosophers’; one may think this is too narrow a definition and wish to include dialogical abilities to bring out the best live philosophical exchanges with others to the definition. However defined, it is doubtful that selection for such academic enterprises operates on the basis of merit alone. People are invited to speak at conferences and participate as authors in edited volumes thanks not only to their expertise, but also to their academic reputation (which is, at best, an imperfect proxy for merit), acquaintance with the organisers, and, at least in the case of conferences, the reputation of being sociable or, in the case of edited volumes, of writing in an appealing style. People who edit volumes typically want to include a variety of viewpoints and sufficient new ideas to make the volume interesting. Conference organisers are also interested in having a friendly group of speakers, because this can be conducive to good scholarship, but also to promote good conversation in general and a good atmosphere. All these goals — diversity and novelty, friendly and relaxed working relationships and good conversation in general — can, under lucky circumstances, serve to *also* advance knowledge. But there is no reason to believe that the group of academics who are capable of advancing all these goals in the context of particular conferences and volumes coincide exactly with the group of academics who are the absolute best in that particular sub-field, even if it were possible to decide on the identity of the absolute best. Finally, it is plausible that conference organisers and book editors use, at least occasionally, their decision power in order to invite — and thereby promote — their own academic friends or would-be-friends, current and former students and other people they wish to please or help for one reason or another. (I briefly engage, below, with the legitimacy of non-

meritocratic reasons for inviting people.)

To better appreciate how unrealistic it is to assume that people are selected on purely meritocratic grounds, it is worth turning for a moment to the literature on meritocracy and female quotas in general. Anne Phillips — an advocate of female quotas in politics — encourages us to:

... query the startling presumption that existing incumbents were chosen on merit. One of the points raised in the wider literature is that, even in the most seemingly meritocratic of systems — the selection of students for academic courses or the appointment of academics to university jobs — there is normally a cluster of vaguer characteristics which can override the stricter numerical hierarchy of grades or publications or degrees, always moderated by additional criteria. These more qualitative criteria 'personality', 'character', whether the candidates will 'fit in') often favour those who are most like the people conducting the interview: more starkly, they often favour the men.¹⁵

If Phillips and her sources are right, pure merit does not determine the allocation of positions such as jobs or student places within academia, and even less does it determine job allocations outside it. Indeed, recent sociological research on hirings in elite professional service firms supports this hypothesis. According to Lauren Rivera, the often suggested, if rarely tested, belief that cultural similarities play a significant role in hiring is likely to be true. Based on interviews with 120 employers and participant observation of a hiring committee, she argues that cultural similarities such as the choice of leisure pursuits, experiences, and self-presentation styles significantly influence hirings and sometimes out-weigh the criterion of competence.¹⁶

6. Is Pure Meritocracy Feasible?

Nor *can* meritocracy be the only ground for selecting speakers and authors. Two necessary conditions have to be met to make it possible that pure meritocracy guides one's choice of invited speakers and authors: first, there should exist an objective hierarchy of philosophical competence. Second, organisers and editors should be able to know it. If such a fully-ordered hierarchy existed, and there were no serious epistemic obstacles to accessing it, the legitimacy of women quotas would be challenged — and so would the decision to invite academics partly because they are friendly, or people with unusual views or with a good sense of humour.

But relative comparisons of philosophical merit are bound to be widely disputed. For simplicity, assume, again, that the best philosophers are those who produce the best philosophical writings. There are several qualities they can display: importance of the issues they address, clarity, precision and plausibility of argument, depth, breadth, originality, insight. It is not obvious that it is possible to optimise all these qualities in one and the same piece of philosophical work. This makes it likely that there is no objective hierarchy of philosophical competence. Even if such hierarchy existed, it would be bound to be highly disputed. Different approaches to contemporary philosophy — such as analytic and continental — tend to operate with different methodologies and to praise different intellectual virtues.

Inside each camp there are various schools and orientations and people across them are unlikely to agree on who are the best philosophers.

It therefore seems plausible that it is not possible to produce a full, objective ordering according to merit — either because of the nature of reality, or because of the organisers' and editors' epistemic limitations. Given these assumptions, the best one can do if one wants to pursue pure meritocracy is to invite the people one *judges* to be 'the best of the best'.

Yet, in addition to the principled obstacles to pure meritocracy — the absence of an objective hierarchy and epistemic access to it — there are also pragmatic considerations that make meritocracy unattainable. In a globalised world of philosophy the number of existing qualified philosophers working on almost any particular topic tends to be much higher than the number of people whose work most individual organisers or editors can possibly be familiar with. It is very plausible that as an organiser or editor you will not know about many, perhaps a majority, of those whom you should be able to consider, should your aim be to select on pure merit. There are too many philosophers to know. Moreover, even if you *do* happen to know a large proportion of philosophers from the relevant field, chances are that you will find yourself at a loss when trying to decide whom to invite based exclusively on academic competence. There are too many philosophers to choose from. You will need to rely on additional criteria in order to go ahead with your conference or volume.

Finally, in all likelihood, reasons unrelated to competence will subconsciously guide the choice; full impartiality is not most people's strength. Readers convinced by the pervasive and unavoidable nature of implicit bias against women may think this is a principled, rather than pragmatic, reason to believe that pure meritocracy is infeasible. If the risk of unintentionally misjudging merit cannot be avoided it is particularly important to acknowledge that criteria other than merit are necessary; then, one can at least consider which such criteria are likely to be legitimate. This is a first step towards bringing such criteria into open consideration and subjecting them to scrutiny.

So, even if pure meritocracy was desirable, attempts to implement it might be impossible or too fraught with risk. It then seems legitimate — even if as a second best option — to allow other criteria in addition to competence to make the final cut in the selection of speakers and authors.

Some of the criteria that are in fact operating are morally innocent and likely to have desirable consequences. It is legitimate to invite people *also* because they are friendly or have unusual views or because they are female. All these features — friendliness, originality, being female — and probably others along with them, are likely to make the conference a better event — maybe academically, maybe by creating a better philosophical community; academically, because a relaxed atmosphere, or the existence of unusual points of view may be conducive to learning. But, beyond their immediate academic merit, conferences can also contribute to the nurturing of a philosophical community; community is particularly important to philosophy, since philosophy thrives through dialogue. Individual philosophers who participate in academic events can therefore contribute in more than one way to the excellence of a conference, or volume: through the quality of their work, but also through human qualities such as generosity, humour or friendliness. Belonging to a minority is, in this context, particularly important. The mere presence of a woman or an African American philosopher can send a message of inclusiveness and enable more members of the minority in question to participate in academic exchanges and, in the longer run, help change the general climate of academic philosophy.¹⁷ Supposing that the pursuit of truth is the only aim of the philosophical community — as a

believer in pure meritocracy will have to say — it will take more than mere academic merit to best reach this goal.

By contrast, inviting people because you want to promote them in the hope that they will do the same for you seems less legitimate: it is not clear how this would advance the interests of conference participants, or of the members of the profession in general. Accepting a form of qualified meritocracy, whether as a mere second best or as a fully desirable ideal, need not condone cronyism.

Whoever thinks it can be offensive to be invited because one is a woman should think twice. First — it is worth stressing this point — because the selection of the 'token woman' is never exclusively on grounds of being a female. If you were a historian, or a lawyer, or indeed, a blue-collar worker you would never get an invitation to give or publish a paper in philosophy just because you are a woman! Second, some women *are* invited in the absence of any affirmative action, but it is implausible that they are invited on merit only. Do you assume that an invitation is to be explained by the fact, or the belief, that one is the unqualified best choice of speaker or author? This assumption may reflect either excessive self-confidence or a measure of naivety.

If meritocracy is not, and cannot be, the only ground for selecting people in positions of visibility and prestige, an important reason to doubt the legitimacy of affirmative action in real- (as opposed to ideal-) world circumstances is gone. In particular, supporters of initiatives such as the GCC need not worry that the campaign will undermine meritocracy: there is no (possibility of) pure meritocracy in the first place when it comes to selecting invited speakers or authors. As a potential token woman, you need not be deterred by the fact that your sex played a causal role in your selection: the majority of participants have been, and had to be, selected on multiple grounds, with their competence being only one of the relevant factors. Only rarely is a philosopher truly non-fungible as a conference speaker or author. (If the conference discusses your own work, you are, in several senses, an irreplaceable participant. And if a Festschrift is dedicated to your work you have to be the one writing replies to other contributors.)

The 'levelling the playing-field' objection, too, denies that the ideal meritocracy is implemented, but, unlike the arguments I propose, it seems to assume that pure meritocracy is desirable: the reason it provides for including women is that, once the field is level, merit can, and should, prevail. By contrast, below I suggest that a form of qualified, rather than pure, meritocracy is defensible on principled grounds. But independently of how convincing my suggestion is, the fact that pure meritocracy is not — nor could it be — a reality in contemporary academia, should take the edge off the worry that one is a token woman. If selection on the basis of sex is unfair then it is a kind of unfairness already present, and unavoidable, in professional philosophy. As a token woman, you know that your sex has played a role in your receiving the invitation; but this fact is no special threat to the quality of the resulting conference or volume, nor should it feed any reasonable scepticism about the quality of your work. Most likely, other people's character, sociability, unusual views or relationship with the organisers or editors have played a role in the invitations *they* have received. Some of them may be the token eccentric or the token humourist. And there is no reason to think that features such as these stand in any closer relationship to academic quality than one's sex. Moreover, it is in all likelihood more desirable to create gender or racial inclusiveness than say, a good-humoured academic environment.

7. Pure Meritocracy or Equality of Real Opportunities?

How worried should we be that invited speakers and authors are not, nor cannot be, selected on the basis of pure merit: what is the role that merit ought to play, ideally, in selection? I do not claim to fully address this large issue in a few paragraphs. But I outline, in this section, a reason why merit ought not to be the only consideration determining invitations to speak and author. It is plausible to reject pure meritocracy in favour of equality of real — as opposed to merely formal — opportunities. If so, then one need not regret that pure meritocracy is infeasible; instead, one can embrace wholeheartedly a form of qualified meritocracy in which some characteristics, but not others, are acknowledged as legitimate non-meritocratic reasons for inviting speakers and authors. Alternatively, one may choose (weighted) lotteries as a method to select invitees. In both cases, inviting women because they are women seems to be a very good idea, one that should make women pleased to participate *qua* women, and even *qua* token women.

Meritocracy is sometimes criticised for its incompatibility with real (rather than merely formal) opportunity. If people are selected exclusively on merit, then the less talented do not stand any chance. But this seems in one way unfair: at least in the case of conferences, participating as a speaker is desirable not only as a source of prestige but also as an occasion for speakers to improve their work. It is, at least *prima facie*, objectionable if some members of the profession have much fewer opportunities than others to enjoy the benefits of having their work discussed by their peers. Some selection methods could ensure equality of real opportunity — such as, for instance, a lottery, the details of which I discuss below.

Note that rejecting pure meritocracy in favour of a principle of equal real opportunities is compatible with preserving the scholarly nature of academic events as well as with ensuring their high quality — although not always with *maximising* quality. One only needs to apply the principle of equal real opportunities to a group of peers, who have already been selected on merit as members of the profession. In professional philosophy, and probably in academia in general, it should not be difficult to preserve sufficient quality while rejecting absolute meritocracy, because it is plausible that all professional philosophers are of a certain minimal merit. To become an academic philosopher one has to undergo extensive education and validation, including a PhD. For many years now there has been a lot more demand than supply of jobs in philosophy, which means that, in order to remain in the profession, one must be repeatedly validated by one's peers. After the successful defence of their doctoral thesis, philosophers usually have to publish their work in peer-reviewed venues. (You may dispute how good an indicator of quality this is but, I take it, if the peer-review is properly anonymised it is the *best* indicator currently available.) This makes it likely that, if lotteries were to determine who is invited to conferences and edited volumes, the quality of these events would not be threatened. An organiser could, for instance, identify philosophers who work on particular issues using easily available and increasingly large electronic databases such as PhilPapers and then run a lottery to determine whom to invite.

A straightforward lottery, one that gives an equal chance to everybody already in the profession to present their work as invited speakers or authors, may or may not select some women as participants in each academic event: women constitute a considerably lower proportion of academic philosophers

than men.¹⁸ But the lottery may as well secure one or several positions for women speakers or authors (as well as for other under-represented groups). Having lotteries with female quotas would represent an improvement, if the sovereign principle of selection were the promotion of equal real opportunity. To say that the discipline of philosophy has been biased against women, as this article assumes, is to say that qualified women had fewer real opportunities than equally qualified men to enter or remain in the profession. A principle of equal real opportunities applied to the more basic level of who enters and remains in the profession would then recommend weighted lotteries as a selection procedure. Moreover, the other assumption of this article is that having female quotas in conferences and edited volumes will make professional philosophy more women-friendly. If so, it will promote a principle of equal real opportunity in the long term, by giving women philosophers more equal chances to enter and remain in academia.

Some will fail to be persuaded by the claim that pure meritocracy is undesirable. You may be a die-hard defender of selection on merit within academia, who would not approve of equal opportunity and (weighted) lotteries when it comes to conferences and publications. You may think that an organiser's job is to ensure their event is as academically excellent as possible, rather than to be observant of a principle of equality of real opportunities. To make the case for a female quota, however, it is enough to show that pure meritocracy is infeasible.

8. Conclusions

The following thought should be comforting to the token woman: if there was no policy to invite women in the first place, then other, equally merit-independent features of yours would explain, at least in part, why you were invited, and *this would be all right*.

To sum up: being a token woman is not an especially desirable position, but for many professional philosophers it may be their best chance to participate in academic events such as conferences and edited volumes. Moreover, having token women may be necessary to make professional philosophy more women-friendly. Their participation is good both for themselves, and because it is instrumental to making the profession more inclusive to women, and in this way promoting non-discrimination and philosophical quality. A token woman is, by definition, not selected on merit only, and therefore one may entertain some reasonable worries if one is in such a position, worries that may deter one from accepting invitations. On reflection, these worries are not warranted. Selecting some participants because they are women is not unfair to anybody in particular since most participants are unavoidably selected on mixed grounds, and it is not otherwise wrong since not all non-meritocratic selection criteria are illegitimate. In fact, by accepting the role of token woman one does not violate any rules of fairness in the present and one promotes fairness in the long term. A first cheer to this! Second, having token women is not likely to worsen the quality of the event any more than selecting people on other legitimate non-meritocratic criteria (the use of some of which will be unavoidable). On the contrary: if diversity of viewpoints advances quality, as a token woman you *may* be able to add value, directly or indirectly, to the academic event in which you participate. A second cheer to this! Third, the existence of token women need not result in the devaluation of women's work. Women's work is already devalued, and of course there is no guarantee that including more women *qua* women will improve everybody's ability to give due credit to women philosophers. There is also no guarantee that it will not

help some to rationalise their scepticism about women philosophers. But, as a token women, you have a chance to change at least a few people's minds about the merits of your work and in general about women's ability to contribute to philosophy. A final cheer to this! In total, three cheers for the token woman.¹⁹

Notes

- 1 Both older and more recent defences of affirmative action point to the fact that it promotes the good of integration, which is necessary in order to avoid future discrimination. See, for instance — and for the case of racial integration — Elizabeth Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration*, Princeton (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).
- 2 Recent opponents of affirmative action appeal to the very general — and hence widely endorsed — Aristotelian principle of equality, which requires us to treat equals equally. According to Carl Cohen, the principle ‘certainly entails at least this: It is wrong, always and everywhere, to give special advantage to any group *simply* on the basis of physical characteristics that have no relevance to the award given or the burden imposed’ [my emphasis] in Carl Cohen & James Sterba, *Affirmative Action and Racial Preference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2003), p. 25.
- 3 See <http://www.thepetitionsite.com/505/468/134/support-the-gendered-conference-campaign/> (Accessed 29 July 2014).
- 4 Alternative efforts to realise the same goal are more prescriptive, demanding that male philosophers refuse invitations to be keynote speakers at conferences with two or more keynotes none of which are women. There is disagreement about how precise the demands of gendered campaigns should be.
- 5 For an introduction to the state of the art on implicit bias, including definition, measurement and effect in education, criminal justice and health care see Cheryl Staats & Charles Patton, *Implicit Bias Review 2013* (Columbus, OH: Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, Ohio State University, 2013).
- 6 For accounts of how bias against women is likely to work in professional philosophy see J. Saul, ‘Implicit bias, stereotype threat and women in philosophy’ in F. Jenkins and K. Hutchison (eds) *Women in Philosophy: What Needs to Change?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013), pp. 39–60.
- 7 See for instance Philip Tetlock & Gregory Mitchell, ‘Implicit bias and accountability systems: What must organizations do to prevent discrimination?’, *Research in Organizational Behavior* 29 (2009): 3–38.
- 8 The history of sexism in academic philosophy is likely to have created a path-dependent

development of the field that can explain current marginalisation of women. But there is ample anecdotal evidence of current sexist behaviour; see beingawomaninphilosophy.wordpress.com/ (Accessed 29 July 2014) for numerous first-hand testimonials.

- 9 Some may think that in such a case the token women would be used as a means to an end. But if initiatives like the GCC are successful, they aren't necessarily used merely as a means: what is likely to be their own end — feeling more at home in academic philosophy — is also being intentionally advanced (in the longer run).
- 10 This form of argument has been recently put forward, in the debate on affirmative action, by Robert Fullinwider & Judith Lichtenberg in *Leveling the Playing Field: Justice, Politics, and College Admissions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004). Sally Haslanger and Louise Antony have appealed to it in the context of discussing affirmative action concerning women in academic philosophy. See Sally Haslanger, 'Changing the ideology and culture of philosophy: Not by reason (alone)', *Hypatia* 23,2 (2008): 210–223 and Louise Antony, 'Different voices or perfect storm: Why are there so few women in philosophy?', *Journal of Social Philosophy* 43,3 (2012): 227–255.
- 11 That professional philosophy is biased against women in one way or another is a fundamental presupposition of this article. For arguments, see Haslanger op cit. For more details and possible explanations of the lack of women in philosophy, see Antony op. cit.
- 12 This is one of the traditional arguments in favour of affirmative action, initially defended by Mary Anne Warren, 'Secondary sexism and quota hiring,' *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 6 (1977): 240–261 and J. Rachels, 'What people deserve' in J. Arthur & W. Shaw (eds) *Justice and Economic Distribution*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978): 150–163. Warren and Rachels argued that privileges lost by those at the losing end of affirmative action were not legitimate privileges in the first place.
- 13 This is, again, a standard objection to the levelling the playing-field argument in favour of affirmative action. See Robert Fullinwider, 'Affirmative action', in E. N. Zalta (ed.) *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Accessed 17 September 2013).
- 14 The criticism of pure meritocracy as a ground for the GCC will be less persuasive for those who are convinced by the literature on implicit bias; if there is implicit bias against women, then the GCC may be the most efficient way to increase meritocracy. The argument of this article — as already noted — aims to make a case for the GCC which is independent of the truth on implicit bias.
- 15 Anne Phillips, *The Politics of Presence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 61.
- 16 Lauren Rivera, 'Hiring as cultural matching: The case of elite professional service firms', *American Sociological Review* 77,6 (2012): 999–1022.

- 17 This can raise the worry that, in an environment that is utterly and openly hostile to women, the presence of the 'token woman' can be an obstacle to dialogue. I do not claim that including women — or other minorities — can lead to better conferences under *any* circumstances, but women should be the last ones to feel embarrassed if other participants are hostile to them *qua* women.
- 18 See Haslanger op. cit.; Antony op. cit.; and the 'Survey of Earned Doctorates' from the National Opinion Research Center of the University of Chicago (2009), reported at: <http://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2011/05/05/gender-composition-of-academic-disciplines-phds-in-2009/> (Accessed 29 July 2014).
- 19 I am grateful to Christine Bratu and Judit Szalai for conversations that helped me find out why I think one should not feel embarrassed to be a token woman. And to Ryoa Chung, Jurgen De Wispelaere, Miranda Fricker, Lisa Herzog, Jessica Leech, Adina Preda, Jennifer Saul, Anders Schinkel, Nicole van Voorst Vader-Bours and members of the feminist philosophy reading group at the University of Sheffield for helpful comments on previous drafts.

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