



MAKING WOMEN VISIBLE IN PHILOSOPHY

DIVERSIFYING PHILOSOPHY: PATHWAYS TOWARDS A MORE INCLUSIVE CANON

WHAT IS THIS ABOUT?

Academic philosophy faces a representation problem. The established canon consists almost exclusively of white, male thinkers from Western traditions. This not only shapes perceptions of who can count as a philosopher, but also reinforces mechanisms of exclusion within academic career paths. Women and members of marginalised groups (for example, people of colour or individuals from non-academic family backgrounds) remain comparatively underrepresented in philosophy despite progress over recent decades — particularly at higher career stages.

Moreover, also philosophy and ethics teaching at secondary schools tends to convey an image of philosophy and philosophers as male, Western, and white.

This handout addresses the question of how greater diversity can be systematically embedded into the traditional philosophical canon in both research and teaching. We begin by outlining general

challenges on the path towards greater diversity in philosophy. We then present six tried-and-tested strategies for making teaching and research more diverse. In addition, we identify common pitfalls that may arise during implementation — and how to overcome them.

For those teaching philosophy at secondary schools, the final section of the handout offers additional guidance and practical examples.

CHALLENGES AT A GLANCE

The current structure of the canon not only leads to a distorted perception of what counts as philosophy, but also has concrete effects on academic careers, research perspectives, and institutional structures.

This becomes visible on several levels.

- **Leaky pipeline:** The higher the academic qualification, the lower the proportion of women and members of marginalised groups. Various hypotheses have been proposed to explain this situation. Access to philosophy is hindered not only by the lack of female role models in the canon and by a conception of philosophical authorship shaped predominantly by male and Western figures, but also by an academic climate that is often experienced as exclusionary ('chilly climate'). This climate manifests, for example, in confrontational styles of communication, as well as in more subtle mechanisms of exclusion, such as lack of representation, unspoken expectations, or the absence of a supportive, friendly environment.
- **Normative effects of the canon:** The canon shapes whose ideas are regarded as foundational to the discipline — and whose are not. This also creates path dependencies in philosophical research. Which questions are asked, and whose perspectives are included? Which research topics are institutionally rewarded and supported through external funding?
- **Distorted epistemic perspectives:** A narrow canon reduces the range of concepts and analytical tools necessary for a deeper understanding of social structures. It privileges certain modes of thought while marginalizing others (see below for more on the pitfall of adopting core philosophical concepts without critical reflection).
- **Resistance to change:** Even when alternative perspectives are introduced into teaching or research, there are often no institutional structures in place to ensure they are sustained. Moreover, the canon is frequently regarded as 'neutral' or 'objective', which means that attempts to broaden it may encounter resistance — whether through appeals to tradition or by treating certain forms of knowledge as inherently more important than others.

STRATEGIES FOR DIVERSIFICATION

The following strategies can be implemented — individually or in combination — in order to actively challenge, expand, and diversify the canon. They are intended as suggestions for both teaching and research and can be adapted or supplemented depending on the specific context. The aim is to open up new possibilities for thinking and teaching, and in doing so, to question inherited and seemingly self-evident assumptions.



Pairing Complementing Canonical Figures with Alternative Perspectives

The method of pairing deliberately combines canonical texts with writings by lesser-known thinkers. One example is the joint reading of René Descartes and Elisabeth of Bohemia, who discuss central questions in metaphysics, philosophy of mind, and moral philosophy in their correspondence. Placing these texts side by side makes it possible to highlight and relate different styles of argumentation and philosophical perspectives.

+/- A key advantage of this method is its compatibility with established course content and its capacity to make underrepresented positions visible not in isolation, but in dialogue. At the same time, the strategy carries certain risks. It may result in non-canonical authors appearing merely as secondary figures or respondents to canonical figures. This creates the danger that they are relegated to a secondary role, without full recognition of their independent philosophical contributions. Moreover, the overall structure of the canon often remains largely intact when using the pairing method, since text selection may still revolve around debates that have already been canonised.



Expansion

Adding New Thinkers Instead of Merely Repeating Classical Names

This strategy actively incorporates new voices and perspectives into teaching and research in order to expand the canon over the long term. The aim is not mere juxtaposition, but recognition of alternative traditions of thought in their own right. For example, in political philosophy one might include texts by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain or Nkiru Nzegwu.

+/- This approach fosters the pluralisation of philosophy by making systematically excluded perspectives visible. In teaching, however, it often requires restructuring existing syllabi. This entails additional research and preparation.



Constellation Research

Filling Gaps by Systematically Reintegrating Overlooked Precursors, Contributions, and Discourses

Constellation research is dedicated to reconstructing the complex networks of connections between philosophers, ideas, and historical contexts. It works with archival materials such as letters, reviews, and manuscript fragments, and in some cases also draws on oral traditions. In this way, connections and mutual influences become visible that have often been overlooked — for instance, when individual thinkers are portrayed as timeless geniuses detached from their intellectual environments.

Peter Adamson's podcast *A History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps*, for example, demonstrates how the systematic inclusion of Islamic and Jewish thinkers reshapes the writing of the history of philosophy.



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+/- A major advantage of this method is its strong compatibility with the established history of philosophy and its canon, as well as with common philological and philosophical practices and methods. At the same time, it is very time-consuming, as it requires extensive work with primary sources and detailed contextual knowledge. In teaching, moreover, it is less suitable if the focus is on systematic philosophical questions rather than historical reconstruction.



Re-reading **Reinterpreting Well-Known Texts from New Perspectives**

The strategy of re-reading aims at a critical engagement with the existing canon. Central texts are revisited and interpreted in new ways. A prominent example is the 37-volume series *Re-reading the Canon*, edited by Nancy Tuana, which brings together feminist re-readings of major Western philosophers. In this context, for instance, Aristotle's ethics is examined from feminist and postcolonial perspectives.

+/- This method enables a far-reaching critique of established positions. At the same time, it risks offering only a refinement of what already exists. Since the focus remains on canonical texts, the transformative scope of this approach may ultimately be limited.



Method of Separation

Designing Dedicated Courses Focused Exclusively on Women Philosophers or Non-Western Thinkers

The method of separation assigns underrepresented philosophers and traditions their own seminars or lecture series. For example, an entire course might be devoted exclusively to Afro-diasporic thought or to ecofeminism. In ethics, one might design courses based on approaches from disability studies or critical race theory. A seminar on ethics beyond the autonomy paradigm, for instance, could build on the work of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson or María Puig de la Bellacasa.

+/- This strategy allows for focused engagement with particular bodies of thought, without making them seem less important than the more well-known texts. It thus helps prevent marginalization within mixed curricula. At the same time, it carries certain risks – most notably that of ‘ghettoisation’. When content is treated separately in this way, there is a danger that it will not be perceived as an integral and equal part of philosophical discourse, but rather as an optional or specialised subfield.



Moving Beyond Author-Centred Approaches

Thinking in Terms of Themes and Networks of Ideas Rather Than Centering 'Great Thinkers'

A more idea-based, systematic approach places emphasis on argumentative structures and philosophical problems rather than on individual authors. In teaching, this can be implemented through thematic seminars — for example, on 'Concepts of Justice' or 'Embodiment and Mind'. Texts by diverse groups of authors are treated on an equal footing, without foregrounding particular philosophical figures.

+/- Shifting away from author-centred approaches towards a thematic and network-oriented perspective enables forms of teaching that do not reproduce canonical exclusions. At the same time, this strategy carries certain risks. First, it may obscure the historical context and developmental trajectories of philosophical ideas — knowledge that is often necessary for critically situating particular positions. Second, even within this approach, it remains important to pay attention to the diversity of the philosophers included and to the thematic breadth of the material selected.

ATTENTION! FOUR CLASSIC PITFALLS – AND HOW TO AVOID THEM

Anyone seeking to transform the philosophical canon enters a complex field marked by numerous challenges. Good intentions alone are not enough — certain pitfalls should be recognised and avoided. Classic traps that repeatedly arise in teaching contexts, curricula, and research practice include the following:



Pitfall No. 1: Philosophical Core Concepts Remain Unexamined

Concepts such as 'reason', 'nature', 'the subject', or 'freedom' are not neutral terms — they are historically and culturally shaped, often by Eurocentric and patriarchal traditions of thought. Anyone working with these concepts must acknowledge their ambiguity and critically contextualise them, rather than presupposing a single, universal meaning.



Pitfall No. 2: Lack of Intersectionality

An analysis that focuses solely on gender or solely on origin does not go far enough. Discrimination operates intersectionally — that is, through the interaction of multiple social categories such as gender, skin colour, class, disability, or sexual orientation. Without this perspective, efforts to diversify may generate new forms of exclusion.



Philosophy in Secondary Schools: Impulses for More Diversity

Starting Point

- When philosophy or ethics courses are offered at secondary schools, pupils often encounter an image of philosophy that is predominantly male and Western. According to a 2024 analysis of current upper secondary curricula for philosophy and ethics classes in Germany, e.g., 96.7% of the philosophers named are men, and 99.8% come from Western countries. In upper secondary school textbooks in Germany published between 2015 and 2022, 94.3% of the philosophers represented are male, and 99.4% are from Western countries. Despite considerable differences in education systems, this situation is likely familiar to educators in many countries – insofar as philosophy is taught at all in secondary schools. In the Netherlands, e.g., the current curriculum includes work by only one woman (Martha Nussbaum), compared to 18 men. In France, the list of philosophers recommended for the baccalauréat names 77 men and only 6 women – none of them from before the 20th century. While the UK's Philosophy A-Level specification features a somewhat higher proportion of female philosophers (10 out of 54 reference texts are written or co-written by women), those numbers are misleading. Only a small portion of class time is allotted to these works, resulting once again in a predominantly male curriculum ([Burkard et al. 2025](#))
- As a recent study shows, both pupils and teachers at secondary schools perceive philosophy as a male-dominated field. The study further indicates that female pupils tend to rate their own philosophical abilities lower than male pupils do – regardless of their actual competence ([Leopold et al. 2025](#))

Possible Approaches

- The strategies described above for diversifying the canon at universities can, in part, also be applied to make the diversity of philoso-

! Pitfall No. 3: Mere Expansion Instead of Structural Change

Women philosophers and non-Western thinkers must not appear merely as add-ons – for example, in a single session devoted to the collective 'Other' or the 'non-canonical', in marginal notes, or in elective modules. Only by redefining what counts as 'philosophical' can the persistence of the dominant paradigm be effectively challenged.

A particularly deceptive subtype of additive approaches is tokenism. This refers to the symbolic inclusion of individual representatives of marginalised groups – for instance, the occasional mention of a woman philosopher or a non-Western thinker – without any corresponding transformation of existing structures. Prominent figures such as Audre Lorde or Simone de Beauvoir sometimes function as a kind of 'fig leaf', creating the appearance of diversity without fundamentally questioning or reshaping the canon.

! Pitfall No. 4: Lack of Institutional Embedding

The commitment of individual lecturers and students is not sufficient to bring about lasting change in the canon. Structural support from institutions such as universities and research funding bodies is also required – for example, in the form of research projects on diversifying the canon, targeted support for early-career scholars, and institutional incentives for diversity-oriented teaching and research.



phy more accessible in secondary schools.

- Using the pairing method, e.g., Al-Ghazali and René Descartes can be brought into a productive dialogue about radical scepticism. The role of hypotheses in science can be explored through a joint reading of Émilie du Châtelet and Karl Popper. John Rawls and Martha Nussbaum can be read together to address questions of justice.
- Using the method of separation, entire teaching units can be designed exclusively around contributions by women philosophers in order to examine their theories in their own right. Examples include sequences on Iris Marion Young's concept of structural injustice, or a unit on the tension between equality, difference, and intersectionality featuring texts by bell hooks and Kimberlé Crenshaw.
- As in the university context, potential pitfalls must also be considered in secondary schools. For example, one should avoid treating individual philosophers as representatives of their entire gender or tradition (tokenism). The separate treatment of women philosophers or thinkers from non-Western traditions may also give pupils the impression that these authors or their philosophies are too exceptional to be addressed alongside 'mainstream' philosophy (risk of ghettoization or othering). An alternative approach is to integrate lesser-known philosophers into problem-oriented teaching without foregrounding identity categories.

Further Resources

Extending New Narratives in the History of Philosophy – An international network working to reshape research and teaching by amplifying historically marginalised voices.

MAP – Minorities and Philosophy – A resource platform with curated reading lists and teaching materials addressing underrepresentation in philosophy curricula.

PhilSci-EU – Inclusive Teaching in Philosophy – A collection of strategies and practical approaches for inclusive philosophy teaching in schools and universities.

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