



BEING-FROM-BIRTH: PREGNANCY AND PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

Women are underrepresented in philosophy. And pregnancy is under-researched in philosophy. Can a connection be made between the two? I will argue that whilst the counterfactual of ‘had women historically been better represented in philosophy then pregnancy would have been too’ may be true, it is not necessarily the case that we can now, in the present day, expect (or desire) a correlation. In order to understand the gap between these two areas of underrepresentation, one need only adopt a non-essentialist understanding of women so as to recognise that not all women experience pregnancy or are interested in pregnancy (philosophically or otherwise). Nevertheless, given the historical silence(ing) of women in philosophy on the topic of pregnancy, it is important now to redress that imbalance by tackling both issues of underrepresentation simultaneously. To demonstrate further I refer to the difference between representational diversity and substantive diversity (which is related to the more commonly known distinction between descriptive representation and substantive representation). This will be the topic of the first section of the paper. Then, in the second and third sections of the paper I will explore the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of women in philosophy, regarding not only the lack of women numerically speaking but also how women, as a general ‘kind’, are (misogynistically) described in philosophy historically. I will then apply the same treatment to pregnancy in the fourth and fifth sections of the paper, exploring both its underrepresentation as a topic of philosophical endeavour

and misrepresentation within society at large. The analysis contains a review of the literature, and cites statistical quantitative data and qualitative grounded interviews, to provide evidence for my claims. I will end by hypothesising about the relationship between these under- and mis- representations, and will provide musings on the future for women and pregnancy in philosophy.

Keywords: *representation; diversity; women; pregnancy; philosophy.*

1. Introduction

Women are underrepresented in philosophy. And pregnancy is under-researched in philosophy. Can a connection be made between the two? I will argue that whilst the counterfactual of ‘had women historically been better represented in philosophy then pregnancy would have been too’ may be true, it is not necessarily the case that we can now, in the present day, expect (or desire) a correlation. In order to understand the gap between these two areas of underrepresentation, one need only adopt a non-essentialist understanding of women so as to recognise that not all women experience pregnancy or are interested in pregnancy (philosophically or otherwise). Nevertheless, given the historical silence(ing) of women in philosophy on the topic of pregnancy, it is important now to redress that imbalance by tackling both issues of underrepresentation simultaneously. To demonstrate further I refer to the difference between representational diversity and substantive diversity (which is related to the more commonly known distinction between descriptive representation and substantive representation). This will be the topic of the first section of the paper. Then, in the second and third sections of the paper I will explore the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of women in philosophy, regarding not only the lack of women numerically speaking but also how women, as a general ‘kind’, are (misogynistically) described in philosophy historically. I will then apply the same treatment to pregnancy in the fourth and fifth sections of the paper, exploring both its underrepresentation as a topic of philosophical endeavour and misrepresentation within society at large. The analysis contains a review of the literature, and cites statistical quantitative data and qualitative grounded interviews, to provide evidence

for my claims. I will end by hypothesising about the relationship between these under- and mis- representations, and will provide musings on the future for women and pregnancy in philosophy.

2. Representation and Diversity

In the area of political theory, a distinction is often made between descriptive and substantive representation, based on two of the four types of representation identified by Hanna Pitkin in *The Concept of Representation* (1967).¹ To explain the difference between these types of representation, take group X to include all the x's who are to be represented, and take group Y to include all the y's who are to be the representatives. Y *descriptively* represents X when the x's and y's share a salient characteristic P. For example, it could be argued that Margaret Thatcher descriptively represents women as Margaret Thatcher is herself a woman. Y *substantively* represents X when the interests Q of the x's with respect to their characteristic P is acted upon by Y. For example, it could be argued that Barack Obama substantively represents women as he acted upon women's interests.

Pitkin argued that the descriptive type of representation is limited because it focuses on the identity of the representative(s) rather than the actions or policies of the representative(s) and how they reflect the interests of the represented group.² This is evident when we consider whether descriptive representation leads to substantive representation, and therefore whether the represented x's and their representative y's sharing characteristic P is necessary and/or sufficient for Y representing the interests Q of X which pertain to P. Consider a possible counterexample to sufficiency, where Margaret Thatcher is a woman yet did "nothing" for women (Murray 2013). Here we see descriptive representation despite not acting upon the interests of those represented, and so the sharing of P was not sufficient for the sharing of Q. And consider a possible counterexample to necessity, where Barack Obama is not a woman yet did do something for women.³ Here

¹ The two other types of representation that I will not be discussing are formalistic and symbolic.

² Pitkin (1969, 9) argued that these other forms of representation, all but substantive, fail to consider "what is going on during representation" and as such do not reflect what is important to focus on in representation.

³ For example, supporting the 2014 'HeForShe' campaign and launching policies to address the gender

we see substantive representation despite not having the characteristic of those represented, and so the sharing of P was not necessary for the sharing of Q. If these counterexamples are not convincing, there are many others that help to show the conceptual gap between descriptive and substantive representation.⁴ Another way of making sense of this conceptual gap is to acknowledge that members of groups are not always allies to that group. As perplexing as that may seem, I am sure each reader can bring to mind someone who fits this description, whether it be a misogynistic woman, a racist person of colour, or a gay man with internalised homophobia, for example.

Following on from the work led by Laura Sjoberg and Yoav Galai at Royal Holloway University of London, a related qualification can be made between representational diversity and substantive diversity:

Representational diversity asks: do the administration, the faculty, the staff, and the students of the University/the department represent the race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability, and national origin diversity of the community that the University serves?

Substantive diversity asks: does the content of our syllabi and our publications accurately and effectively reflect the scope of our fields? If not, what content is being privileged? What content is being marginalised? When we teach philosophy, whose philosophy are we teaching? Whose understandings influence what we define as philosophy?

This distinction in some way mirrors that put forward by Pitkin, where representational diversity is about descriptive representation or shared characteristics with those represented, and substantive diversity is about substantive representation or acting on the interests of the represented. In this paper I will be looking at the relation between the (descriptive) representational diversity of philosophy when it comes to women and

pay gap.

⁴ Philips (1995), Williams (1998), and Young (2000), show that the quantity of women as representatives for women is not sufficient for reflecting the quality of the representation of women's interests. And Celis (2008) shows that a representative does not necessarily have to look like who they are representing in order to act in their interests.

the substantive diversity of philosophy when it comes to research about pregnancy. I will argue that we get (descriptive) representational diversity in philosophy by having women philosophers in the canon, women philosophers in our departments, and women philosophers in our reading lists, but that we also should strive for substantive diversity in philosophy by having pregnancy be a canonical topic, where pregnancy is included in the research interests of our members of department, and is taught as part of our syllabi. The (descriptive) representational diversity of the inclusion of women in these spheres does not automatically result in substantive diversity of the inclusion of pregnancy. Pregnancy is not only a women's issue. However, the historic exclusion of women from these spheres is partly explanatory for the exclusion of pregnancy. As such, I will explore the historic underrepresentation (and misrepresentation) of women in philosophy alongside the historic underrepresentation (and misrepresentation) of pregnancy in philosophy, in order to demonstrate a correlation between them and an indication towards a probabilistic influence that one has over the other.⁵ Specifically, I want to make the counterfactual claim, that if philosophy were to have included more women, then it is likely that philosophy would have included pregnancy in a more substantive way. And so now one of the various strategies we may take to correct these underrepresentation's is to include more women in philosophy which may help to increase the inclusion of pregnancy in philosophy.

Whilst I am connecting women with pregnancy in this loose sense, I want to make clear that this is not intended as an argument for essentialism, whereby women are defined by their reproductive capacities. And whilst I am using the language of 'woman' as if it were a neat category, I stress the importance of challenging (rather than reinforcing) the binary of man/woman. Of course, in an ideal world, the gender of the philosopher should simply be irrelevant. However, we are not living in a world where gender is or has historically been irrelevant, which is why highlighting women's work is important (for examples, see Finn 2021; Vintiadis 2020; Buxton and Whiting 2020), as well as paying closer attention to highly gendered work, like pregnancy. This does not, however, make pregnancy a topic

⁵ This is in line with Dodson (2006) and Philips (1995) who state that the influence of descriptive representation on substantive representation is 'probabilistic, rather than deterministic'. As such, inclusion of women increases the possibility of inclusion of pregnancy, but does not guarantee it, and there may be other ways too of achieving more substantive diversity and representation of pregnancy.

for only women to engage with specifically. I remember at the start of my career considering whether I, as a feminist, ought to specialise in feminist philosophy. Whilst I do indeed now engage with feminist philosophy, I am firmly of the opinion that I, as a feminist, ought to specialise in any area of philosophy that I like (as I do in metaphysics and logic), and also that everyone ought to be a feminist (as feminist philosophy is for everyone). Philosophers who are women are philosophers first, and incidentally women, yet the prejudice comes from taking them to be women first, and incidentally philosophers.⁶ It is seemingly harder to bring to mind names of philosophers who are women who are not side-lined as philosophers who write about women, for women. There are two important points which speak to this prejudice: (1) philosophy of gender, pregnancy, and feminist philosophy are not solely by and for women, they are by and for everyone, and impact on everyone; (2) philosophers who are women do not solely work on the philosophy of gender, pregnancy, and feminist philosophy, they work in all areas of philosophy. As such, women philosophers are not philosophers for women. This means that descriptive representation does not always lead to substantive representation when it comes to women in philosophy.

That is not to say though that historically the connection cannot be made. Rather, when we look back, we can see that women philosophers did contribute disproportionately to specifically feminist philosophy, suggesting more of a link between descriptive (representational) diversity and substantive representation/diversity. As Vintiadis puts it:

Women have contributed in many different ways, and their work spans the range from analytic philosophy of logic (e.g., Susan Stebbing, Susan Haack, Ruth Barcan Marcus) through to new subject areas in applied ethics (e.g., Martha Nussbaum, Judith Jarvis Thomson, Christine Korsgaard). And of course, women should be free to contribute to philosophy as they individually see fit, and not forced into someone else's vision of what they ought to be writing about, qua women. Still, the most obvious way that women have contributed is in addressing questions that arise for women, in the first

⁶ As described by Buxton and Whiting (2021) in discussing the reception of their book *The Philosopher Queens*.

instance, in the area of feminist philosophy. Though feminist philosophical approaches, such as those of Judith Butler, Luce Irigaray and Patricia Hill Collins, are very different from one another, they have generally been an attempt to bring to light that what has been traditionally taken to be an objective point of view, a view from nowhere, was, in fact, associated exclusively with one particular point of view, the male one—that of the knower by default. (Vintiadis 2021)

The claim that, in certain circumstances, descriptive (representational) diversity is linked to the substantive representation/diversity of historically excluded groups (such as women in philosophy) has been subject to empirical testing and is generally supported.⁷ In order to demonstrate, and by way of context, I will now provide some of that pertinent data which highlights (and connects) the underrepresentation of women and pregnancy in philosophy.

3. The (Under)representation of Women in Philosophy

A 2018 survey conducted by the Higher Education Statistics Agency showed that only 29.7% of philosophers employed in UK universities are women. This is the lowest representation of women in any discipline outside of science, technology, and engineering. And in the US, the latest data assessed in 2011 from the Digest of Education Statistics (a publication of the National Center for Education Statistics) found only 21% of professional philosophers to be women. This is also reflected in the data on percentage of tenured women in philosophy departments (across 98 Universities in the US) collected by Julie van Camp from 2004 to 2015, Sally Haslanger in 2009, Nicole Hassoun in 2015, and Greg Peterson and Zayna Hustoft in 2019: 19% in 2004, 20% in 2006, 22% in 2008, 22% in 2010, 23% in 2011, 28% in 2015, and 28% in 2019.⁸ The numbers are even lower when considering factors such as race, ethnicity, and dis/ability (although philosophy is yet to produce comparably comprehensive reports

⁷ See Sobolewska, Mckee, and Campbell (2018) who provide evidence for this in the case of race and ethnic minorities: Miller and Stokes (1963), Swain (1993), Bratton and Haynie (1999), Tate (2003), Preuhs (2006), Burden (2007), Minta (2009), Butler and Broockman (2011), Saalfeld and Bischof (2012), Chaney (2015).

⁸ See <https://women-in-philosophy.org/data/faculty>

on these factors). As such, there is still considerable work to be done, and not solely with respect to gender.

The number of women in philosophy departments is a measure of representational diversity. Another way of measuring representational diversity is with respect to publications—seemingly the type of research output that is most valued within academia. Schwitzgebel and Jennings provide data on the percentage of female authorships in top philosophy journals between 1954 and 2015, where the figures start at 5% from 1954-1955, and rise to 10% from 1974-1975, then 12% from 1994-1995, then 17% in 2004, plateauing at 19% a decade later in 2014, and finally reaching 20% in 2015.⁹ Connecting the representational with the substantive, data from the JSTOR network dataset shows that between 1900 and 2009 most of the publications by female authors are in feminist studies and are published in specialist journals such as *Hypatia* and ethical or political journals. This data implies that women in philosophy were generally publishing on women's interests in philosophy, such that the representational diversity did result in increased substantive diversity—or at the least that women philosophers were pigeon-holed into certain areas of philosophy (where those areas were simultaneously pigeon-holed as women's areas). There has also been a simultaneous increase (though whether by correlation or causation is yet to be determined) with respect to women in philosophy departments and research relating to the status of women in philosophy. On this, the BPA/SWIP 2021 report (which followed on from their 2011 report) on women in philosophy was summarised by the authors as such:

The new survey results paint a picture of slight improvement in representation of women at nearly all levels, with substantial improvement in the percentage of permanent staff who are women (up from 24% to 30%) and in the percentage of professors who are women, (up from 19% to 25%) (...). Perhaps the most significant change since the 2011 Women in Philosophy report has been the explosion of research attention devoted to the issue of the underrepresentation of women in philosophy. While the underrepresentation of women in academia was already well studied, especially in STEM, in 2011 there had been virtually no empirical research relating to

⁹ See https://women-in-philosophy.org/data/h_journal/

women in philosophy. There has now been a huge amount of work in this area.¹⁰

This growing area of research has helped to identify speculative reasons why there may be low descriptive representational diversity of women in academic positions, and this is due to a substantive issue—namely, with respect to how academic mothers are treated. In a news article in 2017 on the topic, philosopher Anna M. Hennessey provided the following case:

Mary Ann Mason, professor and co-director of the Center, Economics & Family Security at the University of California, Berkeley, School of Law, conducted a lengthy study over the course of a decade on how childbearing and rearing affect the academic careers of both men and women. Mason and her team published their findings in the 2013 book, *Do Babies Matter? Gender and Family in the Ivory Tower* (Rutgers University Press), as well as in her widely read article for *Slate*, ‘In the Ivory Tower Men Only’ (Mason 2013). The results demonstrate that academic women who decide to have children pay a great “baby penalty”. In fact, childbearing and rearing often result in the end of a woman’s career, while for men, having children is a career advantage (...). Ultimately, the reality of these penalties play a decisive role in how significantly less women than men in academia have children. On average, tenured women who do decide to have children are age 40 when they begin a family, often having one child. Mason’s study also reveals cases in which academic women are blacklisted once they notify faculty of their pregnancies, as well as other cases in which women report how even simple *discussion* of having children negatively affects their job candidacy during interviews. (Hennessey 2017)

Hennessey goes on to show that this “baby penalty” is not just applicable generally to those women with academic careers, but also there is a specific phenomenon of them then not being able to write about the experience itself, given the all-encompassing nature of it.

¹⁰ See <https://dailynous.com/2021/11/16/women-in-philosophy-recent-reports/> and <https://bpa.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/2021-BPA-SWIP-Report-Women-in-Philosophy-in-the-UK.pdf>

As Elisa Albert asks: “so who’s gonna write about it if everyone doing it is lost forever within it?” (Albert 2015) And similarly Maggie Nelson: “here’s the catch: *I cannot hold my baby at the same time as I write*” (Nelson 2015). If this is the case, then it is no wonder that there are simultaneous under-representations of women and of pregnancy in the literature. This suggests more than mere correlation between the lack of descriptive diversity and the lack of substantive diversity, and points towards a systemic issue regarding the burden of reproductive labour disproportionately effecting women far beyond the gestational period.

This discrimination and issues of underrepresentation are echoed in anecdotes from women philosophers who were part of the edited collection *Women of Ideas* and were asked “What is it like being a woman in philosophy?” (Finn 2021, xiii) Here are a few responses to that question:

Elisabeth Schellekens: 11 years ago I was the first member of my then department to apply for maternity leave (in response to which several well-meaning colleagues wondered why I would want to sabotage my career thus and if I ever intended to return to work). (Elisabeth Schellekens, in Finn 2021, xxii)

Jennifer Nagel: As an undergraduate, I never had a woman professor or instructor in philosophy, and I took a number of advanced logic classes in which I was the only woman. I remember feeling self-conscious when raising my hand to speak in class, as though I were speaking on behalf of all of womankind, even in asking a tiny question about a proof. People would turn and look at me. I also felt somewhat alone, and wondered whether being outnumbered like this was a bad sign, an indication that I should shift my interests to the kinds of things that were more popular among women; this feeling was then heightened by some dabbling in feminist literature in the Carol Gilligan vein, literature encouraging the notion that women’s thinking is naturally concrete and care-oriented, as opposed to abstract. It was a relief to stumble upon Jean Grimshaw’s 1986 book *Philosophy and Feminist Thinking*, which gave voice to some of the worries I had felt about the thesis that women have some naturally different way of

thinking, while still deeply engaged with the issues of justice that drove me towards feminism in the first place. (Jennifer Nagel, in Finn 2021, xviii–xix)

Angie Hobbs: There is still much more that could be done to encourage girls to take up philosophy, and—as with all academic subjects—to make it easier to combine an academic career with family life. The latter point applies to fathers too, of course, but it is still women who get pregnant, give birth and breast-feed. However, the situation has improved from the start of my career: I gave a paper on the ethics of flourishing at a UK university in the early 1990s and was told beforehand “Don’t worry if we don’t pay much attention to your paper: in this Department we regard ethics as a bit pink and fluffy and female”. (Angie Hobbs, in Finn 2021, xvi–xvii)

Alison Gopnik: In general, the fact that human beings have children—a particularly salient fact for women—has largely been invisible to the men, and often at least notionally celibate men, who have dominated philosophy. The 1967 *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* has 4 references to children. When I was doing my D.Phil at Oxford, I made the argument that paying attention to children could illuminate a wide range of philosophical problems, from epistemology to ethics. The senior philosopher I was talking to looked puzzled: “Of course,” he said, “one has seen children about, but you would never actually talk to one”. (Alison Gopnik, in Finn 2021, xvi)

These comments also speak to the substantive issue that was mentioned previously: namely, that women philosophers were pigeon-holed into certain areas of philosophy, where those areas were simultaneously pigeon-holed as women’s areas. In the cases described above, those areas included the philosophy of children, concrete care-oriented philosophy, and ethics. This qualitative data is supported by the quantitative data provided earlier from the JSTOR network dataset whereby most of the publications by women in the twentieth century were on feminist topics in specialist ethics and politics journals. But even those published philosophers—women working in ‘women’s areas’—did not warrant an entry in the

aforementioned Encyclopaedia of Philosophy. As Witt and Shapiro have noted, the index of the encyclopaedia did not cite canonical philosophers such as de Beauvoir and Wollstonecraft as being mentioned in any article within it (Witt and Shapiro 2021). So having only four references to children was only part of a much larger issue regarding both the descriptive representational diversity of women philosophers and the substantive diversity of women's interests in that encyclopaedia.

Thankfully, we are currently doing better on gender representation than the 1967 encyclopaedia (though we still have a long way to go on other axes of privilege and oppression, for example with respect to race, ethnicity, and dis/ability). There is now a huge wealth of literature documenting women within the history of philosophy including the following resources: Hutton (2019), O'Neill and Lascano (2019), Buxton and Whiting (2020). In *A History of Women Philosophers* (Waithe 1987-1991), Mary Ellen Waithe documents women philosophers from many eras: more than 16 in the classical world; 17 from 500-1600; more than 30 from 1600-1900 (Witt and Shapiro 2021). And Vintiadis 2021 highlights the following notable philosophers who, despite their extensive work, did not make it into the philosophical canon:

In the ancient world, Hypatia of Alexandria, Hipparchia of Maroneia and Arete of Cyrene; in the 17th century, Elena Cornaro Piscopia of Venice (the first woman to receive a university degree) and Margaret Cavendish Duchess of Newcastle; and in the 18th century, Laura Bassi and Dorothea Erxleben (...). We must also not forget that non-white thinkers—Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, Audre Lorde and W E B Du Bois, who belong to groups more marginalised than most white women—have long been arguing that their status as knowers is not recognised and given sufficient credit. (Vintiadis 2021)

Women philosophers wrote, to use O'Neill's (1997) words, in "disappearing ink", whereby their work disappeared from the history of philosophy. Though intriguingly O'Neill shows that in the seventeenth century there was a "lively interest in the topic of women philosophers" (O'Neill 1997, 32) which was all but gone by the nineteenth century. Why

was this? O'Neill stresses the contribution that the "social and political events surrounding the French Revolution" (O'Neill 1997, 20) made to this erasure of women's work. She also provides the following explanation:

In the transition from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, there were a number of developments, internal to philosophy, regarding what constituted the main philosophical problems, the proper method of inquiry, and the appropriate style of exposition (...). [T]he alignment of the feminine gender with the issues, methods, and styles that 'lost out', together with a good deal of slippage between gender and sex, and the scholarly practice of anonymous authorship for women, led to the almost complete disappearance of women from the history of early modern philosophy. (O'Neill 1997, 36)

Following on from those insights, I suggest that the systematic exclusion of women philosophers from the canon is also in part due to the (mis)representation of women in (and outside of) philosophy and the social position within which they were held, as I will show in the following section.

4. The (Mis)representation of 'Woman'

Here I critique not 'just' the historical exclusion of women from philosophy, but also the way that philosophy has characterised women.¹¹ I propose that the two are connected, and probably mutually reinforcing, in a vicious circle. Women have been (mis)represented in philosophy as not capable of philosophising, despite the existence of women philosophers. This has been well documented, but here are some notable examples from Kant and Hegel who are notorious for having such views:

A woman who has a head full of Greek, like Madame Dacier, or one who engages in debate about the intricacies of mechanics, like the Marquise du Châtelet, might just as well

¹¹ Though I will not be going into the more recent philosophical literature on what gender is, and how or whether to define what it means to identify as a woman—this would go beyond the scope of the paper, as my intended focus is to show how women have historically been represented as not well equipped for philosophy.

have a beard; for that expresses in a more recognizable form the profundity for which she strives. (Kant 1764/1960, 61–62)

Women can, of course, be educated, but their minds are not adapted to the higher sciences, philosophy, or certain of the arts (...). Women are capable of education, but they are not made for activities which demand a universal faculty such as the more advanced sciences, philosophy and certain forms of artistic production. (Hegel 1820/1967, 263–264)

The idea that women cannot (and ought not) philosophise is embedded within philosophy. As Lloyd demonstrates in her book *The Man of Reason: 'Male' and 'Female' in Western Philosophy*, “the implicit maleness [of ideals of reason] is no superficial linguistic bias (...) [but is something that] lies deep in our philosophical tradition” (Lloyd 1984/1993, xviii). This deep bias is also echoed more generally historically with respect to women not being able to write or think as well as men, since women were intended for other purposes. Women were said to be assigned to the bodily and private domestic sphere of the home which required women as wives and mothers in the family, rather than to the public sphere and pursuits of the mind such as philosophy which were reserved for men (Okin 1979, 1989). So women not only ought not participate in philosophy, but also could not, given their limited capacities:

Girls only learned spinning, weaving, and sewing, and at most a little reading and writing (...). In Euripides a woman is called an oikourema, a thing (the word is neuter) for looking after the house, and, apart from her business of bearing children, that was all she was for the Athenian—his chief female domestic servant. (Engels 1884/1902, 77–78)

It may be affirmed without fear of calumny, that the woman who dabbles with philosophy and writing destroys her progeny by the labor of her brain and her kisses which savor of man; the safest and most honorable way for her is to renounce home life and maternity; destiny has branded her on the forehead; made only for love, the title of concubine if not of courtesan suffices her. (Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, in d'Héricourt 1864, 73–74)

So too with the two ingredients which constitute our life-principle, the rational and the irrational; the rational which belongs to mind and reason is of the masculine gender, the irrational, the province of sense, is of the feminine. (Philo of Alexandria, in Lloyd 1993, 27)

A woman's preaching is like a dog's walking on his hind legs (...) you are surprised to find it done at all. (Samuel Johnson, in Woolf 1957, 56)

The division of such tasks is connected to the (mis)representation of woman as inferior to man, a view that was prominent as far back as in the works of Aristotle who states “[T]he relation of male to female is by nature a relation of superior to inferior” (Aristotle *Politics* 1254b13–14). Given that the discipline held women in such low regard, I take it as no surprise that women were actively excluded from participating—and after all, why would they want to? To change it from the inside, perhaps, to *be* the counterexample to these sexist tropes. But what value would a woman find in inclusion to this realm, as opposed to rejecting it outright? Flikschuh cites Wiredu in saying it takes ‘considerable discipline’ to do so:

The Ghanaian philosopher, Kwasi Wiredu, once said that given their views on Africans, it takes considerable discipline for a Black person to find anything of value in the philosophical writings of Hume or Kant (these are just random examples from the discipline). Wiredu conscientiously exercised that discipline, which is one reason among many why he is himself a true philosopher. I think something similar might hold for women: ‘given the history of philosophy, it takes considerable discipline (...)’. (Katrin Flikschuh, in Finn 2021, xv)

We learn from Lorde that “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde 1979/1984, 110–113) when it comes to Black scholars pursuing racial justice, and this may apply to women with regard to gender equity in philosophy as well. But since philosophy was not always solely the ‘master’s house’ (as discussed earlier, where the pivotal point for explicit exclusion of women was around the turn of the nineteenth century), perhaps there are tools that remain that are not

sharpened for the purpose of exclusion. And working with those tools requires not only ‘considerable discipline’, but also an overcoming of what is known as ‘stereotype threat’. Given that philosophy is stereotyped as male¹² in the ways described above, there is the danger that the stereotype threat causes women to underperform in philosophy (by assuming the position that it is not ‘for them’).¹³ This descriptive underrepresentation of women in philosophy may also be a cause, and effect, of the lack of substantive ‘women’s issues’ represented in the content of philosophical work. As I shall show next, there has been a considerable lack of work on pregnancy specifically, which speculatively may be the result of the lack of people directly engaged in pregnancy being directly engaged in philosophy historically, and adds to the stereotype threat that philosophy is ‘for’, and ‘about’, the male population, disinterested in that which affects predominantly women.

5. The (Under)representation of Pregnancy in Philosophy

Pregnancy has been under-researched in philosophy historically: “for philosophy it is as if pregnancy has never happened” (Smith 2016, 15). Even beyond philosophy, Young notes that “through most of the history of medicine its theoreticians and practitioners did not include the reproductive processes of women within its domain” (Young 2005, 56). Early mentions of pregnancy in philosophy functioned as metaphor as we see in Socrates comparing himself to an intellectual midwife to help men give birth to ideas:

[M]y art of midwifery is just like [the midwives] in most respects. The difference is that I attend to men and not women, and that I watch over the labour of their souls, not of their bodies. (Plato 396BC/1997, 167)

Here we see again the “distinction between what is proper to the world of philosophy (men and ideas), as distinct from the realm of the maternal (women and the body)” (Knowles 2020), where pregnancy is only relevant in philosophy as a metaphor given that it is a matter of the (woman’s) body

¹² As argued by, e.g., Haslanger (2009).

¹³ As argued by, e.g., Saul (2015)

rather than the (man's) soul. But other bodily experiences are prominent in the history of philosophy, specifically the other end of life, namely, death. Villarrea puts the point well, and inspired the title of this paper:

There are many thinkers who identify philosophy with learning to die, but relatively few consider birth a subject for philosophy and even fewer give delivery or pregnancy a second thought. In this respect, the Heideggerian expression that characterises human existence—albeit excessively—as ‘being-toward-death’, captures the imbalance that pervades the history of philosophy as we generally know and teach it. (Villarrea 2021)

Villarrea goes on to say that the over-representation of death and the under-representation of birth in philosophy constitutes “a deafening silence—a silencing even” (Villarrea 2021). Some may appeal by way of explanation that death happens to all of us, and as such is a universal experience of interest to philosophy that deals with universals, whereas pregnancy and birth is something that only some of us do (where those ‘some’ were typically from the same group of people—women—who were excluded from philosophy). In line with this, Vintiadis describes the lack of work on pregnancy in philosophy historically as “another example of female experience being dismissed as irrelevant” (Vintiadis 2021). We can now therefore see that ‘being-toward-death’, presented as a universal claim, masks an underlying partiality away from female experience. And as Young famously describes, once we have brought pregnancy into view, the male bias within philosophy becomes apparent (Young 1985, 25).

But this overlooks that pregnancy is something that effects all of us: we are all the result of a pregnancy. In Rich's words, “all human life on the planet is born of woman” (Rich 1977, 1), and in less gendered terms, as Villarrea puts it “every human life begins with gestation and birth” (Villarrea 2021). As such, there is certainly something universal about birth, as we are all *being-from-birth*. Every one of us has therefore had some interaction with pregnancy, not by being pregnant ourselves, but by having been the result of someone else's pregnancy. Thus, we have all experienced being born, whereas death, by contrast, is not something anyone has experienced

before!¹⁴ As a result, it is surprising that pregnancy and birth are so marginal (Husserl literally names them “marginal problems”¹⁵) when they really ought to be considered more central, at least as central as death. So why the difference in coverage between pregnancy and birth on the one hand, and death on the other? As Hennessey states:

Some investigation reveals that intellectual approaches to birth are suppressed in both active and passive ways. While one could argue that the historical domination of white men in the academy is part of the problem, the lopsided coverage of these two monumental endpoints of life is quite complex and cannot be reduced to it. (Hennessey 2017)

Whilst I agree about the complexity, I nevertheless do not want to underestimate the connection between the descriptive underrepresentation of women in philosophy and the substantive underrepresentation of topics such as pregnancy in philosophy (where each has influence over the other).

The fact that pregnancy has not been a traditional focus in philosophy is, as Kingma puts it, “remarkable”:¹⁶ pregnancy is a source of fascinating philosophical issues, and so given both the common nature of pregnancy as an essential part of the human life cycle and its highly unique aspects, it is truly astonishing that not more attention in philosophy has been paid to this topic. This has not gone unnoticed, as Gurton-Wachter states:

We don’t have a familiar canon of nuanced literary or philosophical texts about the experience of having a child, even though having a child, too, is a profound, frightening, exhilarating, transformative experience at the boundary of life, an experience from which one comes back a different person. (Gurton-Wachter 2016)

¹⁴ These claims depend, of course, on what your definition of ‘experience’ is and what qualifies as ‘death’.

¹⁵ In the original German, ‘Randprobleme’ (though ‘marginal’ means something different within the context of Husserl’s phenomenology). See Husserl (1908-1937/2013).

¹⁶ See Kingma’s ‘Better Understanding the Metaphysics of Pregnancy’ project description at <https://bump.group/about>.

What we do have a familiarity with, however, is the more recent literature on the topic of abortion. This is a glaring anomaly. But it does have something in common with the rest of philosophy: not much attention is paid to the gestator—the person undergoing the pregnancy itself. In bioethics and philosophy there is a considerable metaphysical and ethical body of literature on fetuses (if not pregnancy, *per se*). Mostly this focuses on the ethical implication of progressive foetal development—for example its implications for moral status and/or the permissibility of abortion. A second focus—though much more often forgotten—is the moral relevance of the physical location inside the pregnant body (see, e.g., Warren 1989; Kingma and Woollard forthcoming). As such, the literature is hardly woman-centred. If the pregnancy or birth itself were of philosophical value, then we would see the topics treated on their own terms, without relating solely and directly with ethical issues to do with the foetus. After all, as Witt argues, “there are many other philosophical issues related to birth that have nothing to do with abortion or any other ethical issues for that matter”, but nevertheless “when birth does surface as a topic of philosophical inquiry, it is usually within the sphere of ethics” (Witt 1996).

Other exceptions from modern times is within continental feminist philosophy in the work on the maternal from Luce Irigaray (e.g. 1985) and Julia Kristeva (e.g. 1980), and within continental political philosophy in the work on natality from Hannah Arendt. But as Knowles points out, “it is only relatively recently that questions of pregnancy, birth and early motherhood have begun to be taken seriously in mainstream analytic philosophy” (Knowles 2020). As evidence of this, consider, for example, that neither the Stanford Encyclopaedia entries on ‘analytic feminism’ nor ‘feminist metaphysics’ mention pregnancy or birth (Garry 2021; Haslanger and Ásta 2018). Despite that, there have been trail-blazing projects in those areas such as those led by Fiona Woollard and Elselijn Kingma on the metaphysics of pregnancy and Stella Villarmeá’s philosophy of birth in the medical humanities paving the way for more central discussions of pregnancy within analytic philosophy. This newly established ontology of pregnancy has been investigated from various other perspectives in the last decade or so, both indirectly in dealing with the individuation of embryos (e.g. Nuño de la Rosa 2010) and life cycles (e.g. DiFrisco and Mossio 2020), and also directly when examining pregnancy from a relational perspective (e.g. Howes 2008) and from the perspective of biological

individuality and organismality (e.g. Grose 2020; Nuño de la Rosa et al 2021). These provide more promising accounts of pregnancy than how pregnancy was represented historically, which I will now provide a brief overview of.

6. The (Mis)representation of ‘Pregnancy’

Going back to biblical times, we are told that the pain women suffer during pregnancy and birth is in order to redress the sin of Eve when she supposedly tempted Adam to take a bite of the apple. We see this in the book of Genesis: “I will greatly multiply your pain in childbirth, in pain shall you bring forth children yet your desire shall be for your husband” (Genesis 3.7). Not only that, but according to Martin Luther, women were “not created for any other purpose than to serve man and be his assistant in bearing children” (Found in McKeown 2014). Despite that being the woman’s purpose, she was not valued as contributing much to the process other than an environment within which the father’s ‘seed’ could grow (see DeRenzi 2004). Feldman names this the ‘flowerpot’ view: “Without this pot there will be no plant, but what the plant will grow into is all contained in the seed” (Feldman 1992, 98).

The flowerpot view has been prominent in the history of philosophy, dating at least back to Aristotle for whom the foetus “behaves like seeds sown in the ground (...) [its] growth (...) supplied through the umbilicus in the same way that the plant’s growth is supplied through its roots”.¹⁷ This view had prominence too in the Middle Ages, where Thomas Aquinas particularly devalued the process of gestation and the mothers contribution, treating the father as having the central role in creation (see Sauer 2015, 30).

Into the seventeenth century, this flowerpot view started to take on scientific backing with anatomists discovering sperm in semen under the microscope, contributing to the theory of ‘preformation’. Preformation stated that male gametes contained the whole of a future person and the homunculus was originally described as an ‘animalcule’. The reproductive role of the female was understood to be entirely that of an incubator, an

¹⁷ Found in Connell (2016, 129). It is worth noting that Connell seems to have recently changed view on this.

environment in which a future child would grow separate from (though inside of) the pregnant person (Rothman 1994, 105). This is reflected upon by Rothman who states

The perception of the foetus as a person separate from the mother draws its roots from patriarchal ideology, and can be documented at least as far back as the early use of the microscope to see the homunculus. (Rothman 1989, 157)

Fox's (2022) recent work on eighteenth century experiences of pregnancy and childbirth uncovers further 'scientific reasoning' behind patriarchal influences. As described in Finn et al. (forthcoming), theories included the notion that the female should be happy, cheerful, and moderate in order to conceive, and that too much sexual activity would destroy the chances of maintaining a foetus in the womb. We see here the foundations of contemporary assumptions that 'good mothers' are 'model women', authentically living in accordance with their destiny and inherent identity. As Romanis et al. point out, women who did not conform to this ideal were considered to be monsters: "From classical times, theologians and physicians declared barren women to be monstrous" (Romanis et al. 2021, 821). And as Kingma and Woollard argue, we still encounter a "heavily gendered cultural ideal of motherhood", which we can trace back through this long history of control over the female body (Kingma and Woollard forthcoming; see also Hays 1998; Bueskens 2018; Kukla 2005; Mullin 2005).

Finn et al. (forthcoming) show that in the nineteenth century a strong legislative momentum in all areas of law developed. The enactment of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861 was a landmark in the legislative agenda for many reasons. In particular, it made abortion a criminal offence and this law remains on the statute books today. Such legislative enthusiasm continued into the twentieth century. Acts of Parliament became more specifically targeted at pregnant women and new mothers. Notably, the Infant Life (Preservation) Act 1929 and the Infanticide Act 1938 emphasise the protection of the foetus and neonate, and, in 1967, the Abortion Act created defences to the termination of pregnancy. Current legislation covers an ever-broadening range of reproductive issues such as technological and medical advances, which helped pave the way for how

we conceptualise pregnancy today.¹⁸ The historical misrepresentation of pregnancy and the need to control it is both a cause and an effect of the underrepresentation of women among those who put forward such theories and laws. Given where we are now, it is clear that more work needs to be done to better understand issues like pregnancy from those who experience it and those who are impacted by the resultant theories and laws.

7. Conclusion

In this paper I have provided a historical review of the representation of women and pregnancy in philosophy. There has indeed been progress in both descriptive and substantive representation, but nevertheless there is still a long way to go. Whilst it may manifest differently across time and place, unfortunately “patriarchy has not dissolved and neither have the traditional stereotypes of pregnancy and maternity” (Oliver 2010, 761). Misogynistic attitudes persist, and this is reflected in the continual degrading of the gestator and gestation which is reinforced by certain philosophical theorising and systemic marginalisation. As Le Doeuff depressingly noted back in 1977:

From Hipparchia to the female historians of philosophy, there has been little progress in emancipation (...). Whether forbidden to enter the area of philosophising, or ‘benefitting’ from a more or less cunning permissiveness, women have not yet won the battle that would give them a right to philosophy. For the moment it is important to know against whom—and with whom—this struggle can be fought. (Le Doeuff 1977)

It is my hypothesis that the origins, as well as the fundamental approaches, of philosophy could partially explain the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of pregnancy within it. Pregnancy is something that historically has mostly affected women. And philosophy is something that historically is dominated by men. Therefore, historically those who were involved in philosophy were not those who were involved in pregnancy (specifically, they either could not be pregnant, and those who could disproportionately had not been). Furthermore, women’s ideas

¹⁸ See Finn et al. (forthcoming) for more details on the historical transformation of pregnancy.

in philosophy (and beyond) have historically been underrepresented, and worse, silenced. This is to the detriment not just of the women but of the areas that have excluded them, which are deprived of their worthy contributions. I believe that the lack of diversity has led to the neglect of certain topics in philosophy, like pregnancy. This is echoed in Vintiadis who points to Mary Midgley's 'Rings and Books'—an unpublished script prepared for a talk on BBC Radio in the 1950's—making a similar point:

This brings to mind Mary Midgley who in discussing how our living situations influence the way we think about the world points out how much of philosophy has been done by privileged men without families who had the luxury of doing philosophy in isolation—like Descartes in his room contemplating the truth about knowledge, isolated from the mundane exigencies of everyday life. The problem with such isolated thinking is that it skews the way we think about the world and ignores viewpoints that might be revealing of another dimension of reality. (Vintiadis 2021)¹⁹

As I have attempted to demonstrate, the viewpoints of women were specifically ignored historically and this gave rise to skewed understandings of pregnancy. Baron similarly argues:

The historical record, of course, reflects the views of those who were politically and structurally dominant; we know comparatively little about women's views of pregnancy during Antiquity and the Middle Ages. The prevailing understanding of conception and gestation that has been passed down to us is therefore one according to which women contribute passively to development, providing a space, and nutrition for the foetus; men, on the other hand, provide generative force and life. (Baron 2019, 495)

As we have seen, a feminist, human-centred (rather than man-centred) world of philosophy is still only in its early stages, and philosophy still has a lot further to go in order to come to terms with its history and

¹⁹ See Midgley's script online at <https://www.womeninparenthesis.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/rings-and-books.pdf>

assumptions. Ideas (and the lack thereof) about pregnancy grew out of the positions of men of privilege, and those men used their analyses to justify those positions—a never-ending, and vicious, echo chamber. But when women, people with different understandings of pregnancy as a state and possibility, enter the discussion, the analysis of pregnancy shifts. The same goes for the inclusion of trans-perspectives in this gendered area. As sociologist Barbara Katz Rothman (1982) describes, philosophy has strong roots in a patriarchal society, a world in which men’s bodies are the taken-for-granted ordinary, and women’s an interesting variation; a world in which the children of men grow in the bodies of women, where the seed of Abraham covers the world. “Acknowledging gaps in our history of ideas provides fertile ground for exploration” (Hennessey 2017), and so perhaps what is needed is a study of the sociology of philosophy to unearth these gaps in order to offer new things to the discussion.

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